



## INFLUENCING POLICY THROUGH EVIDENCE: ACCELERATED PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

### THE CASE OF LAO PDR

Access to pre-primary education in Lao PDR has increased in recent years, and while significant progress has been made, 30% of children still do not participate in early childhood education (ECE) before enrolling in Grade 1. Children who miss out are mainly poorer and rural children, those whose parents are less educated or who belong to non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups. Dropout and repetition in early grades of primary school remain high and learning outcomes low. To address this, Plan International with support from Dubai Cares, implemented the LEARN project (2015-2019), a research-based project that aims to build evidence on effective innovations. LEARN worked with the Ministry of Education and Sports in Lao PDR to test an innovative program, the Summer Pre-Primary (SPP), to improve school readiness and early grades learning for children from remote, disadvantaged ethnic groups.



### ACCELERATED SCHOOL READINESS: SUMMER PRE-PRIMARY PROGRAM

The SPP is a gender-responsive, accelerated school readiness program that aims to improve the school readiness of disadvantaged children who are about to enter Grade 1 with no ECE experience. Adopted from a model developed by the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) in Turkey, SPP is a 10-week program that was implemented in Laos during the summer break before the start of the new school year. SPP supports holistic development of children and promotes physical, language, cognitive and socio-emotional development through a play-based daily

routine. SPP is taught by grade 1 or pre-primary education teachers supported by school heads and District education staff. It uses teacher's guidebooks, children's workbooks and teaching-learning materials aligned with national ECE standards. The program initially ran for 4.5 hours a day but was adjusted based on research, monitoring and evaluation findings to 6 hours of class per day, five days a week for 10 weeks. Classes are held in Grade 1 classrooms or any safe spaces with access to clean water and toilet facilities. SPP promotes gender-responsive teaching and learning approaches, good hygiene through handwashing and tooth brushing, and good nutrition through healthy meals. It also educates parents on gender-responsive parenting skills and in supporting children's learning at home.

### SPP IMPACT IN LAO PDR

An impact study was conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) using a randomized controlled trial. This compared SPP participants, 9-month government pre-primary education program (PPE) participants and those who received no ECE intervention and found that SPP increased on-time Grade 1 enrolment and improved school readiness skills for children and led to an increased number of children retained to the end of Grade 1. The findings related to on-time Grade 1 enrolment were particularly striking, with a 37 percentage points higher rate of transition for SPP children than those with no





intervention, and an 18 percentage points higher transition rate compared to children in the government 9-month PPE program.

With regards school readiness, SPP children improved most in numeracy and familiarity with print when compared to children who received no intervention at middle of Grade 1; similarly, SPP children had greater gains in all the above areas plus receptive vocabulary, compared to those in the 9-month pre-primary education (PPE). Although trends continued to be higher for SPP compared to children with no intervention, SPP did not lead to statistically significant differences in learning outcomes in comparison to the 9-month PPE by the end of Grade 1, a finding that is consistent with other similar school readiness interventions in low-income contexts.

## IMPLEMENTATION LESSONS AND EVIDENCE TO ADVOCATE FOR UPTAKE AND SCALE UP

The project's scaling approach is replication through policy adoption. This approach offers a practical and cost-effective pathway to targeted scaling, selectively scaling the key elements of an effective model and diffusing into policy systems. The advantage of policy adoption as a scaling approach include: (a) mandatory compliance by government entities and access to public resources; (b) likelihood of replication by development partners who are aligning with government priorities; (c ) occurring fairly rapidly in a system where decision-making is centralized and can cover a large area quickly.

Learnings from the project implementation and evaluation were used to advocate to government on supporting replication and scale-up of SPP in Laos. Recognizing the effectiveness of the SPP program in improving school readiness, on-time enrolment, and retention in grade 1 among disadvantaged children, the Lao PDR Ministry of Education and Sports included SPP as an innovation to be scaled to increase access to quality ECE in the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan, 2021-2025.

A new LEARN+ project (2021-2023) supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX), aims to support the government of Lao PDR to prepare to scale SPP in more disadvantaged districts. In practice, this will mean identifying districts and communities where SPP could be implemented, costing the implementation of SPP in those areas, building a cadre of SPP champions and developing tools to support scale up.

LEARN+ is also working with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in Cambodia; and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government in Tanzania, to adapt, implement and research SPP to generate evidence about its viability as an innovative program to support expansion of ECE in Cambodia and Tanzania. Overall, evidence will be generated about viability of SPP as an alternative, cost-effective model to support expansion of PPE, including through cost analysis, program materials, standards and tools that will be developed to support scale up.

