



DATA MUST SPEAK

## Moving towards a culture of assessment for learning in Lao schools

Positive deviance research in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

### Key findings



Teachers in highly effective schools adopt several teaching strategies that are reflective of formative assessment and related to targeted instruction more frequently than teachers in less effective schools.



Teachers in highly effective schools report higher levels of confidence in their assessment knowledge and pedagogical skills.



Principals and teachers in highly effective schools report closer monitoring of lower performing students' learning and how it changes over time.



Principals and teachers in highly effective schools report providing significantly more frequent feedback to parents based on student learning assessments.

## Context

Although the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) has made steady progress in expanding access to primary and lower secondary education, many children still finish primary school unable to read, write or do simple calculations. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, learning outcomes were low, with 50 per cent of Lao grade 5 students scoring in the lowest achievement band on the 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) regional assessment.<sup>1</sup> Despite this learning crisis, some schools are outperforming others, even in the most disadvantaged areas. The Data Must Speak (DMS) positive deviance research aims to identify these ‘positive deviant’ or ‘highly effective’<sup>2</sup> schools and examine their practices and behaviours. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from school principals, teachers, students and parents at positive deviant and comparison schools to identify their behaviours and practices. In addition, Village Education Development Committee members and District Education and Sports Bureaux staff were also surveyed.<sup>3</sup>

This brief presents key findings on practices adopted by highly effective schools related to formative assessment and serves to further country-level policy dialogues on the use of formative assessment to improve student learning.



## Research findings

Formative assessment, frequently referred to as ‘assessment for learning’ or continuous assessment, can provide valuable feedback for teachers and/or students that can be used to adjust the teaching and learning process and can inform instructional activities and remedial action.<sup>4</sup> In the post-COVID-19 context, formative assessment can also play a critical role in accelerating learning recovery.<sup>5</sup> International evidence suggests that formative assessments have strong potential to yield promising learning results, especially for lower performing students, if certain conditions are met.

In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in Lao PDR introduced a learning assessment framework highlighting the importance of effective formative and summative assessments as a means of monitoring and improving students’ learning.<sup>6</sup> While Lao PDR’s Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021–2025 builds on this framework by emphasizing the need for formative assessment in classrooms, the development of detailed guidelines on formative assessment is still under way and schools across the country have not systematically implemented formative assessment.

- 1 United Nations Children’s Fund and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, SEA-PLM 2019 Main Regional Report: Children’s learning in 6 Southeast Asian countries, UNICEF and SEAMEO, Bangkok, 2020, <[www.unicef.org/eap/media/7356/file/SEA-PLM%202019%20Main%20Regional%20Report.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7356/file/SEA-PLM%202019%20Main%20Regional%20Report.pdf)>.
- 2 Highly effective schools are performing better in terms of student learning than other schools with similar characteristics, as measured through SEA-PLM and Department of Education Quality Assurance data.
- 3 More detailed information about the sampling methodology can be found in the [full report](#).
- 4 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, ‘Assessment for Learning: The case for formative assessment’, OECD/CERI International Conference ‘Learning in the 21st Century: Research, innovation and policy’, 2008, <[www.oecd.org/site/educeri21st/40600533.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/site/educeri21st/40600533.pdf)>.
- 5 Global Education Monitoring Report Team, Global Education Monitoring Report 2020. Inclusion and education: All means all, UNESCO, Paris, 2020, <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718>>.
- 6 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization International Institute for Educational Planning, ‘Formative Assessment’, IIEP Learning Portal, UNESCO, Paris, 2023, <<https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/issue-briefs/monitor-learning/formative-assessment>>, accessed 18 April 2023.
- 7 United Nations Children’s Fund, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and World Bank, Where Are We On Education Recovery?, UNICEF, New York, 2022, <[www.unicef.org/media/117626/file/Where%20are%20we%20in%20Education%20Recovery?.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/117626/file/Where%20are%20we%20in%20Education%20Recovery?.pdf)>.
- 8 Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Ministry of Education and Sports, ‘Ministerial Decree on the Assessment Framework for General Education’ Ref. No. 9849/MOES, 2018.

This research suggests that highly effective schools in Lao PDR adopt practices relating to formative assessment in the classroom and focus more on students' learning outcomes.

**Teachers in highly effective schools adopt several teaching strategies that are reflective of formative assessment and related to targeted instruction more frequently than teachers in less effective schools.**

Teachers in highly effective schools were more likely to check and correct students' work on a regular basis and to track students' results in their own records, which could inform related remedial action. Students in highly effective schools more frequently reported that their teachers continued to teach until all students understood. Survey results from teachers in highly effective schools corroborated these results (**Figure 1**). Teachers and school principals from highly effective schools also indicated more frequent support for students requiring extra help, with students from these schools agreeing that their teachers provide extra support when they need it.

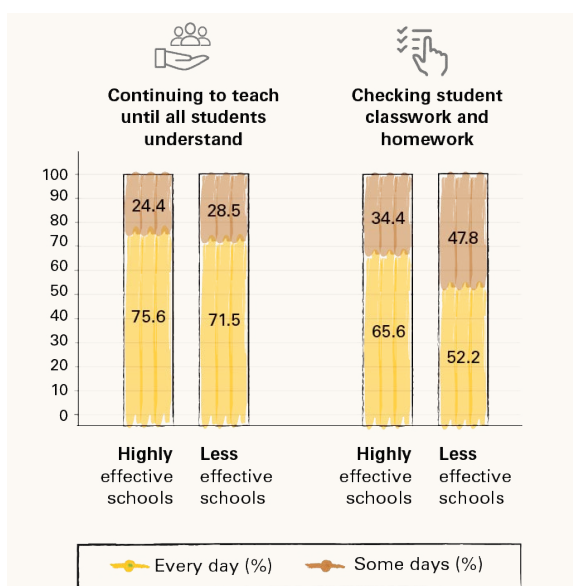
In the qualitative data, teachers and school principals in highly effective schools also reported adopting some specific practices to support students' learning based on their evaluation of students' academic performance. One highly effective school installed 'reading corners' – areas of classrooms dedicated to books. One teacher at this school mentioned they would lend students storybooks to read at home. Teachers would then randomly pick an extract from a book for a student to read (e.g., some arranged letters, vowels, then words). If students could not do it, they would take the book back home with them and repeat the exercise the next day.

**Teachers in highly effective schools report higher levels of confidence in their assessment knowledge and pedagogical skills.**

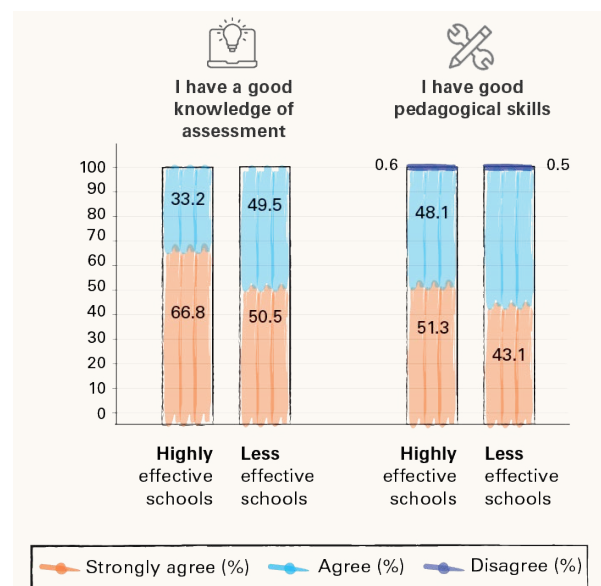
Teachers' assessment knowledge and pedagogical skills may help them conduct formative assessment in classrooms. In highly effective schools, 66.8 per cent of teachers strongly agreed that they had good knowledge of assessment, compared with 50.5 per cent in less effective schools. Meanwhile, 51.3 per cent of teachers in highly effective schools strongly agreed that they had good pedagogical skills, compared with 43.1 per cent in less effective schools (**Figure 2**). This is in line with other results of the study underlining that teachers in highly effective schools have significantly greater knowledge of teaching content.

Principals and teachers in highly effective schools report closer monitoring of lower performing students' learning and how it changes over time. Teachers in highly effective schools were more likely to monitor weaker students' learning during classes. For example, teachers in one of these schools walked around the classroom to identify students who needed help in different areas. Teachers would then work with these students in the afternoon or the next day on that specific topic to improve their understanding of it. Another highly effective school reported summarizing the monthly results of all students and tracking how their performance had evolved during the month, with a specific focus on lower performing students.

**Figure 1: Teachers' self-reported teaching practices**



**Figure 2: Teachers' self-reported levels of confidence in their assessment knowledge and pedagogical skills**

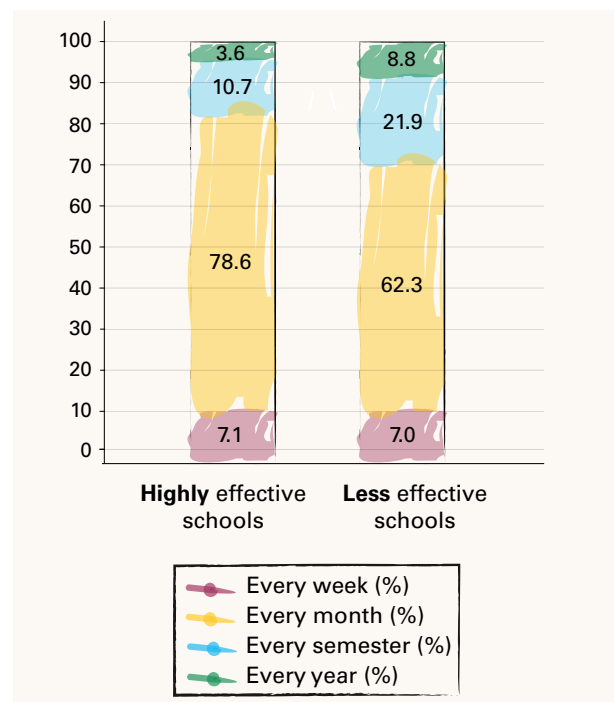
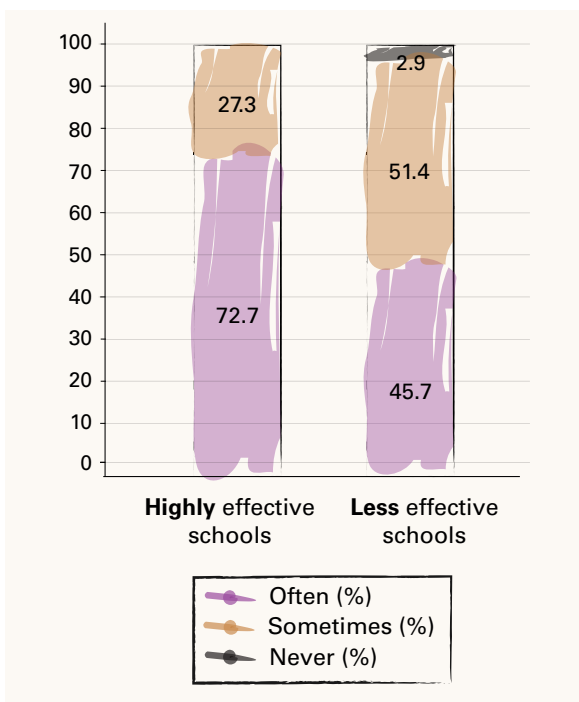


Source: Department of Education Quality Assurance, 2020/21.

Principals and teachers in highly effective schools report providing significantly more frequent feedback to parents based on student learning assessments. Approximately 73 per cent of principals in highly effective schools reported that they often engaged with teachers on providing feedback to parents based on student assessment and progress, compared with about 46 per cent in less effective schools (**Figure 3**). About 86 per cent of teachers in highly effective schools reported providing feedback to parents on a weekly or monthly basis, compared with about 69 per cent in less effective schools (**Figure 4**). Informing parents about assessment results, especially formative assessment results, provides them with the opportunity to understand and appreciate their children’s progress and achievements over time. It also gives them important information for engaging further with school staff and supporting their children’s learning at home.

**Figure 3:** School principals’ self-reported frequency of engaging with teachers to provide feedback to parents on student assessment and progress

**Figure 4:** Teachers’ self-reported frequency of providing feedback to parents on student assessment and progress



Source: Department of Education Quality Assurance, 2020/21.

## Policy recommendations



**Institutionalize formative assessment in teaching and learning practices, including through equipping school principals and teachers with the necessary skills and tools.** At the systems level, this can include embedding formative assessment within sector planning, teacher education and professional development. It also requires equipping teachers with the skills and tools needed to better assess and monitor students’ learning levels through both pre-service and in-service professional development. The MoES could consider developing a toolkit of resources, including remedial, catch-up and accelerated practices and programmes designed for specific subjects, which could help teachers adapt their practices to different learning levels among students. The use of formative assessment is even more critical to target adequate remedial support to learners following COVID-19-related school closures.

## About the Data Must Speak positive deviance research

The **DMS research on positive deviant schools** in Lao PDR was developed jointly by the Ministry of Education and Sports, local education partners, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Lao PDR country office, and UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight. This global research is being implemented in 14 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is co-funded by the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) programme of the Global Partnership for Education/International Development Research Centre, the Hewlett Foundation, the Jacobs Foundation, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, the Schools2030 programme (led by the Aga Khan Foundation) and UNICEF internal resources, including UNICEF Lao PDR's efforts under the European Union-funded Partnership for Strengthening the Education System.

## Series of policy briefs

This brief is the fourth in a series of documents produced as part of the DMS research in Lao PDR. It presents key findings from Stage 3 of this research, exploring practices and behaviours at positive deviant schools. The **first policy brief** focuses on teachers' capacity and the **second policy brief** examines the characteristics and practices of school principals, while the third policy brief explores school climate issues in Lao schools. This series aims to inform policy dialogue and decision-making in Lao PDR and other countries interested in improving student learning outcomes. To access the full report, click [here](#).

## For more information

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