Cultivating Educational Action Research in Lao PDR - for a better future?

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the introduction of educational action research as part of the national education reforms in Lao PDR. National policies on education emphasise concepts such as ‘education for all’ and ‘student-centred education’ taken from the globalised education reform agenda. Action research became a tool to implement the new pedagogy of student-centred education that was labelled ‘the five-pointed star’.

The thesis contributes to the field of global policy studies. It combines global and contextual aspects in order to analyse how action research travelled from policy to practice. This process was part of a Lao national education reform that developed after the introduction of the new economic mechanism, when the previous socialist planned-economy system was replaced by a globalised market-oriented system.

Data were collected from national policy documents, international donor documents, instructional material, and interviews with Lao educators involved with action research in different ways. Furthermore, we carried out action research as part of our own teaching duties in Lao PDR, which were subsequently documented and analysed.

In this study of educational reform in Lao PDR we have found that an educational approach like action research that is introduced as part of a taken-for-granted global agenda of change, is reduced to a technical rationality and practices that resemble previous experiences. Our findings are explained from the theoretical perspectives of hidden policy ensembles and policy backlashes. Hidden policy ensembles reduce action research to a technical rationality due to their alien cultural and social connections that are not brought into the open at the reform arena. Policy backlashes become a way for practitioners to create meaning based on previous contextual practices, conceptions, and discourses as a consequence of the technical rationality created by the hidden policy ensembles and the use of the cascade model.

The thesis concludes with an outline of a possible future educational development in the form of a critical and educative action research network in Lao PDR that is inspired by cross-cultural dialogue, a critical pedagogy of place, and our own action research experiences.

Keywords: action research, teacher education, globalisation, technical rationality, hidden policy ensembles, policy backlashes, context, Lao PDR
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April 12, 2011
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Keophouthong Bounyasone & Ngouay Keosada
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<td>ADB</td>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
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<td>EQIP I</td>
<td>Education Quality Improvement Project I</td>
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<td>EQIP II</td>
<td>Education Quality Improvement Project II</td>
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<td>EFA</td>
<td>Education for All</td>
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<td>FOE</td>
<td>Faculty of Education</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<td>LPRP</td>
<td>Lao People’s Revolutionary Party</td>
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<td>LFNC</td>
<td>Lao Front of Nation Construction</td>
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<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>Lao People’s Democratic Republic</td>
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<td>LPF</td>
<td>Lao Patriotic Front</td>
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<td>MOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>National Implementation Team</td>
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<td>NUOL</td>
<td>National University of Laos</td>
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<td>NEM</td>
<td>New Economic Mechanism</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>PhD</td>
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<td>PA</td>
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<td>PAR</td>
<td>Participatory Action Research</td>
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<td>RECSAM</td>
<td>Regional Centre for Education in Science and Mathematics</td>
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<td>RLG</td>
<td>Royal Lao Government</td>
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<td>SCN</td>
<td>Save the Children Norway</td>
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<td>Sida</td>
<td>Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency</td>
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<td>TEI</td>
<td>Teacher Education Institution</td>
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<td>TTD</td>
<td>Teacher Training Department</td>
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<td>TTC</td>
<td>Teacher Training College</td>
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<td>TTEST</td>
<td>Teacher Training Enhancement and Status of Teachers</td>
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<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency of International Development</td>
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<td>UXO/LAO</td>
<td>Unexploded Ordnance Lao</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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PROLOGUE

We, the authors of this thesis, are born in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), but under different conditions. One of us grew up in a family where the father initially worked for the previous Royal Lao Government (RGL) in one of the larger communities in the northern part of the country, while the other grew up in a farmer’s family in the south, where the father was close to the early Lao nationalist movement called Lao Issara or Free Lao.

We both went through primary education during the periods of the Royal Lao Government (RGL) and the American war. The languages of instruction were both Lao and French, and teachers were trained mainly by French colonisers. The colonial education system that we experienced was autocratic in the sense that everything was dictated by the teacher and there was little room for students’ voices and initiatives.

After the proclamation of Lao PDR in December 1975 we both experienced the new sides of socialist education and mobilisation for the first time, one of us as a secondary student and the other as a political mobiliser of local communities. The new characteristics of secondary education included the abolition of corporal and mental punishment of students, the introduction of collective work, and the inclusion of manual work as part of the school curriculum. The social and political mobilisation of communities also included the mobilisation of teachers as important role models for the new socialist society.

After a few years both of us were selected for further studies, one in Vietnam and the other in Soviet Union, where we stayed for nine and seven years respectively. This period gave us further experiences from established socialist education systems that through time had changed character and become both rigid and authority-bound and with less concern for the students’ well-being, even though still applying collective aspects of education.
At our return to Lao PDR one of us became involved in the training of educational managers organised by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the other became a teacher educator at the only higher education institution in the country, the Pedagogical Institute, the forerunner to the present National University of Laos (NUOL). At that time the initial traits of collective socialist education had started to fade away and were replaced by a kind of academic and assessment pseudo-practices coupled with parallel influences from organisational structures and control mechanism, but still under rather difficult constraints with constant lack of educational material and textbooks.

Later on when the effects of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) - the Lao version of marketisation introduced in 1986-started to have an impact also in the field of education we both worked at NUOL as lecturers. The main experience from this period was the many and diverse donor projects that seemed to operate in all areas of education, applying different project approaches, and introducing alien methodologies from ‘all over the world’ at the same time as the old control system prevailed.

At that time we had experienced different types of formal education systems, at different places, and with different emphases. As educators we started to reflect over our own pedagogical experiences. We found that much of the educational practices we had met were composed by dictates from somewhere else being it from the colonial, the socialist, or the capitalist quarters of influences, and we started to wonder whether action research was going to keep its promise to create something from within, or if it was just another donor-driven event in the history of education that would ‘Phai mai phuang’ (burn like a rice stem) and then disappear?
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I. A NEW ERA OF EDUCATION AND ITS CONTEXT

We both worked as lecturers at the Faculty of Education (FOE), NUOL, when the concept ‘action research’ started to appear at the end of 1990s. At first we thought that action research was just another version of ordinary research including testing of hypothesis and something that academics carried out by the collection of survey data and statistics. We soon understood that action research was something else, when we heard that it was introduced at the colleges of education as a way to develop the new methodology of student-centred education. Student-centred education became known as the ‘five pointed star’, presented in an early reform document as activity-based learning, improving teacher questioning, using illustrations effectively, application to daily life, and group learning and group discussion (Teacher Development Centre, 1994).

Towards the end of 1990s one of us was asked by our Dean to carry out action research together with colleagues and teachers at the demonstration school attached to the university. The Dean had attended a seminar on action research and found it helpful for the introduction of the new methodology. However, none of us had any training in action research at that time and our colleagues did not want to participate. So this effort ended with some activities together with two lower secondary teachers in an attempt to introduce aspects of the new methodology. Today, we would not call these activities action research as they only included the introduction of some alternative methods of teaching, including the involvement of the students in the teaching and learning process without any further considerations.

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1 Student-centred and learner-centred education is used interchangeably in this thesis.
Towards the end of 2003 we were selected for a PhD programme that was part of the cooperation between our government in Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and the Government of Sweden through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). We were selected together with two of our colleagues and before the PhD programme started we worked in Lao PDR with our PhD tutors from Sweden during 2004. This was organised as a series of seminars for the preparation of our studies in Sweden and as curriculum development at our workplace. During the seminars we also discussed international articles that we had studied. We prepared and carried out contextual studies at our own workplace as a preparation for future activities. At this time action research had become an acknowledged way to implement the new methodology of student-centred education by donors like Sida (Nagel, Fox & Vixaysack, 2000). We started to develop an interest in action research, and decided to focus on it in our PhD studies, while two other colleagues involved in the Sida-project choose to focus on the introduction of student-centred education in Lao education (Chounlamany & Khoumphilaphanh, 2011).

Our doctoral studies started in 2005 and became a new experience for us, in spite of the preparations in Lao PDR. We were not used to the type of academic dialogue and reasoning, or including different perspectives within educational research. Our previous experiences were influenced by a research perspective with a strong positivistic bias from natural sciences, a perspective that was far from what we met at the Department of Education in Umeå. However, many of the courses that we attended were well suited for our situation as well as our research interest. The courses could all be related to our research area, addressing issues such as education policies, globalisations, and donors; gender and education; and action research and third world education. Our studies helped us to broaden our research perspective and we started to understanding that what happened within education policy and reform in Lao PDR was only a small part of a larger picture.

We attended three annual international conferences on action research organised through the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) in 2006-2008. These conferences helped us to broaden our view on action research and we also met many of the
authors on action research that we have referred to in our thesis like Stephen Kemmis, Julio Diniz-Pereira, and Ken Zeichner to name a few.

After this introduction we will give a brief presentation of our home country, Lao PDR.

**Lao People’s Democratic Republic**

Lao PDR is a landlocked (nowadays also called land-linked) and multi-ethnic country in Southeast Asia. The Mekong River forms much of its western border with Thailand while the mountainous eastern part of the country borders Vietnam. Lao PDR also shares borders with Myanmar and China in the north and with Cambodia in the south.

The population of Lao PDR is estimated at 6.3 million in 2009 according to the World Bank databank. Most of the population live in rural areas and 40% are children under the age of fifteen. School attendance amongst boys is 75% while it is 66% amongst girls. Most people confess to Buddhism or Animism; more than every fourth grownup person is illiterate, and almost equally many have never been to school (Department of Statistics, 2007).

The differences between urban and rural areas in Lao PDR are reflected in many ways. Lao PDR is dominated by an agrarian economy with the majority of the population living in rural villages and being dependent on their own agricultural production (Khouangvichit, 2010). The development of infrastructures like roads and the exploitation of natural resources like rivers for dams and electricity plants, ore for mines, and forestry for logging as part of what is called the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) development are often looked upon as self-evidently good and unavoidable in the present globalisation era. However, this development might also create new dependencies and inequalities as households become more dependent on the market and agricultural systems more dependent on cash inputs, according to Jerndahl & Rigg (1999). Infrastructural development through road development is mainly taking place in the lowland areas and might therefore

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further the inequalities between majority and minority population groups as the lowland areas are largely populated by the majority ethnic group. There are also fears that the transformation of Lao PDR to a crossroads state as part of the GMS development might bring fewer economic benefits to the country in comparison with its neighbours, particularly Thailand, Vietnam, and China (Jerndal & Rigg, 1999).

Lao PDR is an ethnically diverse country with forty-nine (49) officially recognised ethnic groups in the national census from 2005 (Department of Statistics, 2005). Ethnicity and the attached language issue are controversial in Lao PDR and not only amongst international scholars like Benson (2003) and Kosonen (2005:1).

Historically, the division of the Lao people into the three geographical rather than cultural groups of Lao Lum (lowland), Lao Theung (upland), and Lao Sung (highland) was introduced by the Royal government in the 1950s as an attempt to brush off the previous racial division of the people in Lao PDR. However, in reality it was a reproduction that referred to the same ethnic groups as defined by the colonial administration. These concepts are today forbidden in official texts but “nevertheless still widely used, even by state newspapers” (Pholsena, 2006, p. 47). A more culturally relevant identification of people in Lao PDR was carried out in connection with the census for 2000 which was based on ethno-linguistic categories and eventually ended up in the forty-nine ethnic groups officially recognised today. The forty-nine groups are divided into four ethno-linguistic clusters in the background material to the 2005 census and are named Lao-Tai, Hmong-Mien, Sino-Tibetan, and Mon-Khmer (Pholsena, 2006).

The language issue is a highly relevant aspect for education in Lao PDR as the mother tongue of the 55 % of the population that are ethnic Lao is also the official language used in the educational system throughout the country (Department of Statistics, 2007). The consequence of this policy is that a large portion of the school going population is officially taught in a language that they do not use in their homes.

There are some attempts to remedy the situation of education for minority groups in Lao PDR. Kosonen (2005:2) refers to an
approach called the Concentrated Language Encounter that is based on the oral skills in Lao language of minority learners and the consideration of that learners are not native speakers of Lao. There have also been attempts to set up district schools intended for minority learners who are taught by two teachers, one Lao speaking teacher and one teacher with the same ethnicity as the learners. There are 18 schools for minority students that accommodate a total of 9,357 students (Ministry of Education, 2002). The teachers have also gone through specific training programmes, funded by the Australian Government until 2007, with a target towards the training of female teachers from minority communities (AusAID, 2008).

Even though education for minority groups is an important aspect of inclusive nation building we have to look beyond that aspect to be able to paint a broader picture of education in Lao PDR.

Education in Lao PDR – an overview

According to the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (1996), a new era of education started in the beginning of 1990 after the introduction of the NEM in 1986 that opened up for market forces and donors from the west. The new era coincided with the ‘World Declaration on Education For All’ that turned ‘Education For All’ (EFA) into a global slogan for education that was manifested in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 (UNESCO, 1990). This slogan was turned into a powerful agenda since it was ratified by 155 countries in the world and 150 donor organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Lao PDR was one of the ratifying countries who in return for supporting the EFA-agenda, was eligible for receiving support from the international community. This era is still in place and the main characteristics are the influences and budgetary support from western donor organisations and the organisations that financed the original world event in 1990. These are the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). These organisations have continuously taken over the global initiative in the field of education from UN organisation, even though UNESCO still remains as the official coordinator of the EFA agenda (Dahlström, 2009).
We will attend to this agenda in chapter II after this initial introduction to the education system in Lao PDR.

The education system in Lao PDR comprises of five years of primary education, three years of lower secondary education, and three years of upper secondary education. After secondary education students have the options of two to four years of vocational or technical education, one to five years of teacher education, or five years of university education. The majority of children in the school-going age attend school, even though almost every third girl and every fourth boy do not attend formal schooling (Lachanthaboune et al, 2008).

There are a total of eleven teacher education institutions (TEIs) in addition to the FOE at NUOL in the capital Vientiane, Champasack University in the south and the Souphanouvong University in the north (UNESCO, 2008). Eight of these TEIs offer different undergraduate programmes for pre-school, primary, and lower secondary teacher education. The university faculties offer graduate programmes for upper secondary teacher education. Three institutions are also specialised in the education of teachers in physical education, arts teachers, and monk teachers respectively.

In spite of the presence of such an elaborate education system, there are still challenges within the system as described by a joint report from the World Bank and the MOE covering primary and lower secondary education in Lao PDR (Benveniste, et.al. 2007). The report focuses on primary and lower secondary school teachers that together comprise 87% of the teaching force in the country. Access to primary education is relatively high in Lao PDR as 84% of the population live in a village with a primary school. Most of the villages without primary education are situated in the upland and mountainous areas. In addition, the primary schools that are available in these areas are often incomplete, meaning that they do not offer the full five grade cycle of primary education. This opportunity gap widens as children grow older and creates a sharp contrast between the Lao-Tai urban youth of whom more than 30% have access to lower secondary education, while only 3% of the non-Lao-Tai rural youth are in the same position. Completion rates after five years of primary education are very low (around 33%) and a high repetition
rate in primary classes that is close to 20% might contribute to the low completion rates as an extra year in one or more grades is probably not affecting school attendance in a positive way. The report states that repetition is a structural problem that even has generated discussions about automatic promotion at least for the first three years of the primary cycle.

It is also important to note the disruptive effect on social life that modern schooling can have when it is introduced in social situations that in principle follow a pre-modern way of life. This is the case in many so-called developing countries, including Lao PDR, which can be characterised as multi-layered societies, in the sense that pre-modern and modern life are lived in parallel (Dahlström, 2002). Isouthe (2006), for example, studied a rural village in Lao PDR and the considerations that parents have to make when they decide about their children’s schooling. The study showed that parents are well informed about the options they have to consider in contrast to the view expressed by the local educational authorities. Parents make strategic choices to send some children to school and loose the children’s working capacity within the family, and to let other children remain with the parents at home to help them with the daily workload for survival. Local authorities however, have the idea that the parents must be ‘educated’ to understand the importance of formal education for their children. The dilemma that this study points at is a daily struggle for many parents, who live a rural life far away from national enclaves of modernity. This dilemma can only be solved by an education system that is flexible enough to take into account the living conditions of all habitants. This includes those who have not yet been included in the globalised modernity of societies, unless we accept a calculated human loss or marginalisation.

The previously mentioned report on teaching in Lao PDR (Benveniste et. al., 2007) also looks at the teacher education system in the country and reports that students can enter teacher education programmes in four different ways, through quota, entrance examination, nayobay, or non-quota. These options operate in the following ways: The quota system selects students from different regions through a rather extensive application process including a reference to the students’ examination results from previous studies: Students in the entrance examination system are selected on the basis
of their scores on the TEIs entrance examination. The nayobay system is mainly constructed for children of certain groups in the society that are appreciated by the political system from an ideological perspective, like teachers, national heroes, leaders, retired persons, or poor families. The nayobay system works through an application letter that often is considered by an institutional committee. Finally, non-quota students are those who did not pass the entrance examination but are admitted anyhow as fee-paying students. Fee-paying students are often taught in separate course groups. In addition, all TEIs run so-called special courses. The special courses are usually offered in the evenings to fee-paying students and are often organised as upgrading courses in the English language and do not normally lead to teachers’ qualifications.

In the year 2005-06 there was a total enrolment of more than 15.000 students at the TEIs in Lao PDR. Most of these students had eleven years of schooling up to upper secondary examination and entered programmes that led to a qualification to teach English in lower secondary education after three years of professional education (11+3), a qualification to teach in primary education after one year of professional education (11+1), and a qualification to teach social sciences in lower secondary education after three years of professional education (11+3). Benveniste et.al. (2007) are doubtful about the conclusions made by the Education for All Action Plan Quantitative Projection Model (MOE, 2005) that claims that there will be more than enough teachers in 2015. The report’s claim is rather that:

the most likely projection is one of teacher shortages in most years until 2015, ranging from 12 to 50 percent of total demand. Shortages could be particularly acute in rural and remote areas, once incomplete schools are completed and new schools are built where there are none (Benveniste et al., 2007, p.44).

This projection of teacher shortages in Lao PDR will put heavy pressures on TEIs in the country and their main task to prepare teachers for the future.

Benveniste et.al. (2007) also looks at the working conditions for teachers in Lao PDR and describe a system with heavy constraints in addition to the acute need of more teachers especially in rural and remote areas. Multi-grade teaching is applied in more than every
fourth classroom which challenges teachers who have not received proper instructions for that task. Teaching resources beyond textbooks and teacher’s guides are scarce and many rural teachers do not even receive their meagre salary or additional benefits regularly or according to the national regulations. This leaves many teachers in a situation where they become dependent on additional income for their survival. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that teachers make less efforts to prepare interesting and flexible teaching and learning situations, but follow the common instructional practices of;

- frontal lecturing, copying lessons on the blackboard and encouraging recitation and memorization. Students are mostly passive recipients of instruction, while there is some opportunity for copying exercises there is comparatively little time devoted to practical exercises or application of knowledge (Benveniste et. al. 2007, p. 94).

The policy of ‘education for all’ and its methodological practice of ‘student-centred education’ has been adopted in Lao PDR since the beginning of the 1990s the traditional way of organising formal education through one-way communication and recitation seems to be the rule more than fifteen years later. As Sundgren (2008) writes in the preface to a publication based on thesis work produced by Lao educators as part of a professional master course:

Judging by the knowledge produced by the graduates, a future challenge is to find reform strategies that are neither uncritically implementing favoured ideas in western educational philosophy and discourse, nor adhering to traditional practice, but rather taking in account the specific context, culture, language and general conditions of Laos when developing teacher education (Sundgren, 2008, p. 5-6).

Our own educational ambitions are related to a search for such reform strategies and we hope that our inquiries into action research also will contribute to new strategies.

Aim and research questions

Due to the central role of action research in the national teacher education reforms we wanted to look closer at this concept. Our pre-understanding is that the official discourse about reform and change is often restricted to the policy arena in today’s donor driven world
and often stops as ‘political symbolism’, as Jansen (2002) has expressed it. From this follows that practitioners’ understanding and context are seldom recognised beyond their inclusion as the problems to reform efforts.

Our overarching aim is to look into how action research, as a new idea and practice in education, entered the reform arena in Lao PDR and how it moved from policy to practice level. Furthermore, our aim includes a search for factors that influence this move from policy to practice level and this search will also make us enter into broader historical and social contexts beyond the immediate reform arena.

We pose the following research questions:

- How is action research described in national documents, donor documents, and action research reports produced by practitioners?
- How do Lao educators perceive the introduction of action research into Lao education?
- How do Lao educators understand action research as an educational approach?
- What potentials and constraints are related to action research by Lao educators?
- What are the broader contextual factors that influence action research on the educational reform arena?

In addition, we will report and analyse our attempts to carry out action research as part of our own teaching duties. We will also elaborate a forward looking perspective on how action research can be used in the future for the benefit of education in Lao PDR, based on findings from our own action research as well as references from other international educational practices.

Our inquiry starts with a historical description of the educational context in Lao PDR, as our research focus includes context as an important factor for educational development also in the present times of globalisations.

The historical education context

There is a need to look back into history if we want to understand recent teacher education reform efforts in a country, especially if that
country has gone through distinctly different periods of influences, which is the case for Lao PDR. There can be many reasons for looking back. Ours is based on the idea that previous periods of influences can have prolonged effects and even influence when new ideas are introduced long after the official end of previous periods.

We have identified five periods that we have named (1) the traditional period, (2) the colonial period, (3) the war period, (4) the socialist period, and (5) the neoliberal period. These periods are identified mainly through their educational distinctions while overlaps and other types of bridges appear that the following description will show.

The traditional period

The traditional period is the time up to 1893, when the colonial French Indochina was established. Before the colonial period, present day Lao PDR was part of the kingdom of Lan Xang with its initial capital at Luangprabang (Stuart-Fox, 1997). The area was culturally influenced from India and China. The Indian culture brought the Brahma and Buddhist religions, while the Chinese culture foremost influenced trading and calculating practices. Education during the traditional period was carried out in three different modes, as informal education within the structures of families and villages, as feudal education within the kingdoms to serve the needs of the royal families and their rule, and as temple (wat) education following Buddhist traditions (Bouasivath, 1996).

Informal education

Informal education within the structures of families was mostly practically oriented towards life skills related to the needs of the families, according to Bouasivath (1996). The younger generations gained their life skills through observations and imitations as a kind of learning by doing within agriculture, animal husbandry, handicraft, hunting, daily household activities, as well as herbal and traditional medicine skills as often organised in traditional societies not yet affected by modern formal education. Many of the activities within the families were gender stereotyped following a division of duties that made girls learn from their mothers and boys from their fathers. Important cultural behaviours and attitudes were learnt as
integrated parts of the life skills learning, but also through specific social events like story telling within the family or as part of village life. Any grown-up person could in principle act as a teacher as learning was an informal activity related to daily duties in the family and the village, and not something divorced in time and space from daily life. Specific social skills and knowledge for example related to the practicing of traditional medicine, cultural, or religious behaviours that the community wanted to carry over to the next generation were often organised by specifically skilled persons or elders at certain social occasions (Bouasivath 1996).

Lao PDR is still today a diverse country with many ethnic minorities living in the upland and mountainous areas of the country far away from the modern enclaves (Evans, 1999). The historical failure of the modern state to integrate marginalised social groups into the national modernization efforts has meant that informal traditional education continues to play an important role until today, even beyond the areas where modern schooling is still scarce or even lacking. This is true beyond the 23% of the population that live in communities with no access to modern schooling (Department of Statistics, 2005).

**Royal education**

The feudal hierarchy of the traditional kingdoms demanded education of the elite for them to be able to carry out their duties related to the different administrative positions within the kingdom. Stuart-Fox (1997) prefer to describe the kingdoms as segmented structures with larger power centres called mandalas (circles of power) connected to smaller power centres named meuang that paid tribute to the mandala. The flexibility of this system followed the available sources of political, military, economic or ideological power that varied over time between the mandala and the meuang.

The instructional documents used for legal purposes were documented as palm leaf manuscripts and contained instructions for the different positions in the royal patronage. Therefore, in a strict sense, the learning of this type of palm leaf manuscripts was the privilege of the royal elite. The close relation between the heritage of the royal family and religious beliefs afforded a strong position to Buddhist monks, who acted as the link between the royal family and its subject (Bouasivath, 1996).
Teachers or teacher education in a modern sense did not exist within the royal education system. Teaching functioned within the closed circles of the royal family and the group of highest monks as an internal privilege to keep the power within the kingdom.

Buddhist education
The Buddhist temples (wat) have for long played an important role in Lao PDR since Buddhism arrived during the kingdom of Lan Xang in the 14th century. A symbiotic relationship was developed between the kingdoms and Buddhism. The kingdoms supported the building of wats and the spiritual power of the monks, while the monks had an important role to officially acknowledge the royal heritage and the social power of the kingdoms. Temple (wat) education was carried out for different purposes. It had an internal purpose to educate monks on three different levels that corresponded to the duties within the temple, as well as towards the royal family and the people. The monks with the highest ranks were also the ones who carried out administrative work for the kingdom and acted as the teacher for the king. The leading monks also had the responsibility to translate and copy palm leave documents from Pali to Lao language for general educational purposes. (Bouasivath, 1996)

Lockhart (2001, p. 6) claims that monks were an intellectual elite in Lao societies and “in addition to their educational role, temples had traditionally functioned as local cultural centres through the preservation of manuscripts”.

Temple education was also extended as an activity for public education. Young boys usually spent some time in the temple to be educated in spiritual and cultural issues. Temple education also had a common role to play towards the community as it attended to matters such as mathematics, medicine, architecture, handicraft, and arts. Particularly male students from poor families have all along had the possibility to general education as the temples have offered education and livelihood for young boys while they have contributed to the temple life by assisting the monks with the daily duties. The possibilities for being educated in spiritual, cultural, and practical matters at a temple have also been extended to females. However, this possibility for females has often had a corrective purpose for what has been recognised as deviant social behaviour.
Teaching is until today part of the duties of Buddhist monks in Lao PDR and this responsibility corresponds to the positional hierarchy within the monkshood system as a higher monk position creates responsibilities to teach higher up in the society. The temple has lately also functioned as a students' hostel, when modern education is available in a community. Children from poor backgrounds have got their livelihood from the temple and still attended modern schools in the community.

Reagan (1996) points to an interesting aspect of traditional Buddhist educational practices based on documents referring to India, which is also relevant Lao PDR to a certain extent. Debate played an imported role in Buddhist education, according to Reagan, who points to ancient Buddhist text. This is an indication of that Buddhist education is not confined to the recitation of texts, but has also rhetorical functions to develop argumentation and logical thinking.

In conclusion, during the traditional period there was no education or teacher education in forms known today, but people were educated anyhow. Some of these informal as well as formally organised educational activities like the ones organised within families and in the temples, have survived until this day.

**The colonial period**

In 1893, what is today Lao PDR was incorporated into the French colonial Indochina that already included Vietnam and Cambodia. The French authorities saw themselves as savers of the people of Laos from the aggressive and powerful Siam and Vietnam neighbours, according to Lockhart (2001)\(^3\). The French also saw 'their territory' French Indochina as a way to block further expansion eastwards of the British Empire.

Education during the colonial period up until 1954 was influenced by the colonial perspective that constructed the Lao population as a pitiful and backward people;

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\(^3\) The French created the concept Laos for the country that today is officially named Lao PDR. For that reason we will use Laos instead of Lao PDR in a limited part of the text when France still had a significant impact on the country's development even beyond its period as a colonial power.
from whom little was to be expected and who needed to be
protected from their more aggressive Siamese and Vietnamese
neighbours - even as the latter were being encouraged to resettle in
Laos to 'make something out of it' on the French behalf
(Lockhart, 2001, p. 5).

The French organised education in Laos along two different strands
based on their colonial mentality and the complexity of the colonial
situation in Indochina. They kept the traditional temple schools in
modified forms by combining the traditions of Buddhist education
focusing on moral values and religious teaching with the introduction
of western science and maths. This was an attempt by the colonisers
to integrate their so-called civilisation agenda with the main
traditional culture, but with poor outcomes partly because of
resistance from the monks towards western influences. The French
even established a teacher training school for monks in 1909.
However, the monks who went through training preferred to work as
civil servants rather than to teach in the temple schools (Lockhart,
2001).

The other strand was the development of Franco-Lao schools in the
whole of Indochina. This education system contained 5+4+3 years
corresponding to primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary
education. The French language had a prominent position in the
secondary part of this system. There was only one lower secondary
school in the whole of Laos and students who wanted to complete
upper secondary before 1940 had to do that in Cambodia or
Vietnam. During and after the Second World War more schools
were built by the French as an attempt to support a Lao nationalism
sympathetic to the colonisers as a way to hinder Thai influences.
However, very few Lao students continued their schooling after the
first three years of primary education, while immigrant students from
Vietnam as well as China were more frequent in upper grades. The
French also built a training school for primary school teachers in
Vientiane. However, this school did not produce many teachers. Of
the first group of students entering the training school in 1952 only
five out of 32 passed the examination. The colonial education system
did not benefit the Lao population and “the colonial legacy would
shape education in Laos well after its independence” (Lockhart,
2001, p. 10). In conclusion, sixty years of colonial rule managed to
produce 7 Lao graduates at university level in France, 31 students completed upper secondary education, and 118 students finished lower secondary school (Lockhart, 2001; Phonekeo, 1996).

The decolonisation process in Laos was long and complicated, according to Lockhart (2001). Most of the time during the period between 1945 and 1953, the RLG had agreements with France concerning the development of the country, while the revolutionary Lao Patriotic Front (LPF), also called Pathet Lao in mainly western references, did not recognise the French-supported royal regime. This left the country divided both geographically and politically at independence in 1954, when France lost the battle at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam against Vietminh and had to leave its colonies in the region. However as Phraxayavong (2005, p. 50) states;

> the United States had already been involved in those countries since the early 1950s, and the Kingdom of Laos would rely on US assistance to build up the new nation. Thus, by 1954 the US was replacing France as the major foreign influence in Laos.

After the Geneva Conference of 1954 the RLG was provided a neutral status that forced the United States to effectuate its support to the RLG and its political faction in secrecy.

**The war period**

Laos was a divided country politically and educationally during a period of twenty years from 1955 to 1975. The areas that were controlled by RLG got continued support from France in the urban sectors of education, while American support through the United States Agency of International Development (USAID) focused on rural and non-formal education in parallel to the military and undercover involvement through its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on the RLG side of the war. Meanwhile, as the areas controlled by LPF expanded through the late 1950s and 1960s, education in the liberated zone also expanded with the main assistance coming from North Vietnam. (Lockhart, 2001)

Even though there were attempts to reform and to ‘localise’ education under the RGL, it remained heavily influenced by the French system in the region at this time and Lockhart (2001) points to two important factors for this influence. One was that the French
language continued to be the main language of instruction at secondary level which hindered many Lao students from continuing their education beyond primary level. The other was the fact that the curricula used were still reflecting the colonial mentality through its content and way to present Laos as a country still under the colonial burden. However, an important development took place as part of the 1962 reform efforts at village levels. This was the creation of rural community education centres that functioned as an integrated community development locality in an existing school, a temple, or a purposely built shelter combining the first three years of formal schooling, a youth centre, adult literacy, and polytechnic activities. There were also attempts to expand the lower and secondary education with the Lao language as the medium of instruction, leading to a sizable increase in the number of students enrolled in primary education. Despite this, very few Lao students still managed to enter secondary education. The USAID was heavily involved both in the planning and funding of these efforts as a way to strengthen the fragile base in rural areas of the royal government and to foster an American vision as an alternative to LPF (Lockhart, 2001).

The area controlled by LPF expanded continuously so that in the beginning of 1970s it controlled “two-thirds of the country and one-third of its estimated three million population”, according to Langer (1971). Under heavy constraints and pressure from American air raids, among other things, the LPF managed to build up an education system in the liberated zone mainly with the assistance from North Vietnamese advisors. While education under the RLG was portrayed as free from political influences, education under LPF followed an integrated model that included a creation of political awareness. Langer (1971) states that between 1968 and 1971 the school enrolment increased from 63,000 to 68,000 in more than 2,000 village schools. Further, the existence of 20 junior secondary schools, and two senior high schools in the liberated zone were also reported by official Pathet Lao sources according to Langer (1971). According to Chaleunsin (1996) the number of students increased further to around 110,000 in 1975. They were taught by more than 6,000 teachers of whom 42% were ethnic minority teachers, and 19% were female, and 28% were volunteer teachers.
The LPF introduced the Lao language as the medium of instruction in all its schools. This also demanded the production of text books and instructional material mainly with assistance from North Vietnam but also from other socialist countries. The content of the produced school material also reflected the relationship between education and the desired revolutionary transformation of the Lao society. The combination of theory and practice was developed to foster civic responsibility through productive activities integrated with the school work, in remembrance of “the ravages of war, the suffering of the Lao people resulting from it, and their courage in fighting the ‘American imperialists’” (Langer, 1971, p. 11). There were also attempts to produce material in minority languages by using Lao script as a way to encourage literacy and to avoid the suppression of minority languages. Teacher education was upgraded from being a local course for one or two months to an eighteen months training course at TEIs supplemented by in-service training of the serving village teachers, where possible, considering the American air raids. Chaleunsin (1996) claims that towards the end of this period, i.e. 1973-75 there were 268 complete primary schools while other schools were incomplete only covering grades 1-3, 46 lower secondary schools, and three upper secondary schools in the liberated zone and that 19 teacher training schools for primary teachers and one training school for lower secondary teachers in addition to the teacher training college (TTC) in Nakhao, that was serving these schools with teachers. This educational system did not operate as an ordinary system as we know it today, but had to be adapted to the war situation meaning that functions like schooling were not permanent in a village but were moved to alternative places together with the villagers when the situation demanded it. This created of course major constraints to the functioning of the system. Even though the accomplishments were rather impressive there were also critical comments given regarding the quality of education in the liberated zone from observers both from socialist and capitalist countries, according to Langer (1971).

The war period created a lot of general social problems for the people of Laos that were estimated to 3 million at this time. Phraxayavong (2005, p. 128) writes about the social impacts of the armed conflicts...
and the US air bombings during the American war, the period that was called the Vietnam War in the western world;

the number of people in need of refugee resettlement was more than one million, or about one-third of the total population of Laos [...] about 800,000 persons were moved or forced to move on account of the US bombing and other military activities [...]. During the nine years of bombing, from 1964 to 1973, more bomb tonnage was dropped on Laos than had been dropped on all of Europe during World War II [...] three million tons of bombs [...] Laos is still suffering from its war wounds: 100,000 people killed, 3,500 villages destroyed, one of every four people displaced, 400,000 refugees living in more than twenty countries around the world, 40 percent of the arable land rendered barren, and unexploded bombs littered across the ground (UXO/LAO). More than 200 persons are still killed every year by unexploded bombs.

In 1975, the LPF brought with them many of the educational ideas that had been developed in the liberated zone, when they took power in the whole of the country after the establishment of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) in December 1975.

The socialist period

The National Congress of People’s Representatives that met in Vientiane in December 1975 both marked the change of regime from constitutional monarchy to communist people’s republic, and set the direction of future political, social and economic development. For the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, the Congress confirmed the ‘farsighted’ leadership of the Party in bringing the Lao ‘thirty-year struggle’ for political power to a successful conclusion (Stuart-Fox, 1997, p. 168).

Scholars and organisations writing about education in Lao PDR after 1975 remark on the quantitative expansions of students and number of schools, according to Evans (1998). However, external observers also find a reduced quality of education. Evans (1998) states that many serving teachers under the RLG (up to 90%) actually left the country to avoid being ‘re-educated’ by the new Lao PDR government. Another reason for leaving the country was that many Lao citizens also experienced that the new government was very poor and lacked resources to develop the country. Evans (1998) also refers to the concept ‘hidden curriculum’ as a way to point to the implicit
influences on students’ values and ideas about society that schooling actually inculcates. This process might have forced teachers ‘voluntarily’ into exile to avoid the re-education installed by the new government. In contrast to many countries where the idea of a hidden curriculum was not openly discussed, the new regime in Lao PDR that clearly announced the importance of political education as part of schooling. This had other consequences related to the hidden curriculum as demonstrated by Dahlström (2006) in a small classroom research event with teacher educators from Lao PDR. This showed that teacher educators were well aware of how traditions in formal education operated as a way to stifle innovative, independent, and creative thinking amongst students as they learn to pretend to be polite as a strategy to survive life in the classroom.

Political education was carried out through civic education, involvement in community production, and military training. These activities were expected to be organised by all educational institutions. Civic education included for example learning about Marxist-Leninism, moral education, patriotism, family planning, gender issues, and regulations. Community production meant that all educational institutions contributed to the production of food and other necessities that either were used by the school kitchen at boarding schools or sold to the government collective shops. Military training took place once every year and all educational institutions had to set up their own defence. The internal organisation of the school work was also influenced by the collectivism of the government through the organisation of group leaders at different levels. In addition the decisions taken by the party leadership were forwarded to all institutions through regular seminars which also were forums for attacks on the government’s enemies, being them counter-revolutionary forces or former enemies during the liberation struggle. Many of these attempts to create the new socialist human being are still in place in somewhat moderated forms (Chaleunsin 1996).

Evans (1998) has looked into the first textbooks used after 1975 and found that many of them repeated the same messages and themes as the textbooks produced by LPF during the war period. Many of the stories for primary students are about the war and the patriotic soldiers. The textbooks also included texts about socialism and the
new culture portrayed as the enemy of capitalism and individualistic thinking.

The huge constraints that the new government met due to lack of financial means, human resources, and national infrastructures left many gaps between the expressed intentions and what was practically possible to achieve within a vulnerable educational system, according to Evan (1998). The education system was at times illustrated as being built on ‘skeleton schools’ (Evan, 1998, p. 157) characterised as “flimsy bamboo structures with a (usually young girl) ‘teacher’ who had had a few years of primary education”. This can be compared to ‘ritualised coulisse schools’ (Dahlström, 2002) where the modern school concept has created illusions of modernity operated through an internal ritualisation composed by parrot-talk and autocracy.

During the first years after 1975 there were two categories of teachers: volunteer teachers and government employed teachers (Bouasengthong, 1996). The volunteer teachers were supported by the villagers who provided food, clothes, rice and accommodation in the village. They did not get any salary but were paid in kind by the villagers and worked under rather difficult conditions. Volunteer teachers usually operated in remote areas where the government had not had any possibility to place a teacher, meaning also that they did not get proper backup from the government system. Even government employed teachers worked under difficult situations with meagre salaries and with few supportive infrastructures, equipment, and textbooks. The working conditions usually degraded with the distance from regional centres and urban areas. Government teachers were also obliged to participate in political training and in technical subjects during the school vacations and became in that way ‘local intellectuals’ that at times also were recruited to positions in the government organisational structures. However, the overall situation was that the abilities of teachers and the quality of teaching were at a low level (Bouasengthong, 1996).

The previous model for teacher education from the liberated zone was extended during this period to the whole country with a total of 59 training institutions for primary school teachers distributed throughout the provinces. These training schools were usually locally constructed with thatched roofing and bamboo walls. They were
often divided into three sections one for each year of the three year’s training. The background of the students attending these institutions was often five years primary education and they were recruited from the part of the province where the institution was situated. Each institution could have between 20-60 students and they lived in dormitories that were constructed in the same way as the training school. Students received some support, e.g. rice, from the government for their daily living, but had to arrange school gardens and relations with the communities to be able to gather food for their survival. Educational material for these training institutions were scarce so the teaching and learning process was often repetitive through whole class chorus ‘learning’. A report from the ADB with Adams (2000, p. 109) as the team leader states the following regarding teacher education in Lao PDR:

In the late 1980s, teacher training was provided by 59 small training schools that had little common curriculum and offered generally low quality preparation. In the mid-1990s, MOE raised the minimum educational requirements for primary and secondary teachers and began closing and consolidating these small schools into larger teacher training centres. These larger centres were able to achieve economies of scale and offer a stronger, more consistent training program. By 1998 the 59 schools had been reduced to 9 (plus the Faculty of Education at the university).

There were many problems to face in Lao PDR within society as a whole including the education system during the first decade after 1975. Phraxayavong (2005, p. 158) even claims that “Lao PDR inherited a collapsed economy, as most Western donor countries had suspended aid in mid-1975”.

This period was dominated by international support from the Eastern Bloc. This support came to an end with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc at the end of the 1980s. By then, the government of Lao PDR had already started its walk towards a market economy following the global trends of neoliberal development with strong influences from western donor agencies (Phraxayavong, 2005).

The neoliberal period
The educational arena in Lao PDR has been fundamentally changed since the introduction of the NEM policy, the collapse of the Eastern
I. A NEW ERA OF EDUCATION AND ITS CONTEXT

Bloc, and the national adherence to the global doctrine of ‘education for all’. The combined influences of these national and international developments have had far reaching consequences for education in Lao PDR.

The impact of these changes on education has been mixed; perhaps the most significant development have been the growth of private schools as alternatives to public education and the involvement of international organizations like UNESCO and the Asian Development Bank in school-related projects on a large scale. Foreign consultants appear to have been involved with all areas of planning, with particular attention to curriculum and to improving access to schooling for girls and for minority children of both sexes (Lockhart, 2001, p. 27).

In our introduction to the education system in Lao PDR, we outlined the main parts of the education system in the country as it has developed since the beginning of 1990. Lao PDR has an educational system that looks rather elaborated on paper including all levels of education from primary to university education. Furthermore, teachers are, according to Nagel, Fox & Vixaysack (2000), considered to be dedicated to their tasks in spite of their difficult working conditions with a scarcity of textbooks and other supportive material as well as low salaries that are not always paid regularly.

However, there are also deeper problems that have arrived in Lao PDR with the neoliberal and globalised era that seldom are addressed in official government publications or in donor reports concerning education.

Lockhart (2001) makes an informed analysis of these problems that can have severe influences on the education system including teacher education. Lockhart’s analysis goes beyond the common assessment of Lao education that donor organisations are concerned with, namely proper school buildings, the lack of textbooks, and modern teaching methods. Instead, he looks at the structural changes taking place. These structural changes are related to the new environment of professional development for educators in Lao PDR as countries like Thailand, Japan, Australia, Malaysia, and West European countries

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4 See Education in Lao PDR - an overview
have replaced the countries in the former Eastern Bloc as both the submitters of educational consultants and sites for educational programmes. Furthermore, Lockhart points to the cultural counter-discourses that are not only limited to the Thai media influences but extend to internet activities. These structural changes create a delusion of the officially announced revolutionary purposes of education through the impact of western cultures and Lockhart concludes that much of these structural changes bypass the education system.

For example, educators like ourselves who get further education in western countries with different educational and cultural environments might change our perspectives on what is presented as official views on socialism and the socialist human being in Lao PDR. Young people in Lao PDR who are confronted with western-style media and internet networks can develop illusionary views of what a different life in another and more affluent country might be like. Furthermore, the parts of the population that meet unquestioned neoliberal cultures might only see the benefits of market forces and the omnipresence of goods and services without further considerations from collective or justice perspectives. These kinds of structural influences might create both social contradictions and individual frustrations in a country like Lao PDR where the political and educational systems are moulded from revolutionary discourses if not the structural influences are also included as themes for debate and discussion within the educational system.

This last part of the historical education context also serves as an introduction to what is addressed in the next chapter. What we have named the neoliberal period is still prevailing and will be considered in our attempts to shape an analytical perspective. This bridging section will briefly describe the general donor situation in Lao PDR and also look into the most influential donor projects in the area of teacher education.

The presence of donors, donor projects, and foreign consultants has constantly increased during this period. We have listed the most influential organisations and their major areas of operations, including the multilateral lenders of capital like the World Bank and the ADB, in Appendix 1.
In general, the focus of bilateral donors has changed over time, according to Phraxayavong (2005). France has continued its interest in Lao PDR even after 1975 and has changed its focus on education and health in urban areas to rural development as a result of the Lao government’s decentralisation efforts and the French interest to expand their francophone policies. The USA has after 1975 significantly changed and minimized its donor efforts and focus on their self-interest to eradicate opium cultivation and to search for remains of missing Americans from the war period. Countries like Japan, Sweden, and Australia has since the introduction of the NEM provided increasing amounts of assistance, even though Sweden has decided to withdraw its donor support to Lao PDR as from 2012, the reason being a new policy of international cooperation building on an official idea to concentrate cooperation to a smaller number of countries worldwide.

The neighbouring countries Thailand, Vietnam, and China have played an important role in offering assistance in areas like human resource training, agriculture, and road construction. The impacts of aid and loans from multilateral organisations have helped Lao PDR to coordinate the international support not least through the Round Table Meetings since 1989 facilitated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Many multilateral organisations such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the ADB have offices in Vientiane to administer loans and grants, but also to oversee the use of loans, that in 2005 added up to US $ 2.846 billion (Phraxayavong, 2005).

The Education Quality Improvement Project (EQIP) has been the major donor financed project in the education sector in Lao PDR since the beginning of 1990s. EQIP I started in 1992 and was in operation until 1998. Its main focus was “on the development of the teacher education system for primary and lower secondary education, i.e. rationalising pre-service teacher training, upgrading physical facilities, and establishing an in-service training system and teacher development centre” (Asian Development Bank, 2001, p. 10).

The second Education Quality Improvement Project (EQIP II) was introduced in 2002 and operated until 2007. It included three components: (1) Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning;
(2) Increasing Access to and Participation in Education; and (3) Strengthening Management Capacity and Project Implementation. Each component includes a number of sub-categories. Component 1 included a teacher education strategy and a reform agenda for the pre-service teacher training system to improve the supply and quality of teachers; develop curricula material for pre-service; upgrading of untrained teachers, and in-service training; guidelines for the certification of all teachers; the training of TTC staff on master and PhD level; and further curriculum development. Another goal was to establish a policy group whose task was to develop an incentive system for teachers. Further, the development of training facilities at colleges and provincial resource centres and upgrading centres and a nationwide in-service training network was also envisaged. Component 2 included the construction of buildings to upgrade incomplete schools to the fifth grade, building new schools were none were available, and to construct multi-grade schools. These developments were to be carried out at district levels through allocated funds from the project as a way to encourage participation. Component 3 included the establishment of management systems as part of a decentralisation process both in terms of staffing and construction of educational buildings (Asian Development Bank, 2001).

The Teacher Training Enhancement and Status of Teachers (TTEST) project was an integrated part of EQIP II activities. The TTEST focused on component 1 of EQIP II related to teacher education development under a National Teacher Training Plan (NTTP). This work included curriculum, textbook, and materials development for teacher education including components aiming at ethnic minority students such as multi-grade teaching and language issues (Ministry of Education, 2003).

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) project in Teacher Education started in July 2000 with financial support from Sida. The project was implemented with technical assistance from Save the Children Norway (SCN). This was the first attempt to introduce educational action research in Lao PDR and involved the three teacher education colleges that we have used for our data collections (Sida, 2001).
Reflection on the starting point

This chapter has introduced the reader to the site for our research, Lao PDR. It has also introduced the reader to our research focus, action research, and our research questions. A large part of the chapter covers the different historical and educational contexts that we think are relevant for our study. We divided these contexts into five main periods; the traditional, the colonial, the war, the socialist, and the neoliberal periods.

We also concluded that the neoliberal period is still prevailing and affects education in Lao PDR today, even though we cannot be sure whether the effects of previous periods are long gone and forgotten. For example, we have already noted that both informal and Buddhist education are still operating in Lao PDR. A relevant reflection at this stage is whether traits from royal elite thinking, colonial mentalities, autocratic practices, or aspects of emancipatory and liberating ideas with their roots in the previous historical periods still have an influence on educators in Lao PDR in a neoliberal period that is promising ‘education for all’?

When Lockhart (2001) refers to what signifies the neoliberal period he points to the involvement of globally operating donors and their large scale educational projects. It is in connection to these large scale projects that we want to ask: Who is in charge? Because, when you look at documents like the one referred to above (Asian Development Bank, 2001) and its combined efforts to move education in a certain direction it is almost unavoidable to reflect that this type of documents resembles what you might expect from national governments and not from external agencies. Furthermore, such documents become very persuasive as they represent joint efforts by both national and multilateral donor organisations that are difficult to ignore by needy national governments. This becomes even more problematic when you know that donor consultants working together with government representatives are all the time piloting the local representatives into the intended project’s objectives and activities as part of the consulting process. Add to this that these arrangements of strong clusters of international donor organisations in a sector support perspective can easily influence the national policies of the receiving government in the direction of the donors’ desires in spite
of the discourse about local ownership. These processes might well be synonymous with the title of Bäcktorp’s (2007) thesis, “When the First-World-North Goes Local”, which brings us over to our analytical perspective.
II. BUILDING A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION - LEGACIES AND REGIMES OF INFLUENCE

Our thesis is placed within the tradition of global policy studies in education (Steiner-Khamsi, 2000). Our concern is global educational trends that influence countries that are dependent on foreign support within the educational sector, Lao PDR being one such example. Our perspective is close to what Tickly (2001) has addressed as a beginning of a conceptual framework. In his framework Tickly includes the importance of economic globalisation, the globalisation of the politics of education, and the way western cultural forms have become influential through the globalisation of education.

This chapter starts in a description of the global influences during the last 20 years or more with specific reference to donor influences in the area of education policy and practice in Lao PDR. Reference is also made to other countries in similar situations, especially in the case of what is called the new methodology or student-centred education. It continues with a section on action research, its background and developments that we find significant to the introduction of action research in Lao PDR. The chapter is concluded with an emerging theoretical foundation that will be used as a basis for our analysis.

The legacies of globalisations and donors

Much has been written about education policies, globalisations, and donors since the end of the division between the Western and Eastern Blocs and the birth of what Castells (1996) calls the information age and what is commonly understood as globalisation. Giddens (1991, p. 64) has defined globalisation in a straightforward way as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link
distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by
events occurring many miles away and vice versa”. Giddens (1991)
claims that globalisation is dialectical as it influences both ends. For
example, while the globalisation of educational policies influence the
education system in Lao PDR, the textile factory production in Lao
PDR aimed for the global market makes the same type of production
in the west globally uncompetitive.

Santos (2002) prefers to talk about globalisations as a way to
problematisate the globalisation concept. Santos has identified different
forms of globalisations of which some are hegemonic as globalisations
from above. These globalisations have a large impact often based on
dominant forms of development, knowledge, and economic
imperatives. This category of globalisations are for example:
deforestation carried out by multinational corporations, the spread of
American fast food, the transformation of English to a worldwide
language, and educational policies that are transformed into demands
on national policies that need donor support. Santos has also
identified counter-hegemonic globalisations from below that are
concerned with fights against social exclusions and marginalisation
through networks of grassroots initiatives and community
developments that he prefers to call cosmopolitanism. Networks of
critical forms of action research for social justice and empowerment
can also be included under the label of counter-hegemonic
cosmopolitanism, according to Diniz-Pereira (2002).

Globalisations contain many aspects of transformations in the social
landscape of human life, according to Castells (1996). Amongst the
most significant are the technological revolution through information
technologies, the global interdependency of economies and new
relationships between economy, state, and society, the collapse of
Soviet Union, and a profound restructuring of capitalism through
flexible management, networking, empowering of capital and
diminished labour influence. There has also been, according to
Castells (1996, p. 2);

an accentuation of uneven development, this time not only
between North and South, but between the dynamic segments and
territories of societies everywhere and those others that risk
becoming irrelevant from the perspective of the system’s logic.
II. BUILDING A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION – LEGACIES AND REGIMES OF INFLUENCE

Education policies and donor activities have been affected by these transformations and Tickly (2001) claims that analysis of education in low income countries has often been limited to the impact of economic globalisation. Furthermore, the space for educational action has been affected and limited, especially for critical intellectual work, due to the entrance of neoliberal perspectives in education (Davies, 2005). Davies and Bansel (2005) use Foucault’s theorising of governmentality as a tool to analyse what neoliberalism does to education and claims that neoliberalism sets up the discursive parameters along which educators are forced to think and act so that the move of education institutions from the logic of collective well-being to the logic of the market becomes unproblematic.

Arnove (2007, p. 1) looks at education from a globalisation perspective and claims that the increased interconnectedness between societies creates problems for education around the world. He relates these problems to:

- the governance, financing, and provision of mass education; they relate to issues of equality of educational opportunities and outcomes for differently situated social groups, especially those who historically have been most discriminated against - women, ethnic minorities, rural populations, and working-class people.

Furthermore, Arnove (2007) comments that although there seem to be common problems and agendas of education the outcomes differ due to the interactive processes between the local and the global and their tensions and contradictions.

When the Eastern Bloc collapsed after the perestroika of Soviet Union in 1989, Lao PDR started to adopt relationships with countries in the west and their international donor organisations, mainly due to the lack of national financial means to cope with both internal and external expectations. Education reforms in Lao PDR have since then followed the general global trend and been “implemented by education policymakers who often have little choice but to do so in exchange for access to needed funds” as Arnove (2007, p 2) expresses it. This global trend can also be called a ‘forced voluntarism’ as it combines external pressures to change with internally adopted policies of development towards western types of modernity.
The changes in Lao PDR towards the end of the 1980s meant a move from a position as a young member in the cooperation between socialist states and consequently being part of the doctrine of socialist internationalism to a position as a marginalised third world least developed country within the hierarchy of the global capitalist world. Similar moves happened in many of the former member states of the socialist bloc as described by Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2006) in the case of Mongolia.

This move changed the outlooks and meanings of life in Lao PDR, most significantly influenced by the introduction of the NEM in 1986, which replaced the previously centrally planned economy.

Khouangvichit (2010) describes the move from the centrally planned economy to a market-oriented economy as politically justified by Lenin’s concept of new economic policy, but in practice it followed the mainstream recipe for success according to the western donor community expressed through what is known as the Washington Consensus (Williamsson, 2004). Lao PDR adopted much policy advice being addressed by the Washington Consensus, such as decentralisation, trade liberalisation, allowance of foreign direct investment, privatisation, WTO agreements, and targeted poverty reduction (Global Trade Negotiations, 2003). On a general national level it meant profound economic changes as shown by GDP (Gross Domestic Product) measures, according to Khouangvichit (2010), while poverty still remained a pressing issue in the country as more than 30% of the population still lived under the national poverty line 15 years after the introduction of the NEM policy, according to UNDP\(^1\). An askew distribution of equity as measured by the Education for All Development Index (EDI) is another pattern in Lao PDR. The EDI includes an aggregate of net enrolment in primary education, adult literacy, survival rate to grade 5 of primary education, and gender parity in gross enrolment ratios in primary education, secondary education, and adult literacy. Lao PDR is today ranked as 102 amongst a total of 127 countries in the world, according to the EDI, and resides therefore amongst the most inequitable countries in the world (UNESCO, 2004). This is worth a reflection as Lao PDR had a relatively equal distribution of meagre

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\(^1\) Retrieved from www.undplao.org 2010-08-04
national resources before the introduction of the NEM policy around 25 years ago, which means that the new policies have not had the same effect on all citizens in the country.

With the introduction of the NEM, the national education sector became almost flooded by donor projects financed by international donors such as the World Bank, its regional partners like the ADB, and national donor organisations for example from Australia, Japan, and Sweden. This had the effect that between 75-95 per cent of the public expenditure for education on an annual basis were financed by donors during the period 1990-2005 (LBC/TECSULT International Limited, 2006). Furthermore, the English language became the new symbol of power, replacing French and Russian from previous eras, and created both work and learning opportunities for Lao nationals through donor organisations, private enterprises, and mushrooming private educational institutions, especially around Vientiane. The expansions of private education became an acceptable alternative to the struggle of public education especially after 2001 as a way to expand the overall student enrolment (Central Party Committee, LPRP, 2002). The expansion of private education had the effect that new regulations concerning private education was developed and a department for private education was established at the Ministry of Education in 2000 (MOE, 2000).

Achren (2007) analysed the imposition of Eurocentric values through the lenses of an English language donor project. Her analysis pointed to the subversive agency of Lao stakeholders in development discourses and curriculum approaches as an effect of the differences in value systems on the ground, while the power attached to the English language was still recognised and promoted in official government documents (Ministry of Education, 2002). This is an indication of a gap between policies and practice that Achren (2007) explained by the agency of Lao educators.

As government employees, we experienced the changes that came with NEM both in relation to our work and family life. Previously, we did not need much cash as the basic needs in the family were catered for by the state through a ration card system and all costs for housing was free of charge. With the new market economy everything became more individualised and expensive. We had to pay
for water and electricity for our government houses and at work educators started to use their working time for private activities to gain more money for the extended costs of living. The opening up of the country for donor projects from the West, meant that government employees got opportunities to work for donors and gain financially, especially if they were good in English. Therefore, many government employees entered English language courses to improve their language skills as a way to improve their financial situation, even though in most cases they also had to pay the fees for these courses themselves. Many also started small business activities as it became allowed to do that beside the ordinary work for the government. It could be to produce and sell products for the local market like fishing nets, baskets, traditional clothing, fruits, and vegetables. Others left the public sector and started private enterprises. Fees were also introduced in the public health and education sectors. The economic demands even developed alternative and sometimes corrupt ways by few individuals to gain economically. For example, it happened at a few occasions that a teacher organised extra classes for students who were failed purposely by the same teacher.

We will now look at the general policy situation as it has been played out globally by the international donor community since 1990, when the EFA policy was introduced.

**The global EFA doctrine**

The EFA policy was introduced in 1990 at the international donor conference at Jomtien, Thailand. Since then, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) leads the global EFA movement, according to its own website and the aim is to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015, expressed through six internationally agreed goals, spelled out as follows:

- Goal 1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

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- Goal 2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- Goal 3. Ensuring that the learning need of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.
- Goal 4. Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
- Goal 5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
- Goal 6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

The EFA policy soon became the overarching and unquestioned approach for education reforms in third world countries worldwide. As such it has developed into an educational doctrine, the EFA doctrine, to which all countries have to submit when they need financial support from the international donor community.

Countries that accept the EFA doctrine are requested to work towards the six EFA goals, but also to accept the way the international community, through the UNESCO monitoring teams, is evaluating progress. The six humanistic goals of this doctrine are difficult to question in the form they are presented as undisputable ambitions beyond their optimism of what is possible to achieve within the given time span. However, we find the monitoring more problematic as it is influenced foremost by neoliberal financial perspectives. According to Hill (2006) the neoliberal perspectives transform the view on education from a human right to a ‘free choice’ according to market logics and introduce surveillance systems both through intensive testing and extended managerial powers over educational institutions. He further states that:
Internationally, liberalisation of schooling and higher education, and other education sectors, has been taken up voluntarily, or been forced upon governments through the influence of the world regime of neo-liberal capitalist organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, OECD, international trade regimes [...] (Hill, 2006, p. 7).

The neoliberal perspectives enter the EFA doctrine and influence the view on one of its key concepts, quality education, and reduce it to measurable outcomes or products following behaviourist and market approaches (UNESCO, 2004). This corrupts the concept of knowledge which is made equivalent to information through the emphasis on new technologies that serve web-based information with the consequence that “what is regarded as the important knowledge is likely to become more technical and less humanistic and critical” (Samoff, 2007, p. 61). Furthermore, “what emerges most clearly is the broad adoption of a common framework for describing, categorizing, analyzing, and assessing education” (Samoff, 2007, p. 55), combined under the umbrella of the EFA global monitoring reports.

In parallel with the EFA doctrine there has been an impact on education policies worldwide from neoliberal ideas such as those expressed in the Washington Consensus mentioned above. This development has coincided with the disintegration of the Eastern bloc of which Lao PDR was an integrated part. Furthermore, it has meant a shift of power in the international field of policy formation towards a situation where the World Bank and its affiliated organisations WTO and IMF have taken over the lead in the education sector from the United Nations and its sister organisations like UNESCO, even though the latter remains an operative front to guarantee the humanistic public image. This shift in power position has meant that World Bank perspectives, generally influenced by economic and market ideas, have become more prominent or been taken for granted as necessary not only in the field of economics but also in the field of education. The more humanistic perspectives represented by the United Nation and its organisations have become second order and used mainly as discursive fronts for the more market oriented perspectives of the World Bank (Dahlström, 2009).
Tamatea (2005) has analysed the Dakar Framework, which is a reaffirmation of the EFA doctrine according to UNESCO (2000) and points to its position as a matrix-like paradigmatic power perspective that forces us to accept it as representing reality. Tamatea (2005, p. 329) points to the doublespeak and ambivalence of the EFA doctrine and asks how the EFA doctrine can continue the “use of a liberal-humanist human rights focused discourse in ‘the same breadth’ as a neo-liberal discourse and not read as complete nonsense?” His own answer is found in the western modernity’s historical wish to control ‘the Other’, in this case the Third World, in an era where economy reign through neoliberalism and where control is exercised through definitions that constitute the meaning of Quality, Transparency, and Accountability, and how they are materialised. A lengthy quote concludes Tamatea’s viewpoint on the EFA doctrine.

"Having constructed the Other as in need of help, Europe set about through the use of the very strategies which defined its world as developed, and the Other’s as ‘primitive’, to implement its particular vision of the good. That this often did not extend to granting the Other equal human rights to those granted to Europeans at home by liberal-humanism, revealed the very ambivalence within modern liberal humanism itself. This of course is not to say that the Framework does not intend to extend universal human rights through education systems developed in the recipient nations. Rather it is in relation to this granting of rights, as an expressed intention of the Framework, that we need to be aware of how ambivalence permits the Framework to deploy what seem to be two contradictory discourses, which together may facilitate other ends. (Tamatea, 2005, p. 330)

Lao PDR as a recipient nation of donor perspectives, donor funds, donor project activities, donor monitoring, and donor evaluations is heavily influenced by the EFA-doctrine as the overarching idea in the globalisation of education and student-centred education as a worldwide part of this doctrine.

**Student-centred education - global variations of western modernity?**

Student-centred education became an important concept in Lao PDR in the beginning of 1990s soon after the introduction of the EFA doctrine. At an early stage student-centred education was
referred to as ‘the new methodology’ or ‘the five-pointed star’ (Bounyasone et al, 2006). This indicates that student-centred education has a tendency to find its own way wherever it is found on national grounds. Student-centred education is described in a document produced as part of a donor project in Lao PDR (Teacher Training Department, 2002:3) and it is of the few available in Lao PDR where student-centred education is presented in some detail.

Firstly, under the title ‘What is learner centred teaching and learning?’ a ten point summary is presented focusing on the learner’s needs from the perspectives of teaching, teacher, and learners. These points address teaching that suit the learners and help learners learn successfully, teaching that is relevant to learner’s experience and situation, recognise individual differences, and are planned according to the interests of the learners. Furthermore, teachers should be able to use the learner’s environment in their teaching and encourage learners to use their experience in their learning. Learners in learner-centred teaching and learning are actively involved in their learning; they relate new learning to previous knowledge, they express ideas in their own ways, and they learn for understanding and not only for memorising.

Secondly, learner-centred teaching is contrasted to teacher-centred teaching in a total of 19 aspects of which the majority is about the teacher’s behaviour. Educators are advised to use this ‘checklist’ in their own teaching. Teachers’ role and behaviour in learner-centred teaching are addressed at a general philosophical level such as the teacher’s many roles as animator, facilitator, instructor, and monitor; the teacher’s encouragement of learners to think for themselves and to contribute with ideas; the teacher’s use of ‘incorrect’ answers and learning ‘mistakes’ as steps towards broader learning; and that the teacher opens up for learners’ reactions and ideas to influence the learning process in the lessons. Other descriptors of the teacher’s role and behaviour are on a more specific behavioural and technical level such as the teacher moves around the classroom; the teacher’s voice is warm and encouraging; the teacher uses a variety of questions; the teacher uses a variety of teaching aids of which the blackboard is one; the teacher uses ideas and objects from the environment as a supplement to the textbook; the teacher uses different types of groupings such as mixed-ability groups and strict ability grouping;
and uses different types of evaluations during the stages of a lesson and to evaluate learning outcomes at the end of a lesson.

The list of references used in the document shows that many of the ideas are related to experiences and documentation in Australia, England, and the United States.

The local variations of student-centred or learner-centred education, and how these variations are apprehended and analysed are shown by the following examples from Namibia, Botswana, and Mongolia. In Namibia, a country that gained its independence in 1990 after years of occupation by the South African apartheid regime, learner-centred education became part of the national reform efforts to replace the racist apartheid education system with a democratic system, according to Dahlström (2002). The general policy document for the education sector after independence described learner-centred education in the following way:

- The starting point is the learners’ existing knowledge, skills, interests and understanding, derived from previous experience in and out of school;
- The natural curiosity and eagerness of all young people to learn to investigate and to make sense of a widening world must be nourished and encouraged by challenging and meaningful tasks;
- The learners’ perspective needs to be appreciated and considered in the work of the school;
- Learners should be empowered to think and take responsibility not only for their own, but also for one another’s learning and total development; and
- Learners should be involved as partners in, rather than receivers of, educational growth (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 60).

However, there was an influence from child-centred education on the conceptions and practices of learner-centred education in Namibia, as described by van Harmelen (1998). This influence at times distanced learner-centred education from its basis exemplified by the above statements of what learner-centred education could be. Instead, parts of behavioural understandings associated with the child-centred traditions of stage theories and their similarities to the previous apartheid ideology were adopted. Nyanbe (1996) refers to three
different understandings of learner-centred education amongst educators and students involved in teacher education in Namibia. These are learner-centred education as democratisation; learner-centred education as challenges for the previous authoritarian system; or learner-centred education as collaborative work or group work during lessons (referred to by Dahlström, 2002).

Dahlström’s (2002) analysis is based on a Gramscian perspective including concepts like hegemony and counter-hegemony, traditional and organic intellectuals, common and good sense. His analysis of the post-independence teacher education reform in Namibia states that the intellectual war of position created many transpositions or redefinitions of concepts and practices. In that sense, learner-centred education became defined as group work, and “that you only needed to organise the learners in groups to accomplish learner-centred education” (Dahlström, 2002, p. 252).

Tabulawa (2003) looks at learner-centred pedagogy from a critical world systems approach with examples from Botswana. Tabulawa claims that learned-centred pedagogy is not value-neutral but has its social, epistemological and philosophical foundation in western thinking concerned with individualism, modernisation, neoliberalism, and liberal democracy. However, this foundation is often not recognised as its implementation is informed by a technical rationality that is presented as value-free. This explains, according to Tabulawa, why learner-centred pedagogy is often presented as a one-size-fits-all approach as “a universal pedagogy, one that works with equal effectiveness irrespective of the context. It is this technicist view of the pedagogy that masks its ideological/political nature” (Tabulawa, 2003, p. 9).

Tabulawa looked at a specific donor project financed by the USAID, called Primary Education Improvement Project (PEIP) that during its period of existence (1981-1991) had as its goal to improve quality, relevance, and effectiveness through the introduction of learner-centred education. He found that the official goal and the means through which the goal was supposed to be reached, learner-centred pedagogy, actually operated as a machinery to promote the undercurrents in the agenda of the donor agencies namely to spread the values associated with liberal democracy. The destructive effects
of the project could be seen in its erosion of traditional modes of thought and the promotion of dispositions suitable for liberal democracy and neoliberalism (Tabulawa, 2003).

Our third example of the introduction of student-centred education comes from a place with many similarities with Lao PDR, namely Mongolia, a country that also was part of the previous socialist bloc. Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2006) writes about student-centred learning from a comparative globalisation perspective focusing on educational import and modification. Their findings are best summarised in the following quotation:

After a decade of experimentation with Western style teaching methods, there is a proliferation of Mongolian variants, or hybrids of student-centred learning, that all have one feature in common: the imported teaching methods are recontextualized in ways that suit the hierarchical order in the Mongolian classroom (Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006, p 113).

The authors acknowledge the wide gap between the status of a teacher and that of the students. They further claim that pyramidal structures of socialist life are still replicated in the classroom, where the class monitor fills the space between the teacher and students and act like assistant teacher. The class monitors are in most cases female students selected from the group of best students in class. The hierarchical setting includes the class monitor with a general responsibility as an assistant teacher, task monitors for certain tasks like hygiene and cleaning, and line or group monitors responsible for academic and disciplinary issues. The authors’ findings from classroom observations show that it is the different monitors who participate in classroom communication with the teacher for example in connections with reports from group work. While group work increased communication between students, most activities remained led by the teachers. Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe also reports that the class monitor system is blamed for the so called darga-mentality (‘leader-mentality’) which create passivity, lack of critical thinking, and blind obedience, with the effect that when students finish school they still rely on the leader who decides on their behaviour.

There was already an institution of modern schooling in place by the time structural adjustment policies and other educational reforms were transferred to Mongolia. Starting in 1990, the
existing institution was not simply replaced by travelling policies and practices that had landed in Mongolia, but rather global reforms were interpreted and adapted to suit the Mongolian institution of schooling. In the same vein, the imported pedagogy of student-centred learning was Mongolized in ways that reflect the hierarchical social structure in the Mongolian institution of schooling (Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006, p. 129).

The different examples of the introduction of student-centred education presented in this part of the chapter point to important aspects of transpositions as a result of power struggles in the case of Namibia, impositions of alien cultural aspects as well as destructions of local inhabitations in the case of Botswana, and adaptations to the established common sense in Mongolia. Our own analysis in chapter V will show whether similar processes have been present during the introduction of action research in Lao PDR.

The introduction of action research in Lao PDR was often motivated as a means to forward student-centred education in the country. Therefore, we will now turn to the concept of action research with the aim to identify its theoretical background as an important aspect for our coming analysis of its introduction in Lao PDR.

International legacies of action research

The action research concept is often traced back to the American social psychologist Kurt Lewin and his work in the 1940s (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliott, 1991; McGlinn Manfra, 2009). Smith (1996; 2001, 2007, p.2) quotes Lewin, who expressed his views like this:

The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice.

Today’s educational scholars and action researchers would probably not define or express the aim of action research in the same way as Lewin, even though sympathetic to his intention of social action. For example, Elliott (1991, p. 49) says:

The fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. The production and
utilization of knowledge is subordinate to, and conditioned by, this fundamental aim [...]. The improvement of practice consists of realizing those values which constitute its ends, e.g. [...] "education" for teaching [...]. Such ends are not simply manifested in the outcomes of a practice. They are also manifested as intrinsic qualities of the practices themselves.

Carr & Kemmis (1986, p. 162) say that action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry by participants in social situations. They further claim that the aim is to improve the rationality and justice of practices, the understanding of these practices, and the situation in which the practices are carried out. Carr & Kemmis (1986, p. 164-165) also refer to an edited definition of educational action research from a seminar at Deakin University:

*Educational action research is a term used to describe a family of activities in curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programs, and system planning and policy development. These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are implemented, and then systematically submitted to observation, reflection and change. Participants in the action being considered are integrally involved in all of these activities.*

Noffke (1995, pp. 2-5) addresses the history of action research, especially in the United States and claims that “an understanding of action research that transcends the traditional divisions between practitioners and scholars are needed”. Noffke emphasises the process of action research as a way to identify contradictions, “which, in turn, help to locate spaces for ethically defensible, politically strategic actions” to further more democratic schooling towards social justice. Action research “is about taking everyday things in the life of education and unpacking them for their historical and ideological baggage”.

In their elaboration of action research as a critical educational science Carr and Kemmis concluded already in 1980s that teachers need to organise themselves to support and protect their professional work in times of increasing bureaucratic management of education:

*Moreover, if the central aim of education is the critical transmission, interpretation and development of the cultural traditions of our society, then the need for a form of research*
Lewin presented action research as a cyclic process including planning, fact-finding, and execution (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The cyclic process has since then been a strong aspect of action research both as an educational idea and a practice. The cyclic aspect of action research is also recognised in the instructional material for action research in Lao PDR (see chapter IV). However, Smith (1996; 2001, 2007) points to the danger with the sequential form of the action research cycle as it might open up to dogmatic interpretations that can lead to practices that are ‘correct’ rather than ‘good’ and to minimal emphasis on analysis. According to McTaggart (1996) it is a mistake to believe that to follow the action research cycle is all that is needed for doing action research, as action research is neither a method nor a procedure for research but rather an investigative commitment towards developmental aspects of educational practice.

After Lewin’s introduction of the concept and practice of action research it suffered a decline in the US in the 1960s mainly due to its association with radical political activism, according to Smith (1996; 2001, 2007). While action research declined in the US it started to develop in the United Kingdom as part of what was called the teacher as researcher movement and curriculum reform projects financed by the state (Elliott, 1991). Since then action research has become an important global factor in education, even though carried out in different ways and for different purposes.

Kemmis and Grundy (1997) claim that Australian educational action research emerge differently compared to the British, continental European, North American versions. The British model was less strategically oriented and less politically aware. It fostered interpretations rather than critical perspectives. The European shared the critical aspects with the Australian model, but was less practical, while American action research focused a more teacher-oriented model. Kemmis and Grundy (1997) use Habermas’ tension between system and lifeworld in their analysis of action research in a major
action research project in Australia, called the Innovative Links Project. If Habermas conceptions are transferred to the educational field, the main parallel is an interconnection between the educational system (school administration and work organisation) and the lifeworld of teachers and students (the teaching and learning processes) that affects the possibilities and constraints to carry out action research in school settings. Kemmis and Grundy (1997, p. 46) conclude, “a new centralism is emerging in Australian educational planning and administration which is rooted in opposition to the kind of collaborative, devolved processes characteristic of action research”.

Diniz-Pereira (2002, p. 374), who uses the concept teacher research as equivalent to action research, argues “teacher research, as an international movement, has the potential to become a counter-hegemonic strategy to construct critical teacher education approaches in a globalised world”. Diniz-Pereira places action research within a framework of different approaches to teacher education, a type of framework that also has been used by scholars like Carr and Kemmis (1986), Liston and Zeichner (1991) and Elliott (1993), even though with different labelling. In principle, such frameworks contain three main types of approaches to teacher education, each with its typical characterisations of the field. Diniz-Pereira outlines these approaches as grounded in technical, practical, and critical rationalities. In principle, action research as international and globally applied practices follows these rationalities.

Technical approaches in teacher education and action research

Most teacher education programmes have been constructed along traditions of technical approaches, according to Darling-Hammond and Cobb (1995). Technical approaches are characterised by the idea that teacher education is about the transmission of theories and abstract templates of practice to student teachers. Teaching is the transformation of abstractions presented during training to the practical field. Technical approaches are grounded in the belief that teaching and learning are neutral and value-free (objective) activities, whose true (conservative) values remain if treated as such in teacher education. Diniz-Pereira claims that international financial institutions like the World Bank promotes programmes and action
research that follow these approaches, especially relevant for countries like Lao PDR that depend on international donor finance. Similarly, countries that follow the surveillance machinery of PISA\(^7\) in the Global North and the quality-transparency-accountability triad of the EFA doctrine in the Global South are conditioned to technical rationalities to be able to cope with external neoliberal demands and evaluations (Dahlström, 2009). Action research, according to a technical approach, is carried out by following the steps in the cyclic process.

*Practical approaches in teacher education and action research*

Approaches within this realm are often based on the work of John Dewey and ideas about practical rationalities and practical knowledge (see for example Dewey, 1944). These approaches have often been a reaction against the hegemony of conservative approaches of technical rationalities. Practical approaches acknowledge that practical wisdom is not emanating from theoretical and abstract information but from the understanding of the intrinsic complexity of educational practice itself to which theoretical understanding can be attached on a supportive level. Practical approaches also support a sense of professional autonomy that encourage self-reflections following Schön’s idea of ‘reflection-in-action’ (Schön, 1983). Practical rationalities have recently been appropriated by international organisations like the World Bank as a way to maintain control over teacher education globally, according to Diniz-Pereira (2002). Action researchers that follow practical approaches concentrate their efforts on solving teaching and learning problems in classrooms.

*Critical approaches in teacher education and action research*

According to Diniz-Pereira (2002) critical approaches in teacher education are rare today both on national and global levels as they are counter-hegemonic and seldom supported by the powerful structures in societies that follow neoliberal market logics. Critical approaches look beyond the classrooms into the historical and prevailing social fabrics as a way to contextualise educational activities and to intersect

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\(^7\) Program for International Student Assessment.
them with social structures. Critical approaches make education ‘problematic’ in the sense that they attempt to disclose education structures and practices that are grounded in ideas that have been purposely obscured or made tentatively invisible by what is taken for granted. Critical rationalities aim at changed practices not only in the classrooms, but beyond the classrooms towards social justice, transgression beyond social and intellectual boundaries, and emancipative community development. Diniz-Pereira (2002, p. 384) urges educators to distinguish between action research approaches co-opted by international organisations like the World Bank that follow technical rationalities from “the critical approaches, which are strategically oriented and politically aware”. Action researchers within the critical domain combine a focus on the teaching and learning processes with critical situational and contextual understanding as a way towards empowerment and critical consciousness, similar to a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003). Another example is the Critical Practitioner Inquiry approach developed from experiences within the liberation struggle in Southern Africa and carried over to national teacher education reforms and staff development programmes in Namibia and Ethiopia (Dahlström, 2006).

One of the few available academic articles about action research in Lao PDR is written by Stephens (2007). This article is based on the author’s involvement with the first phase of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) project in 2000 and points to two critical questions that are highly relevant for our own perspective on educational development in Lao PDR. The first question is an epistemological and ideological issue related to relationships between knowledge and power, tradition and modernity. Stephens (2007, p. 203) asks:

What happens when you introduce a research approach that has as its overt agenda one of change and democratic involvement of practitioners into a culture hierarchically ordered and growing out of political and religious traditions of obedience and consensus?

The second question is related to communal and individual aspects of development and self-reflection within the research process, which Stephens (2007, p. 203) characterises as follows:
Central to PAR is the development of practices that encourage self-reflection, self-evaluation, and the belief that the change process can be owned by the practitioners involved in the research activity. Within a Laotian culture predominantly influenced by Buddhism (where no-self is to be attained) and a political environment characterised by a culture of centralism and authoritarianism, questions arise as to the extent to which the culture and individuals working within it can adapt and be adaptable towards a very different approach to the solving of educational problems.

These questions are also close to our inquiry into action research in Lao PDR. We will return to these questions in connection with our analysis in the last chapter.

Action research can be many different things, according to the above. At one end, it can be seen as a technique to develop practice according to some predefined goals and at the other end it can be seen as a broad way to look at education with the intention to create emancipation within education and beyond as part of cosmopolitanism.

Legacies and regimes of influences - a beginning of a theoretical foundation

The arena for action research in Lao PDR is our research field. This arena is an intersection between the local and the global as is the case for education reform in most countries in our globalised world, according to Arnove (2007). Such arenas become more problematic in cases where it is also heavily influenced by the international donor community. Therefore, the general legacies and influences of globalisations and donors as well as the more specific ones of international and educational action research that we have painted on the previous pages in this chapter, constitute both a background for and a mapping of players on the reform arena for action research.

The introduction, perceptions, practices, possibilities and constraints of action research in Lao PDR will be analysed as an intersection between the local and the global. In this intersection we acknowledge the power of global forces as they have been played out through donor activities. At the same time we also recognise the agency of local actors; that is the power of local actors to influence practice,
especially at the level of practitioners who we call re-constructors, but also at the level of local policy ‘carriers’ who we call constructors. These forces meet at what we call the reform arena for action research, but enter at different positions - from outside or inside - on the arena, and receive different positional powers in relation to policy, conceptions, and practices.

Our theoretical perspective is grounded in global policy studies that also can be related to the transfers of educational policies within a critical perspective that acknowledges context and cultural bounded characteristics of education systems (Steiner-Khamsi, 2000). Furthermore, the local context influences the global transfers so that the practical outcomes turn out differently and by that it might obscure the global influences if observed from a comparative perspective (Dahlström, 2009; Steensen, 2006).

To start with, we have realised that the relation between educational policy texts and practice is not as straightforward as policy writers or educational bureaucrats state. The road from the written policy document through instructional material, local contexts, practitioners’ interpretations, and students’ reactions at the receiving end is often messy, contains revisits, regressions, and re-considerations, and is far from one-way and linear (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). It is in these complex situations of uncertainties created in the intersection between the local and the global that new interpretations can be done.

**Hidden policy ensembles**

Educational policy texts are part of broader discourses combining collections of related policies that Ball (2006) calls policy ensembles. These policy ensembles “exercise power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, as discourses” and “we do not speak a discourse, it speaks to us”, according to Ball (2006, p. 48). Ball (2006, p. 50) continues:

> A neglect of the general is most common in single-focus studies which take one change or one policy text and attempt to determine its impact. Taken in this way the specific effects of a specific policy may be limited but the general effects of ensembles of policies of different kinds may be of considerable significance [...].


For example, the introduction of action research is an integrated part of the new education policy in Lao PDR, which is based on the EFA doctrine as a combination of policies expressed through the six official EFA goals and reaffirmed by the Dakar Framework, which in turn are related to the eight Millennium Goals (United Nations, 2010). Further on, the EFA and Millennium goals are framed within an economic modernisation paradigm for development that emanates from western discourses. Such clusters of policy ensembles exercise power through a production of discursive meaning, knowledge, and truth that are included in the taken for granted, not least because of their networking effects that create an image of omnipresence. The productive aspects of discourses are important, especially in a country like Lao PDR, where the policy texts and discourses are influenced by the international donor communities that act as de-contextualised enclaves and extensions of western power and interest. These policy ensembles are not confined to national arenas but operate globally beyond national borders. This contributes to what we call a hidden policy ensemble situation through which the global doctrines operate. We call it hidden, because policy ensembles that have their foundations in alien cultures and thinking are not openly spoken of or integrated at the reform arenas beyond their taken for granted contribution to the development discourse in the modernisation paradigm. This alienation of policy ensembles influence the reform arenas and how new policies, like action research, are understood and practised in the local.

The hidden policy ensembles operate in a similar way as common sense does for Gramsci (1971). Gramsci makes a distinction between common sense and good sense. Common sense is the collections of understandings in a society that have become taken for granted as an effect of hegemonic powers and repetitions. The interests of the powerful in a society have become legitimate and unquestioned in this way. The similarity between hidden policy ensembles and common sense is that they both obscure the underlying interests.

**Policy backlashes**

All societies have legacies of influences that are formed through history. Such legacies are manifested in different ways through official discourses, acceptable conceptions, and expected practices expressed
through the political and social webs of societies. The regimes of influences are more complex in societies like Lao PDR that have gone through periods of colonial rule and liberation struggles, and that today are facing new situations when they as still officially socialist one-party states are transformed through what is commonly called globalisation and the introduction of so-called open market ideologies from the capitalist world.

Regimes of influences in a society are not only confined to the field of politics and economy. Regimes of influences also set parameters for the educational field. This is most obvious in the way that broad objectives of education are formulated in a given society and during a given era; and in our case exemplified by the different periods of influences described in chapter I. However, regimes of influences are not confined to their officially hegemonic eras, but operate also as conceptual and practical remnants during later eras and might even be reborn on the discursive levels through renaming, when old ideas are dressed in new cloths. In this respect we rely on a theory developed by Asplund (1979) and referred to by Dahlström (2002). This theory looks at discourses, conceptions, and practices and their historical and social relations. Asplund’s notion is that discourses change quickly and continuously, conceptions are firm and difficult to change, while practices are solid and almost constant. If we apply this theory on educational reform that in most cases aims at practical changes we might be able to understand and explain some of the problems with educational reform and change. When a new policy is introduced at the discursive level, through new policy documents and instructional material, we can expect that practitioners’ understandings of the ideas are influenced by previous conceptions. Therefore new policy is understood in a way that is adapted to previous regimes of influences with the consequence that practices might remain more or less intact, but eventually talked about and described in new ways according to the official discourse. This delay, reinterpretation or mismatch in the discourse-conception-practice process of change is problematic in all reform efforts and might at times create a policy backlash due to previous experiences and practices, unless the reform process itself is carried out in holistic ways that allow enough time and space for practitioners’ involvement. However, policy backlashes need not to be perceived in
negative ways as returns to old practices of social transformations. They can also be interpreted as effects of local agency, processes of meaning making, or ways of development that builds on cross-cultural dialogues following Santos (2002) that in turn can develop into new forms of practices in the future.

**Perspectives emanating from a cross-cultural dialogue**

Based on the above we ask ourselves if it is possible to identify and develop aspects of action research and other practices that are contextually sensitive to the social, cultural and political situation as it has developed in Lao PDR? From such a perspective it might be possible to consider an approach that Santos (2002) has called 'diatopical hermeneutics' as a form of progressive multi-culturalism building on cross-cultural dialogue. An application of a cross-cultural dialogue will address forgotten, non-inclusive, or marginalised contributions from different historical and cultural locations that have had an impact on education in Lao PDR as a way to broaden the base for education in the future.

By pointing to such contributions we want to identify transformative possibilities towards a cosmopolitan emancipation from below. We will search for such contributions from action research inspired by Buddhist thinking and its relation to aspects of progressive action research from the west and the south, alternative education in France, as well as experimental education from the early years of the socialist revolution in Russia. These and other contributions will merge into our theoretical foundation as a basis for a tentative vision for the future.

**Mindfulness, connectedness, and impermanence**

Our cross-cultural dialogue starts in a Buddhist perspective on action research presented by Chuaprapasilp (1997) and Winter (2003). A Buddhist perspective has relevance for Lao PDR where the majority of people confess to Buddhism. Chuaprapasilp looks at the Buddhist concept of mindfulness (Lao: satee) and its central position for the creation of wisdom. Mindfulness is related to the ability to think carefully in advance and to read the social and situational context before acting. Mindfulness can in this respect be compared to the emancipatory action research that Carr and Kemmis (1986, pp. 203-
II. BUILDING A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION – LEGACIES AND REGIMES OF INFLUENCE

204) support and the concept of critical consciousness from Freire (1973) that became part of the foundation for the participatory action research movement in Brazil (Diniz-Pereira, 2002). Further on, we may acknowledge that mindfulness as an integrated part of critical action research has the power to unpack the taken for granted factors that influence educational practice and to reconstruct an emancipatory practice beyond what Marxist philosophy calls a false consciousness (Chuaprapasilp, 1997; Phomvihane, 1997).

Winter (2003) reminds us that rationales for action research draw on a variety of western intellectual traditions, such as Marxism, critical social theory, postmodernism, phenomenology, organisational relationships theory, and reflective practice. He furthers the idea that action research principles can be “illuminated and informed by analogies, and parallels with the complex synthesis of philosophy, psychology, ethics and moral practice represented by Buddhism” (Winter, 2003, p. 142). Winter (2003, p. 146) relates his analysis also to the dialectical process of critical action research as expressed by Carr and Kemmis (1986) and brings it further as “a general theory about the nature of the social world and how we understand it” that “may be summarised as three basic proposition” with relevance to critical action research. The propositions are: all phenomena are changing; all phenomena are connected to each other; and all phenomena are complex and made up of contradictory elements. These propositions are close to the doctrines of change and impermanence in Buddhism, according to Winter (2003). Furthermore, the collaborative and critical companionship of action research places it beyond competition and within the sphere of the Buddhist doctrine of harmonious speech.

Meaningful learning and production

Another contribution to a cross-cultural dialogue comes from France, the former colonial power in Lao PDR, and an alternative educational movement that started in the 1920s by the French Celestine Freinet and from whom the so called Freinet movement - the collective of modern schooling-emerged also beyond the borders of France, but never to Lao PDR. The pedagogy of this movement is characterised by a focus on meaningful learning with a purpose, that learning activities are geared towards authentic communication, and
understandings that are grounded in the local community. Many of the innovations that Freinet initiated are today integrated in common educational practices in the west, but often without the 'Freinet-label' and its consistency. This is the case for the collective production of texts as part of language learning and communication; the printing of student-produced texts for communicative purposes; the production of students’ free texts; the combination of physical and mental 'labour' as part of education; students’ own planning; individual as well as collective work; and the transformation of traditional subject learning for example in Maths, Social Sciences, and Arts through students’ own investigations in the environment. A learning curriculum that follows the Freinet pedagogy is often thematic and includes time that students have to plan individually and in groups on a weekly basis. The individual planning also includes more systematic exercises, when students practice certain skills that often are organised according to sets of work sheets that students have to attend to as part of their personal commitments. The so-called ‘working library’ is another resource for individual and collective work that is composed by a number of teacher-made pamphlets for a range of topics that initially are based on students’ individual interests. The pamphlets in the working library are shared between teachers as is the case with many products within the Freinet movement. Evaluations of student progress is an important aspects of the Freinet pedagogy even though organised mainly through a combination of self-evaluations organised and documented by the students, the teacher’s individual advice when difficulties arise, and the utilisation self-corrective material (Castle Wustenberg, 1979; Legrand, 2000).

The International Federation of the Movements of the Modern School (FIMEM) is an organisation composed by fifty-six (56) national organisations for Freinet pedagogy, meaning that the educational philosophy that the collective of modern schooling is built on has a global representation. In global times of “unreasonable exploitation of the world’s natural and human capital for the sake of instant gratification and to assuage the thirst for property and power”

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Legrand (2000, p. 12) points to the need for a living education that can create a universal awareness and a revitalisation of fundamental “basic values of love for others and love of nature, as against love of property and power”. The type of education that Freinet once started has today, according to Legrand, become a necessity as a way to seek self-realisation through own activities and experience of living in a community, to develop respect for humanity and nature, and to advance knowledge in and through co-operation. Legrand (2000, p 13) concludes:

*All these objectives are in stark contrast, today as in the past, to the selective, teacher-centred education that is characteristic of a civilization geared to productivity and to the frenzied exploitation of nature, and whose only goals are the possession of worldly goods and power over people.*

**The complex method**

This contribution to a cross-cultural dialogue is from the attempts to create a new kind of education after the socialist revolution in Russia 1917. These first attempts were encouraged by the Minister of Education in Soviet Russia, Nadezdha Krupskaya, and headed by Stanislav Shatskii, an educator with progressive educational ideas with the ambition “to reshape the way children and the village saw the world and themselves” (Partlett, 2005, p. 2). The project that Shatskii worked on was called the First Experimental Station (FES) and comprised a number of provincial schools, kindergarten, regional libraries, reading houses, children’s clubs, and a pedagogical centre. The approach was a radical strategy for social cultural revolution to “alter children’s beliefs, attitudes, values, and norms of behaviour” and to “teach children to live” rather than to impart technical knowledge or political literacy, according to Partlett (2005, p.4). The methodology of FES was similar to the Freinet pedagogy in the sense that it combined school learning with the learning to understand the outside world. The approach combined three types of influences on learning: the natural influences on development from entities like light, food, and warmth (nature); the material factors like family resources related to economy and housing (labour); and the societal influences like norms, habits, and language (society). All
school activities were related to the three categories of nature, labour, and society and where therefore modularised according to themes.

*This approach, called the ‘complex method’, rejected individual subjects (such as history, chemistry, etc) on the grounds that they artificially carved up knowledge into separate disciplines. Instead, the new approach sought to reveal the interconnectedness of knowledge and its relevancy to everyday life by organizing knowledge into theme-based modules* (Partlett, 2005, p. 5).

A cross-cultural aspect of Shatksii’s experimental school is related to the mutual influences between Soviet education of that time and the work of John Dewey in the USA. For example, Shatskii was enthusiastic about pragmatism and “by 1910 Shatskii had discovered John Dewey’s philosophy and educational theory, perhaps aided by the appearance of the first Russian edition of School and Society three years earlier” (Engerman, 2006, p. 39). Dewey admired Soviet educators such as Shatskii of whom he spoke with enthusiasm to a collegiate audience in 1929 after a month-long trip to Russia, according to Engerman (2006). However, both Dewey’s enthusiasm and Shatksii’s humanistic vision for education disappeared with the introduction of Stalinism to which the FESs “humanitarian and collaborative system of cultural change was too slow, too pro-peasant, and too collaborative. The Party leadership could not tolerate a negotiated transformation of the countryside; their ideology preached the virtue of rapid, forced change” (Partlett, 2005, p. 22). Shatksii’s vision survived for thirteen years, 1919-1932, in the beginning of the socialist revolution in Soviet Russia.

A cross-cultural dialogue that is initiated here from an action research perspective that acknowledges Buddhist concepts, the model of education that is represented by the Freinet pedagogy, and the complex method of Shatksii’s educational vision combining nature, labour, and society will be integrated with our theoretical foundation and moved forward as influential aspects for a tentative vision for the future.

**Critical pedagogy of place**

A critical pedagogy of place as a merger between place-based approaches and critical pedagogy is another perspective that can contribute to our analysis (Gruenewald, 2003). A critical pedagogy of
II. BUILDING A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION – LEGACIES AND REGIMES OF INFLUENCE

Place offers a framework for educational theory, research, policy and practice, according to Gruenewald (2003). It combines the concern for the well-being of the social and ecological places people inhabit through a contextually sensitive education and a critical pedagogy that challenge the taken for granted assumptions in the global mainstream. Critical pedagogy of place challenges the assumption that “education should mainly support individualistic and nationalistic competition in the global economy and that an educational competition of winners and losers is in the best interest of public life in a diverse society”, according to Gruenewald (2003, p. 3).

A critical pedagogy of place is significant for countries like Lao PDR as it combines a focus on an ecological re-inhabitation and a cultural decolonisation. The re-inhabitation aspect of critical pedagogy of place focuses on the place-based ecological and human survival and by that it acknowledges diversity and contextually grounded knowledge that emerges from the particular attributes of place. This is in sharp contrast to the current educational discourses that:

> seek to standardize the experience of students from diverse geographical and cultural places so that they may compete in the global economy. Such a goal essentially dismisses the idea of place as a primary experiential or educational context, displaces it with traditional disciplinary content and technological skills, and abandons places to the workings of the global market (Gruenewald, 2003, p.7).

Gruenewald refers to writers like Paulo Freire (1975), Henry Giroux (1988), Peter McLaren (2003), bell hooks (1992), and others in his outline of the theoretical tradition of critical pedagogy and its focus on cultural decolonisation. Decolonisation is about the ability to “recognise disruption and injury and to address their causes”, and “from an educational perspective, it means unlearning much of what dominant culture and schooling teaches, and learning more socially just and ecologically sustainable ways of being in the world” (Gruenewald, 2003, p.9).

Our assumption is that decolonisation is called for in the global world of today as colonisation is not confined to previous eras of globalisations, but operates also in the present as neo-colonialism, eurocentrism, or ethnocentrism.
A critical pedagogy of place expands the scope of educational research and theory to social and ecological contexts and has a specific demand on practitioner research and action research, according to Gruenewald (2003, p.10):

> Classroom-based research on teaching and learning that focus on teacher skills and student performances and takes for granted the legitimacy of a standards-based paradigm of accountability is inadequate to the larger tasks of cultural and ecological analysis that re-inhabitation and decolonization demand.

A perspective that includes a critical pedagogy of place will help us to identify contextually relevant or irrelevant aspects through the concepts of re-inhabitation and decolonisation or their antitheses of alienation and colonisation.

**An outline of a theoretical foundation**

The combined forces of influences that we relate to hidden policy ensembles, policy backlashes, cross-cultural dialogues, and critical pedagogy of place are schematically summarised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 illustrates how the theoretical aspects enter the reform arena from different spaces and different times and carry with them different legacies and influences. The hidden policy ensembles have an outside perspective and are part of the external influences on policy and practice that come from donors operating in Lao PDR. The policy backlashes come from historical influences in previous periods through discourses, conceptions, and practices that are taken for granted and affect the present reform efforts; and an interactive cross-cultural dialogue that in conjunction with a critical pedagogy of place create an inside perspective and looks for possibilities for re-inhabitation and decolonisation for the future.
II. BUILDING A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION – LEGACIES AND REGIMES OF INFLUENCE

Figure 1. An outline of a theoretical foundation based on legacies of influences related to space and time

This theoretical foundation will be the starting point for the analysis of our findings that we present in chapter V and for our elaboration of a tentative vision of action research for the future.

Reflection on our theoretical foundation

The theoretical foundation that we have introduced in this chapter is not only a guide for our future analysis of action research in Lao PDR. It also demonstrates our present perspective on the forces that influence the educational reform that we study. It also reflects our educational journey from being narrowly informed about global policy influences to become more knowledgeable about for example hidden policy ensembles that operate as neo-colonial forces in countries like Lao PDR, which are at the margins of the globalisation systems.
Furthermore, we have realised that what we previously thought was a national policy only for Lao PDR - the policy of student-centred education - is actually part of a global policy that seems to be valid for all countries that need foreign financial support. We have also realised that action research can be something far more than a way to change practice by following the action research cycle. 

With these reflections we will move over to our methodological considerations.
III. METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS OF INQUIRY

Before we start to look into our methodological concerns, we want to make readers aware of the situation in Lao PDR, when it comes to availability of written resources and data. Lao PDR is a country where written material is not easily available. There are probably many reasons for this situation, one being the general lack of financial means at least in the government structures including the education system. Another reason is that the habit to produce written texts is weak while the oral tradition is still very strong (Evans, 1998). In combination with the lack of written material in the society as a whole it has become more common to rely on oral communications rather than on written documentations until this day. People might also be hesitant to formulate their ideas and thoughts in writing as it creates a kind of permanence that might be used against them in hegemonic situations.

There is also a contradictive and alien tradition developed as part of the influences from donors who demand that all donor activities and related policies need to be documented. However, these documentations are in most cases written in English by foreign advisors, on the behalf of local institutional representatives, and in a style that is not adapted to the local situation but rather to the common international arena. Therefore policy documents and donor documents are seldom read or even made available locally and if translated to Lao it usually happens after long delays.

The problem with the scarcity of written documentations and the difficulty at times to find relevant documents is affecting our research in a critical way, especially in a time when global availability is the rule elsewhere. In spite of this problem, we have tried our best to include references from all types of document, i.e. official government documents, commissioned donor research, and research
carried out by recognised independent researchers published in international journals and by recognised international publishing houses.

We have used a qualitative approach and as Bell (2005) has pointed out, this is more concerned with individuals’ perceptions. Qualitative research methodologies are often based on empirical data from interviews and fieldwork, according to Khouangvichit (2010). She also claims that as a qualitative researcher you have to start with an open mind and open inquiries that will generate new insights.

About our research design

Action research arrived in Lao PDR as part of donor projects and their technical advisors, often perceived as ‘the experts’ by Lao educators. We started to collect information about two of the concepts that were central in the discussions about education reforms in Lao PDR at that time, student-centred education and action research, after we had decided to focus our inquiries on the national reform efforts. However, after the first tentative data collections in 2006 we focused our inquiries on action research, while our colleagues from Lao PDR focused on student-centred education (Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011).

We selected five institutions from which we collected our data. The institutions were selected based on their involvement with action research. Both the institutions and the individuals that we collected information from were given codenames after the data was collected according to their positions in the system and in their relation to action research.

Furthermore, the individuals that we collected information from where divided into two groups that we named ‘constructors’ and ‘reconstructors’ as shown in Table 1 below. Both groups were represented at all institutions.
Table 1. Institutions and groups selected for our inquiries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Institution</th>
<th>This institution is responsible for the reform programmes in the country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Institution</td>
<td>This institution has a central position in the academic arena and is responsible for the training of teacher educators in the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern College</td>
<td>A TEI in the Northern part of the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern College</td>
<td>A TEI in the Eastern part of the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern College</td>
<td>A TEI in the Southern part of the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructors</td>
<td>These educators were part of the group who had the position to introduce action research to other educators, as members of the National Implementation Team (NIT) or regional working teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-constructors</td>
<td>These were the educators who were supposed to carry out action research in their own practice or together with colleagues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our reason for labelling the two groups of informants as constructors and re-constructors follows their functions in relation to action research. The constructors became the first to be informed about action research and had, in that position, an advantage as being knowledgeable about action research. The constructors had a position as the ‘messengers’ of action research and could therefore also construct the message that they were expected to deliver to the re-constructors. The re-constructors were the ones who had to carry out action research. To be able to do that the re-constructors had to include action research into their professional repertoire. This process included aspects of adaptations and rethinking - re-constructions - even when instructions were repeated more or less automatically.
Documents were collected from all institutions in the form of national policy documents, donor documents, documents produced as instructional material for action research, and action research reports. We wanted to follow the implementation process of action research by investigating how it was introduced and how it was received and understood as part of the education reform efforts taking place in the country. We also wanted to find out about the possibilities and constraints connected to action research in Lao PDR. Therefore, we drew up the following research design:

- Investigate national policy and international donor documents, instructional material, as well as action research reports to make inquiries into the official considerations related to action research and to trace these considerations back to their ‘origins’ and into their representation in action research reports.
- Collect information from Lao educators, who have been involved in action research in different ways, to get their opinions about action research and our related research questions, and to find out how action research was carried out.
- Carry out our own action research to be able to combine an outsider view on action research with an informed insider perspective.

Our research design is on the whole a collective responsibility as it is with the rest of this thesis, except for the series of action research interventions reported in chapter IV under the heading “Action research towards participation and empowerment”. We mostly carried out these series individually and are therefore individually responsible for two series each.

Data collections

Our data were collected from relevant documents and institutional data through interviews and observations. Data from our own interventions were collected through observations and video recordings. These activities followed the timeline below.
III. METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS OF INQUIRY

Table 2. Timeline for our data collections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Documents</th>
<th>Institutional data</th>
<th>Interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Collected</td>
<td>Northern &amp; Southern colleges</td>
<td>Three series of action research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Collected</td>
<td>Central institution, Northern, Eastern &amp; Southern colleges</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Collected</td>
<td>National &amp; Central institution, Northern, Eastern &amp; Southern colleges</td>
<td>One series of action research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Collected</td>
<td>Eastern college</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before visiting an institution we had to get in contact with the administrative head of the institution to get permission to carry out our data collection. All of them welcomed us and some even encouraged us to carry out our research. It was also the administrative staff of the institutions that guided us to find people to interview as the procedure often is in Lao PDR. Our information was that we wanted to meet educators who had been or were involved with action research in different ways. The fact that we did not select the informants ourselves might have affected our result as we do not know the considerations that the administrative staff made in their selection of informants as there could have been a kind of gatekeeping involved. However, our feeling is that we probably received a fairly good representation of constructors and re-constructors.

The collection of documents for our research was more complicated. As mentioned above, the availability of documents is scarce and we had to approach different resource persons in our search for documents. This meant that we always asked people who we met at the different institutions about policy or instructional documents, even though we seldom got a positive answer. In some cases we even had to get in touch with former donor employed consultants to get information from them.
Document analysis
The documents included into this study are official policy documents, donor documents, instructional documents, and action research reports. In these documents we have searched for broad themes in the documents that represent the life world of action research - how action research is represented in the different types of documents and how these representations are portrayed in relation to what action research is perceived to be within the framework of our broad research questions (Fairclough, 2004).

Interviews and narrative analysis
Our interviews with constructors and re-constructors were based on a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 2) that created room for follow-up questions as well as new questions that were encouraged by the informants’ previous responses. We visited each institution more than once to be able to meet as many constructors and re-constructors as possible, as well as to follow up on previous interviews on areas that were discovered to need further information. All interviews were carried out in Lao language, tape recorded, and later transcribed to English. The transcriptions were then combined into group narratives through a process of narrative analysis, where a collective story was shaped representing the understanding of each group (Polkinthorne, 1995).

A table over the interviews with constructors and re-constructors and their institutional belonging are found in Appendix 3.

Observations
In addition to informal observations in connection with our field work at the different institutions, we carried out two observations of action research activities at the Eastern College. One occasion was in connection with the teaching of third year students about action research and the other was when teacher educators and teachers from demonstration schools reported their action research projects. Except for these two occasions there were no action research activities available in connection with our institutional visits. Therefore, most of the observations were carried out in connection with our own interventions, where one of us was responsible for the action research
activity and the other functioned as an observer. All interventions were recorded on video for later analysis.

The documentations, i.e. field notes and recorded observations, in connection to our own interventions were used to create a narrative of our four series of action research and also to challenge our pre-conceived opinions or false assumptions about our own actions. This was facilitated by the video recordings as they in retrospect helped us to distance ourselves from our actions and to create new insights about the observed practices as an attempt to develop a disciplined noticing in retrospect (Mason, 2002).

**On the production of trustworthy texts**

In our attempts to produce a trustworthy text we have relied on data from different sources, i.e. documents, interviews, and to a smaller extent, observations. Our own experiences as Lao educators gave us a specific contextual insight which we, well aware of issues of contextual prejudice, have used in the production of our texts. The many sources added up to the common demand for triangulation in social sciences research, meaning that you in most cases should have more than one source for your inquiry.

Griffiths (1998, pp. 130; 133) addresses the problem of bias or prejudices in the research process as "bias is something to be avoided in any paradigm of research", while she at the same time says that "taking an explicit stance helps to reduce bias" as opposed to a neutral stance that actually hides unavoidable partiality. Griffiths says that bias can appear at three levels: in the research process, in the values and politics of the researcher, and the bias in the research community. A possible reflection on our own data collection and research process is that the relationship between us and the informants could have been a reason for bias. In most cases we had a higher position in the education system in Lao PDR than our informants. We also belong to the majority group in the country, which could have an effect in the cases when our informants belonged to a minority group. The issue of the values and beliefs of the researcher as well as the informants has a specific position when research is carried out in Lao PDR where there is a strong official belief in authorities and a weak tradition to express alternative views.
in public outside, the internal monthly meetings at institutional level organised by the internal leadership. This situation could have created bias in our research findings. The last issue that Griffiths bring up is related to the bias in the research community. This relates in our case to the finance of research, who are allowed to do research, and the way it is directed. Most research carried out in Lao PDR is financed, implemented, and directed by external institutions and external researchers. This research is often donor driven and coupled to donor interests as commissioned research (Samoff, 2007). We and other Lao educators that are given the opportunity to investigate our own education system are exceptions to such a system and can in that respect function as an alternative force. It is important to be aware of these different causes for bias, according to Griffiths, as that can help us to take the bias into consideration in our research as an alternative to pretend to be neutral. This concern is related to the attempts to achieve trustworthiness.

Graneheim and Lundman (2004) look into the means to achieve trustworthiness in qualitative research. They look at questions of credibility, dependability, and transferability as important components of trustworthiness.

Credibility deals with “how well data and processes of analysis address the intended focus” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 109). It is related to the focus, the selected informants, and the methods for data collections, which in our case follows the introduction of action research at educational institutions in Lao PDR; the educators that we call constructors and re-constructors at these institutions; and text analysis of the steering documents related to action research and interviews with constructors and re-constructors. It is also related to the ‘meaning unit’, that is the level and size of the matter under consideration. The meaning units in our research are rather broad and belong to the perceptions about action research and its practice in Lao PDR.

Dependability is related to change over time, which means that research is mostly only a ‘snapshot’ even when it is carried out during a longer period, i.e. around four years, as we have done.

Transferability is a question whether findings, concepts, and understandings can be transferred to other situations and other times.
To be able to make proper decisions about transferability it is important to consider descriptions of context and culture in addition to the factors influencing the internal research process related to informants, data collections, and analysis. We think that the political context and the social culture within which education reform is taking place are rather significant in Lao PDR and might to some extent limit possibilities for transferability. However, transferability is not only a matter for educational research but also a concern for education itself in today’s globalised world.

Reflections on methods

When we started to collect data for this thesis, we realised that we had to use methods that we were not so familiar with. In our previous research on master level we had relied on quantitative measures that ended up as figures and numbers through different types of statistical methods. This was the case regardless of whether we worked with the collections and counting of insects or with the estimated number of teachers needed in the future.

We were not familiar with the type of interpretations that we had to get involved with in our analysis of policy texts. The interpretations meant that we had to find explicit as well as implicit expressions of intentions that could be related to our major research questions and our selected research perspective of global policy studies.

We were neither familiar with the type of reasoning we had to develop when we created collective narratives from individual interview data. The type of reasoning we developed in connection with the construction of narratives meant that we had to identify clusters of meanings from individual data that in a trustworthy way added up to collective stories that illustrated meanings in connection to our research questions.

We have learnt a lot by producing a trustworthy text. We have learnt to look beyond the occasional into the structural. We have learnt to identify contradictions between discursive and practical levels of understandings and their consequences. We have learnt to identify aspects of the taken for granted and common sense that affects our positional ideas of the research perspective with consequences for how we look at practice.
After this description of our methodological concerns we will turn to the results of our data collections as we traversed from policy to practice.
IV. REFORM AS A TRAVERSE FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

This chapter presents our findings. It starts in a description of documents that are related to action research in Lao PDR as a way to identify a policy framework. These documents are national policy documents, donor project documents, instructional documents at institutional levels related to action research in Lao PDR. Added to this are locally produced action research reports. The chapter continues with constructors’ and re-constructors’ narratives. The third part of the chapter presents the action research inquiries that we carried out at our own place of work. These focused on participation and empowerment with a focus on gender and ethnicity. The data for the third part are retrieved from video recordings in classrooms and our own field notes.

In search of a policy framework

In a country like Lao PDR, where educational policies are closely interwoven with donor ambitions, it is sometimes difficult to decide of a policy indeed is national. The reason for this is that national policy-making commonly relate to the discourses of international donors. Policy documents have the official sign of the national government might therefore be very similar to international policies. Therefore, to reconstruct a policy framework for action research in Lao PDR we are not only looking at what appears to be national policies, but also at donor project policy documents, instructional documents produced with inputs from donor staff as well as locally produced action research reports.

National policy documents with reference to action research

The national education policy documents, written in Lao or English, speak very little of the policies, practices and applications of action
research at TEIs and schools. In our search of a policy framework for action research in Lao PDR we are going back to documents produced at the beginning of 1990s.

One of the earliest policy documents produced as part of the ‘new educational policies’ dates back to the beginning of 1990s. The document is the so-called Concept Paper (Teacher Development Centre, 1994). According to Stephens (2007), the Concept Paper is based on a policy document prepared to define the goals of the Lao Education System 1992-2000. It is an interesting fact that we have not been able to find a corresponding document produced by Lao authorities, even after inquiries with centrally positioned government officials in Vientiane. Moreover, we only found one policy document written in Lao language for the period of 1997-2000. This document deals with human resources development and covers projects sponsored by the ADB (Ministry of Education, 1997). This leads us to believe that policy documents seem to be primarily written for the dialogues between donors and educational policy authorities in Lao PDR.

The Concept Paper points to the need for future educational development that emphasises the upgrading as well as gradual uplifting of the quality of the national education systems to international standards. The document also addresses the differences between the ‘old and the new’ aspects of teacher education, such as the differences in the teachers’ roles and qualities, course contents, and differences in teaching and learning organisation.

It is possible to relate some of the goals to action research, in spite of the fact that the action research concept was not yet used in Lao PDR at this time and that ‘the goals’ are presented more like behavioural rules than general systemic goals. Some relevance to action research is found in the following statements:

- Teachers must be managers and facilitators of learning. Research has emphasized that students learn by doing and teachers must plan practical student oriented activities so that learning takes place.
- Teachers must function as psychologists, counsellors and consultants. Students are going through different psychological stages and teachers must be sensitive and responsive to these
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age differences as well as to the individual differences of students.

• The teachers must be innovators, researchers and evaluators. The world has been changing very quickly. Teachers need to be sensitive to these changes in order to update their teaching and to make the training relevant to the needs of the changing world (Teacher Development Centre, 1994, pp. 2-3).

Some of the stated characteristics of the new curriculum for teacher education are also relevant for action research:

• The new curriculum is specially designed to improve teaching skills so that upon graduation the students will be able to perform well in their teaching careers.
• The new curriculum places more importance on educational studies as well as teaching techniques than the old curriculum. Science studies are also included as a foundation for both teaching and research.
• The new curriculum has emphasized group and activity-based learning, questioning and use of instructional materials. An additional purpose of the curriculum is to avoid the old teaching tradition of ‘we teach as we were taught’ (Teacher Development Centre, 1994, p. 6).

These goal descriptors on the behaviour of teachers and the characteristics of the curriculum can be seen as forerunners or a foundation of the future introduction of action research for the following reasons: Action Research often emphasises the teacher’s role as both a practitioner and an inquirer; it can encompass a sensitivity to difference; it is often centred around the idea of development and improvement; it often deals with the development of teaching for improved learning and understanding; it is often placed in a broad educational perspective and context; and it can encourage multiple approaches to teaching and learning.

New national policy documents which have been produced following the major international donor projects described in chapter I. An example of this is the EQIP that is part of ADB activities in Lao PDR. EQIP was carried out in two phases, EQIP I during the period 1992-1998 and EQIP II during the period 2002-2007.
The action research concept started to surface within policy documents in the educational sector around 2000. For example, the Education Strategic Vision up to the Year 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2000), produced as part of ‘policy dialogues’ with international donors in 2000, states that one component of the support to General Education and Teacher Training is to improve teaching activities and action research (Ministry of Education, 2000 p. 14). It also states that action research will be implemented at school level (Ministry of Education, 2000 p. 26). The strategic vision document is linked to the Millennium Development Goals produced by the international donor community under UNESCO management and is as such a document that attempts to abide by donor policies.

A Teacher Education Strategy Plan for 2006-2015 has been produced within the overall education vision up until 2020. This strategy plan (MOE, 2006) acknowledges that, “TEIs have conducted school action research programmes and used the results to improve the quality of teacher education” (MOE, 2006 p.2). This document also expresses that teachers should be placed at the centre of decision-making related to quality improvement as part of an overall direction of teacher education development. However, no reference is made to the potentials of action research approaches as part of the action plan for 2006-2010 (included in the teacher education strategy plan mentioned above) to improve teacher education methodology (MOE, 2006, p. 11) or to improve continuing professional development (MOE, 2006, pp. 11-12); areas which according to our understanding are well suited for action research approaches.

In conclusion, action research as part of the reform efforts seems to have a weak position in the policy documents.

There are a number of donor project reports related to action research, in spite of the general lack of reference to action research in the policy documents. We will here attend to these reports produced by donor projects and evaluation reports addressing action research.
IV. REFORM AS A TRAVERSE FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

**Donor project reports within the area of action research**

Action research was introduced to the educational sector in Lao PDR in 2000. The PAR pilot project in TTCs in Laos was initiated by the Teacher Training Department (TTD) at the MOE, carried out by SCN, and funded by Sida.

A semi-external evaluation of the PAR project has been produced as an independent consultancy organised by Sida (Pearson & Khounangwichit, 2003). The conclusions of the evaluation report is that the PAR project has established a foundation for action research in Lao PDR; even though the PAR project experienced some problems in its first phase it has shown through the activities during the second phase that action research is applicable in the Lao context. It further concludes that capacities have been built but that the institutional context and backing is weak. The evaluation report also gives a number of primary and secondary recommendations. The primary recommendations are mainly concerned with a stronger institutionalisation of action research and that action research should be incorporated both in pre-service and in-service programmes. A review of student assessment procedures is included as an important secondary recommendation. This recommendation points to the discrepancies between the ‘new methods of teaching’ and remnants of the traditions of formal testing that are given a high weighting in the assessment procedures.

A report by a foreign consultant (Bullock, 2002) describes how the second phase of the PAR project was implemented during 2002 by expansion from three TTCs in phase one to the Central Institution and to demonstration schools attached to each of these institutions. The report describes how the National Implementation Team (NIT) was set up, trained, and engaged in the activities together with the consultant. The seven member NIT was composed by two members from the National Institution, two from the Central Institution, and one member from each of the Northern, Eastern, and Southern Colleges.

There was also a three member institutionally based working team set up at each of the four institutions involved in the actual development of action research projects i.e. the Central Institution and the three Colleges. The action research projects were organised through
research groups. The research groups identified their own topics, collected data, carried out actions, and reported actions collaboratively. The action research methodologies were introduced through seminars for the NIT and later on through seminars with the institutionally based working teams. Then it was introduced to local action research groups who together with ‘critical friends’, usually teachers at demonstration schools were supposed to become the practitioners of action research, following an adapted and stepwise ‘cascade model’. This is a model often used in donor projects as a way to implement change based on the common notion of ‘effectiveness’. However, this model has a tendency to end up in diluted forms at the receiving end (Hayes, 2000).

The content of seminars became the main basis for the development of two action research handbooks, one designed for the trainers and another for the practitioners of action research (Teacher Training Department, 2002:1; 2002:2). During the process of the PAR project it was observed that teachers had difficulties in finding ways to develop their practices in line with the ‘new’ policies, mainly due to their limited experiences of student-centred methodologies. Therefore, another handbook was compiled from documents that were used in the PAR project as examples of ‘learner-centred teaching methodologies’ (Teacher Training Department, 2002:3). The two handbooks and the teaching and learning document from the PAR project and a handbook on the cooperation between teacher educators and teachers on action research projects from 2005 (Department of Teacher Training, 2005) are attended to below under the heading “Instructional documents for action research”.

One concluding remark about the two donor project reports that focus on action research is that the reports have a project evaluation purpose. Therefore, the reports are geared towards the donor that financed the action research projects rather than the practitioners of action research.

We will now get closer to the practice of action research by looking at the instructional guidelines given by different handbooks produced for Lao educators as well as action research reports written by re-constructors.
Between policy and practice

There is an area between policy and practice that has an important impact on both the understanding and practice of action research in Lao PDR. This area deals with instructional material that address what action research is represented to be, how it is expected to be carried out, and for what purposes it is supposed to be applied. This area is also related to the written documents that become the officially recognised results from action research, namely the action research reports written by practitioners who we call re-constructors.

Instructional documents for action research

Five handbooks with instructional contents have been produced as part of the PAR and the Teacher Training Enhancement and Status of Teachers (TTEST) projects within the framework of the EQIP II. One handbook is published in Lao language, while the other four are all in English.

The first and so far the only handbook in Lao language, Kane Vichay Phakpatibat nai Hong Hiam (Participatory Action Research in the Classroom), was published by the Teacher Training Department in 2001 (TTD, 2001) with support from the PAR project. Two Lao educators in cooperation with a foreign consultant produced the handbook. The two Lao educators later became members of the NIT. Much of the content of the handbook is based on information taken from publications on action research published in Thailand. The handbook is organised in seven parts and covers the common grounds for action research. It starts with the concern of teaching and learning improvement according to the ‘new way of teaching’ and the potential of action research as a way to develop teachers’ professionalism. Classroom action research is defined as a process to find new knowledge through systematic investigations and to use collected data to make correct evaluations. It is also stipulated that action researchers have to set up hypothesis that the result should be tested against and if that is failed the work has to be done again.

The description of the process of classroom action research follows the common action research cycle including reconnaissance, planning, action, and reflection. This process also includes the identification of a study problem, to set up an objective and a plan,
to search for answers and to carry out something new (an innovation), to modify, to conclude, and to publicise.

According to the handbook, the benefits of classroom action research are that teachers can work more systematically, to keep track of their activities, and to develop their planning skills. Teachers can also develop the quality of their teaching by using good experiences and alternative approaches, instead of relying on old practices. Teachers also get more power over their work as they are in control of their own improvements and there is a possibility for the learners to improve their learning skills. Classroom action research is also seen as an on-going process that benefits from collaborations and which can create feedback to policies and regulations within the system.

The major part of the handbook gives more detailed descriptions of the different parts of the action research process, like how to identify a problem, to establish a research focus, to select a focus group and research variables (for example gender issues, educational conditions, and teaching situations). Instructions for the data collections include issues like the meaning of data, the characteristics of data, different types of data and methods for data collections. There is also a section on research proposals that gives instructions on how to write a research proposal including considerations about the importance of the action research project and its characteristics. Finally, there is a section on data analysis, before a few examples of action research are introduced that are based on action research projects in Thailand.

This is the only handbook written in Lao language and it is used at all institutions included in this study, except for the Central Institution, and often in conjunction with the other handbooks described below.

The handbook *Action Research for Lao Educators: Trainer’s Handbook* was produced by the PAR project and published by the Teacher Training Department (TTD) at the MOE (TTD, 2002:1). The handbook is based on activities in the project and also designed for the participants as part of their training program consisting of:

*an initial workshop, with follow up tasks and a review workshop.*
*Part of the training program is the implementation of Action Research Projects between the two workshops with trainers.*
supporting and monitoring the progress of the trainees (TTD, 2002, p 3).

The handbook deals mainly with the details of the two workshops and what the trainers and the trainees should do, in the form of detailed lists of descriptive behavioural rules and actions. The attached hand-outs are dealing with the so-called 'action research cycle', examples of reflective practice, and simple instructions on how to carry out observations, running records over lessons, and how to summarize data from questionnaires.

The handbook often refers to the content in another document produced in the PAR project titled Action Research for Lao Educators: Researcher’s Handbook (TTD, 2002:2), which is meant as a resource for practitioners of action research who we call re-constructors. The first edition of the handbook was produced in 600 copies. The handbook is organised in 5 chapters under the headings ‘Introduction to Action Research’, ‘Developing Your Action Research Skills’, ‘Data collection and Analysis in Action Research’, ‘Writing about Action Research’, and ‘Glossary and References’. The ‘action research cycle’ is presented as a Reconnaissance - Planning - Acting and Observing - Reflecting - Replanning process that is a central feature in the handbook. Action research is introduced through a story that is called ‘The Chicken Problem’. The story deals with a village community and how they try to improve their income from selling chickens at the market place. When action research is transferred to the educational field the example of a topic is given as “Student participation in group work” reformulated as a problem, “Students don’t participate well while working in groups” (TTD, 2002:2, p. 9). The first chapter is concluded with four different ‘action research stories’ and each story is presented in a paragraph consisting of 7-9 lines.

The following chapters address the main features of action research through the action research cycle. Each step in the cyclic process is illustrated with activities under the main questions ‘What can you do?’, ‘How can you do it?’, and ‘When can you do it? The chapter concludes with an outline of two types of action research presented as responsive and proactive action research. This outline follows a different logic from the previous ‘what-how-when’ descriptions. The
third chapter deals with data collections and analysis in action research. The methods presented for data collections are observations, interviews, questionnaires, journal writing, student results, and documents. Advantages and disadvantages of each method are also listed. The data analysis is, according to the handbook, a way to identify what is in the data, to identify patterns or structures, and to make interpretations of what is relevant to the action research project and how that is related to what the practitioner have done or shall do. The last chapter deals with the different types of writing that can be carried out in connection with an action research project. These writings are presented as action research journals, reflective writing, sharing information about action research, and action research project reports. The suggestion on how to write an action research report principle follows in the different steps in the action research cycle with an added conclusion. The chapter is closed with an example of an action research project, which gives the impression that this example is also an example of an action research report consisting of 6 headings each with a summative paragraph composed by 10-20 lines of written text.

One interesting observation is that the problems introduced in chapter 1 (i.e. the chicken problem and student participation) are not in any way related to the rest of the content in the handbook. This might cause problems for practitioners who are trying to understand the processes of action research.

The fourth handbook from the PAR project is *Action Research for Lao Educators: Teaching and Learning Documents* (TTD, 2002:3). This handbook comprises of 18 hand-outs that are collected from the activities in the PAR project and printed as a handbook in 250 copies. Much of the material is written in such a way that it needs to be used in connection with training activities or as summaries of activities already carried out. The material is often presented as lists of activities, instructions, skills, or examples and therefore difficult to use as a separate document or as separate activities.

The Teacher Training Department produced a fifth handbook about action research in 2005 as part of the TTEST project titled *School
Action Research: Handbook for TEI Teachers (TTD 2005). This handbook focuses on the cooperation between teachers at TEIs, i.e. teacher educators, who as part of their professional development programme are instructed to work together with teachers in lower secondary and primary schools on action research projects. The purpose of this cooperation is for the teacher educators to better understand the situation in schools; for teacher educators and school teachers to share ideas; to develop relationship between schools and the TEIs, for professional development for teachers in schools; and to improve teaching in the TEIs and in schools. This will be accomplished through the cooperation between teacher educators and teachers in action research projects where they plan their project together, share ideas about teaching and learning, teach and observe each other in the school classrooms, write individual project journals and a joint action research report that is presented at the college to invited teacher educators and teachers. This handbook follows closely the instructions reported above from the PAR project except for an initial reference to a document titled Partnership in Teacher Education: Report of the Working Party on Partnership in Teacher Education, from April 1997.

In conclusion, the five institutional handbooks that we have referred to are all based on a similar model of action research that emphasise working procedures and technical instructions on how to carry out action research.

We will now continue our traverse between policy and practice by looking at both the instructions for writing an action research reports and action research reports written by re-constructors.

Representation of action research through reporting

Written reports are an important part of the introduced ‘action research cycle’. Reports can have different functions, such as sharing of practices and findings amongst colleagues, resources for student teachers, and by that contribute to educational development and understanding. Reports can also be used as evidence of policy

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9 The Teacher Training Department at the Ministry of Education, Lao PDR, is referred to as the Department of Teacher Training in this document.
implementation in relation to national authorities and international donors as well as a means to exercise control.

The Researcher’s Handbook ‘Action Research for Lao Educators’ (TTD, 2002:2) gives instructions on how to write a report of an action research project. The handbook points to the importance of “reflections about what you did” as well as the reasons for each research group to write a report “to report to supervisors (and) to distribute information about research projects to other researchers” (TTD, 2002:2, p. 46). The content of an action research report should cover the following headlines: background, reconnaissance, plan, act and observe, reflection, re-plan, lessons learned, and conclusions, according to the handbook.

We have found that action research reports in principle follow the headlines for the reports as mentioned above. However, the reports are usually brief, covering not more than 3-5 pages. There is also a tendency that research questions attend to what is perceived as official and common problem areas. Problems are either identified as students’ problems or teachers’ problems. The problems are in general framed within the new methodology of student-centred education and the five-pointed star and as ‘negative’ problems related to what students or teachers are not able to do, rather than as ‘positive’ problems that follow a ‘how-to-encourage’ agenda. Therefore, students are characterised as inactive and uninterested, not responding to the teachers’ questions, and inactive during the lessons. Teachers are characterised as uncommunicative, ‘laissez-faire’, lacking control of their relation to group activities. Further on, the findings normally report improvements and positive changes, but often with weak descriptions of the reasons for the said improvements and changes.

From our overview of action research reports we can conclude that all types of educators involved in teacher education carry out action

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10 We base our finding on a sample of 17 action research reports from the institutions where re-constructors work, namely the Central Institution, the Northern, Eastern, and Southern Colleges. However, most of the reports are from the Eastern College were action research reports are treated in a systematic way and where selected reports are made available in the college library. At other places, the interviewees mostly responded that action research reports are not available or cannot be found.
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research as we have found reports written by pairs of teacher educators; pairs of teacher educators and teachers at demonstration schools; pairs of schoolteachers; pairs of student teachers as part of their school practice; and occasionally also involving education officers. It is worth noting that reports are in most cases collective efforts, involving two or more educators or student teachers and that all types of reports are found at the Eastern College, which obviously seems to be the institution where reports are guarded, kept, and made available for others.

This is confirmed from a seminar at the Eastern College, where the local NIT team member states that action research reports are published, included in the library resources, and used as references for other research teams. We also learned that there is an evaluation committee that selects and validates action research reports that are going to be published and that an action research project should comprise a total of 66 hours, according to their rules (video 7).

Reports from schoolteachers, who have been instructed by educators participating in the Regional Centre for Education in Science and Mathematics (RECSAM) project, follow a different model. The activities of the teachers include a self-assessment of their classroom activities, which they then try to develop. They write a small report on their action research and present their findings at the Friday academic meetings. This approach is also developed into an exchange between schools in the district including both urban and rural schools. This exchange makes it possible for teachers to broaden their experiences and educational knowledge base.

We can conclude that action research reports produced at the institutions we have included in our inquiry follow a similar pattern both in the way problems are presented and in the way the reports

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11 We felt that the issue of an actions research project being carried out as a 66 hours activity had to be further investigated. Therefore, we carried out telephone interviews with two of the constructors at the Eastern Colleges (these interviews were carried out on the 11th and the 13th of May 2010). The interviews clarified that the 66 hours rule was negotiated as a reasonable time-span for an action research cycle during a meeting between donor representatives and representatives from all colleges.

12 See below under subtitle “Further institutional development related to action research”.

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are composed. The only exception is the reports in the RECSAM project.

The following section looks at the process of dissemination of policy to the institutions where the policy of action research is going to be carried out. This dissemination is described as narratives from the deliverers of policy, i.e. educators who act as instructors of action research, here called constructors; and practitioners of action research, i.e. teacher educators and teachers who carry out action research, here called re-constructors.

Constructors’ and re-constructors’ narratives

The following narratives are based on interviews with constructors and re-constructors at the five institutions selected for our inquiry. The constructors’ narrative is presented as a combined national narrative, while the re-constructors’ narratives are presented as four institutionally based narratives. All narratives follow a general structure based on the focuses of our research questions concerning the introduction, understanding, constraints, and potentials of action research. Each narrative is preceded by an explanatory introduction.

Constructors’ narrative

Introduction: The constructors’ narrative is based on interviews with a total of twelve constructors from the five institutions. The constructors have a common position in relation to action research and a common training carried out by foreign donor employees. The constructors are members of the NIT or the regional Working Teams. The reason for creating a common narrative from the interviews with the constructors is that their descriptions are similar in content and views. This probably has its explanation in the constructors’ common role as members of the key groups of ‘managers’ selected to introduce action research nationwide.

Action research has been implemented in Lao PDR since 2000-2001, according to the constructors. It was introduced the first time at provincial level (as part of community development) in Luang

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13 We have interviewed 12 constructors, but two of them were interviewed twice, with the effect that we are referring to a total of 14 interviews. These are the Interviews 3, 5, 6, 14, 21, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 47 and 49.
Prabang Region, Bolikhamxay Region, and the area that is called the Special Zone. When action research entered the educational sector in 2001 it focused on management. People in administrative positions took part in workshops. This was supported by foreign experts financed by Sida and managed by a SCN project in partnership with the Department of Teacher Training, MOE. Action research was introduced at four TEIs in the country; the Central Institution, the Northern College, the Southern College, and initially also another college, not included in this inquiry. The introduction of action research had two main focuses, the theory of action research and its development process. The theory of action research focused on teaching and learning with an emphasis on learner-centred methodologies. The development process of action research was presented as a research cycle including reconnaissance, action plan, acting and observation, reflection, and re-planning. Further on, management issues were attended to by a focus on project and workshop management. The idea with this introduction of action research was to make the participants in the workshops prepared to identify classroom problems and to solve these problems. However, some constructors considered these initial activities as unsuccessful as it only involved general managers, theory of action research, and there were no actions taken.

In 2002, the NIT was organised with representations from all involved institutions. The team and the facilitating foreign consultant ran workshops for institutionally or regionally based Working Teams at the involved institutions after their own training to create a cadre of instructors, called key trainers. This training followed a training of trainers logic connected to the cascade model. The workshops were about teaching and learning in the classroom. An action research guide and a resource book were produced and used as resources during the training. Focus was put on how to carry out classroom observations and by that constructors felt that more effort was put on practice rather than theory. When the SCN project was phased out,

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14 Special Zone is a region that is difficult to access because of its geographical location in the upland mountainous area. Special Zones are based on special economic development areas that are called Focal Points.
the TTEST project continued to support action research in the educational sector in Lao PDR up until 2008.

After the initial introduction, key trainers carried forward action research to colleagues at the institutions and demonstration schools through local workshops. Educators that went through these local workshops were then supposed to identify other educators in the form of critical friends who then carried out action research together. Some constructors participated themselves in action research activities in cooperation with critical friends, while others only carried out observations and followed the activities of teachers and lecturers.

A nationally placed constructor concludes that the activities of the NIT have slowed down due to the lack of financial means for workshops as the donor support has come to an end. The NIT is therefore today only waiting for occasions when local institutions invite them for workshops and other activities. Constructors at the Central Institution say that there are costs connected to action research and therefore funds have been made available from the TTEST project to the involved institutions for report writing as well as for material and transport. Both teacher educators and teachers in schools need some money to buy material for the classroom. When the money was finished the action research also finished. ‘Now everything remains silent’, as one of the constructors put it. The Central Institution has not continued with action research after the funds ended. They claim that there are diverse versions of action research introduced through the TTEST project. Further it is stated that findings and results from action research projects have been adopted and further developed in textbooks, teachers’ guides, and methodology and teaching materials. Constructors also claim that some teachers did not do proper action research, as they only carried out classroom observations and after that sat down to discuss the weaknesses in what they had observed, instead of following the action research cycle.

Constructors understand action research as a way to improve teaching and learning, to develop learning activities, and to make students more active in the classrooms. It can also improve teaching and learning in large classes, which is normally difficult to deal with.
Constructors also mention that action research can promote staff development amongst teachers and for administrators as a way to improve office work and management. The cooperative aspects of action research are also pointed to. Some constructors mention that action research can change attitudes and develop the thinking about education as it can challenge the general view that the causes for educational problems all come from students. Educators might start to recognise that problems in the teaching and learning process are also related to the responsibilities and roles of the teachers. This insight comes from classroom observations carried out as part of action research. In this sense, you can say that educators have started to understand the meanings and functions of action research.

According to the constructors, there are still some misunderstandings about roles and functions of action research in the education system. There are teachers in schools who think that the role of Pedagogical Advisors (PAs)\(^\text{15}\) is to assist with action research, while their traditional role is to exercise a kind of inspection and to concentrate on outputs with minor concerns about the educational inputs. As one constructor expressed it:

> Local teachers have told me that when the pedagogical advisor comes to follow the teaching in the school, instead of assisting the teacher to solve the problems in teaching by trying different teaching methods, they only ask for what the teachers have completed. In reality the pedagogical advisor should help the teachers to improve their teaching and action research at the same time (Interview 5, ethnic majority male).

PAs could play a more supportive role to educational inputs and therefore also to action research. One constructor claims that many teachers misunderstood action research when the action research cycle was first introduced through the chicken feeding problem (in the action research guide). The action research cycle became better understood later on when it was explained through problem solving in relation to teaching and learning. Constructors also explain that:

> when teachers have completed the first cycle of action research they have to start a second cycle, but if the member of the working

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\(^{15}\) PAs are allocated to all districts and all provinces in Lao PDR. PAs work either at primary or secondary level and operate almost like inspectors, but have also as their name says, pedagogical duties.
team finds some mistakes in the first cycle, this cycle must be repeated (Interview 31, ethnic majority female).

It is also mentioned that different concepts have been used for action research during its introduction, such as ‘practical research’, ‘in classroom practical research’ and ‘participatory action research’.

The potentials of action research, as expressed by the constructors, are mostly related to its possibility to improve teaching and learning in the classrooms. This needs support from management as well as the national administration of education in the country. The need for support is often related to the costs for teaching material and paper for report writing attached to action research projects, which previously have been covered by donor projects. Action research takes time both from other duties and as a way to change understanding and practice, therefore if the government wants it to continue they need to create a policy for action research. One constructor even suggests:

There is a need for support and 'nayobay', i.e. some extra benefits or recognition from the people in top positions for those doing action research, if action research is going to be extended further. At the same time the administration should promote a policy for action research and to transform action research into a teaching subject in the curriculum for teacher education (Interview 14, ethnic majority male).

This will be the only way to further develop teaching and learning through action research and to make it part of thinking and practice in a continuous way. This call for a national policy for action research will also facilitate the allocation of funds. A policy can also include action research as part of promotion procedures. The inclusion of action research in the syllabus for the 3rd year student teachers is another way to create a future for action research in the educational system in Lao PDR, according to the constructors.

Re-constructors’ institutional narratives

The re-constructors’ narratives are presented as four institutionally based narratives, as a way to reflect the institutional similarities as well as the differences in the views on action research. We interviewed a total of twenty-seven re-constructors at the four institutions where action research was introduced and carried out by
educators. Nineteen re-constructors were lecturers at these institutions and eight were teachers at adjunctive demonstrations school, where student teachers carry out their practices.

**Re-constructors at the Central Institution**

Introduction: This institution has, as its name indicates, a central position in the education system in the country. Seven re-constructors were interviewed of whom three are employees of the institution as lecturers and four employed as primary and secondary school teachers at demonstration schools attached to the institution.

Re-constructors claim that action research is a new concept and activity for them. It was only through training workshops at the institution around 2002-03 that action research was introduced to them under the label PAR. A foreign expert from a donor project and NIT team members (that previously had been introduced to action research by the same expert) carried out this workshop for a regionally and institutionally based working team. After that the working team had the duty to carry out the training of colleagues and teachers at demonstrations schools. Re-constructors talk about three different occasions when introduction of action research has taken place. However, the participants have differed over the course occasions, which mean that most individual participants only attended one training occasion. Further on, it seems like few re-constructors actually carry out their own action research but rather cooperate with what is called critical friends (teachers) at demonstrations schools. The critical friends then become the practitioners of action research, but observed by those who introduced action research to them:

*Some of us didn’t carry out action research ourselves, we only did class observations on the teaching of the critical friends and collected the reports from them. Based on these reports, we will further produce a report to the project employee* (Interview 2, ethnic majority female).

One re-constructors reports that she together with her colleagues at a demonstration school gathers information about their students’ learning problems from their own lessons and meet periodically to

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16 This narrative is based on data from the Interviews 1, 2, 37, 42, 43, 44 and 45.
exchange experiences and to give feedback to each other, without following the model introduced in the action research handbooks. Others report that they have followed a model including lesson plans and identification of research questions externally controlled and evaluated by the team of constructors.

After training we are requested to do action research. There was an expert and a working team from our institution that came to observe our teaching. They took records while we taught and by the end of our teaching they asked us to write a short report (Interview 43, ethnic majority female).

Re-constructors’ understanding of action research is mainly related to the role of action research as a way to improve the teaching and learning activities according to the student-centred education as a new teaching approach recognised in the national educational policy reform. Most re-constructors explain that knowledge of action research helps teachers to find ways to improve and develop their teaching skills as well as means to solve the learning problems of the students in their classrooms:

We understand that action research is a practice together between the teacher and students. Importantly, when we teach and transfer knowledge to students we have to think about what they are able to understand and not; if not we have to find out ways to help them. The teacher should know and understand the students’ problems (Interview 42, ethnic majority female).

Another re-constructor certifies that through the introduction of action research in the classroom, teachers can identify problems related to the teaching organization and can acknowledge the situational restraints affecting the students. Further on, it leads practitioners to identify and determine the ways to support their students. In addition, skills in expressing opinions and summarising the lessons have been improved by using action research.

Other re-constructors conclude that action research has an important role not only for improving the teaching and learning, but it is useful for uplifting the efficiency of office work. Further on, teachers should do action research, because it is useful to improve student-centred education, as the two concepts have been introduced simultaneously.
One re-constructor states that action research can be integrated with the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Therefore, she says that:

When we teach we have to use action research at the same time in order to follow the students' learning. We do not need to blame the students that they are weak, but we have to know about their situation and living conditions, because in our school the students come from different origins (Interview 45, ethnic majority female)

Despite the significant role of action research in connection to teaching and learning improvement, re-constructors claim that sometimes action research restrains the performance of the teaching program as the teaching process may be slowed down. This can cause problems in the semester examination if all the content of the prescribed syllabus is not attended to. Action research, if seen as an add-on, can hinder teachers to finish the syllabus program on time, something for which they will be blamed. Many re-constructors have the opinion that action research might create delays in the syllabus program. They also propose that the authority should contribute with necessary materials and other kinds of encouragements.

Re-constructors’ viewpoints on the potentials of action research are based on their experiences accumulated during the TTEST project implementation period and their willingness in using action research. All re-constructors recognise that action research is relevant for improving the teaching and learning processes. One re-constructor, who is also a lecturer, states that she often changes the teaching techniques and tries to create learning circumstances encouraging student participation based on her knowledge about action research. Furthermore, as the government and the MOE urge teachers to use action research for updating their teaching methods, the institutional leadership calls teachers to carry out action research to improve teaching and learning as well as administrative work even though the project funding has finished. The Central Institution possesses a potential for action research because most of the teachers have been trained and got skills to carry out action research. Furthermore, action research is also taught as an academic subject for the third year students. Re-constructors also think that the practice at the institution to recognise teachers who do 'good' action research by
giving them small gifts should be included in the promotional policy of the institution.

Another re-constructor working as a lecturer says that she has presented her action research report in an evaluation meeting held at a hotel in the capital city where PAs from different districts and provinces were invited. They were pleased and inspired by her report. Today many teachers at the Central Institution are interested in action research.

A re-constructor from a secondary school proposes that all teachers at the school should be trained in action research, because some teachers do not understand the problems in their teaching. A re-constructor from a primary school tells that action research nowadays is organised by teachers in each grade while it was previously organised for the whole school. Further on, the academic office has an important function, since teachers have to ask the office for material like paper and scissors, needed for their development work through action research.

Re-constructors at the Northern College

Introduction: The Northern College is training teachers for primary and lower secondary schools for the Northern provinces including the mountainous areas and parts of the Special Zone. The duration of training in this institution is two years for primary school teachers and three years for lower secondary teachers. The institution is one of the main sites for our data collections. We interviewed five re-constructors including three lecturers at the college and two teachers from primary and secondary demonstration schools.

Re-constructors inform that they have got knowledge and experiences in action research only through training workshops. The NIT from the Department of Teacher Training at the MOE provided the first training workshop sometime in 2002-2003 at the college. Re-constructors also notify that some teachers of nearby schools and lecturers of the college have been invited to attend this training workshop on action research for improving teaching and learning in the classroom. After the training they went to practice and apply action research at schools and institutions where they work. Re-

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17 This narrative is based on data from Interviews 11, 12, 13, 15 and 36.
constructors explain that they have been instructed to organise research groups and each group comprises of both non-trained and trained teachers, and lecturers organised into so-called pair coaching groups. This way, they can share ideas and transfer experiences to each other. Some of the trained teachers did not carry out action research themselves; they remain as advisors to follow the practice of others. In the period when action research was introduced, one re-constructor said that it was an officer from General Education Department in cooperation with a TTEST foreign employee that organised a workshop at her school. The main objective of the training course was to emphasise the teaching and learning process related mainly to students’ and pupils’ problem solving in the classroom.

Re-constructors understand that action research is an important and crucial factor for pedagogical change as part of educational reform as it can accelerate student-centred education. However, one of the re-constructors points out that action research has developed her teaching skills and allowed her to get new information related to teaching. She continues:

> Research is very important and a task through which we can find diverse 'facts' that create some constraints in our work. For example, after finding these 'facts' we can plan how to solve the constraints through our conduct (Interview 15, ethnic majority female).

Eventually, most teachers can improve teaching and learning through action research. One re-constructor argues that her knowledge of action research has changed her teaching attitude and by that she can improve her teaching and learning arrangements. Before, students were emotionally frightened because of her strict and loud voice during the lessons:

> Before, some students didn’t listen to my explanations and didn’t do their homework. I scolded them and they became very frightened of me (Interview 12, ethnic majority female).

Re-constructors recognise that action research plays a creative and creditable role in the reform process and for teaching and learning methods. They say that most of the teachers in their schools were earlier not interested in the learning problems of the students as
teaching was only about handing over information to students. Nowadays they have changed their perspective on teaching and learning and make attempts to look at and to solve the students’ problems. One re-construct or also highlights that there exist some external and systemic factors - like timetables - that challenge teachers who carry out action research. Furthermore, he reports that some teachers who understand action research as extra work are reluctant to carry it out. This re-construct or explains this reluctance in the following way:

{others understand that research is an additional task which prevents them from doing other work that could generate their family income, so they become reluctant to contribute (Interview 36, ethnic majority male).}

The re-constructors have a positive view on the potential of action research at educational institutions in Laos. They recognise that for the moment action research has an important role for problem solving in teaching and learning organisations. Two re-constructors report that there are many teachers who lack training in action research and that their schools have made plans for a summer training course in action research in cooperation with the college. They say that in order to complete the proposed activity, they will use the school budget without waiting for funds from external projects. Another re-construct or suggests that the possibility of doing action research depends somewhat on the policy makers of the institution. Therefore, the policy makers should look into how to support the carrying out of action research as well as to include the possibilities for action research within the teaching programs. He also claims, based on his experience that it is necessary to plan for followings, evaluations and budget considerations. This re-construct or adds:

{If we want action research to develop continually, the policy makers should make a good plan and timetable for the introduction of action research that considers Lao cultural festivals and celebrations that otherwise restrains the work on action research (Interview 11, ethnic majority male).}

Administrators of the institution appreciate action research as the main key for improving the teaching and learning, so they often encourage this work. The institution also cooperates with schools to
organise research teams in the form of pair coaching to share experiences and help each other.

Re-constructors at the Eastern College

Introduction: This institution is another main site for our data collections. Teachers who are trained here for primary and junior secondary schools normally return to schools in the three provinces that make up the middle region of the country. We interviewed thirteen re-constructors including eleven college lecturers and two teachers from primary and lower secondary demonstration schools. Re-constructors report that action research was introduced to them only through training workshops at the institution around 2003-04 under the version of Practical Research in the Classroom or simply Classroom Research. A few of them have attended previous training workshops provided at the institution by the NIT from the Teacher Education Administration Development Centre at the Central Institution, whereas, many re-constructors have later been trained around 2004-05. The institutional Working Team organised this training. All training workshops in action research have been managed and facilitated by the TTEST project. After the training they were asked and instructed to form research groups and carry out action research in their college classrooms or at demonstration schools with the critical friends (teachers) there. In addition, the re-constructors at demonstration schools say that they have been critical friends to college lecturers who came to cooperate in action research with them. One of the re-constructors at the college claims to have done action research three times at a demonstration school through cooperation with the teachers there, but states that it was not successful. The result was not good because of timetabling problems, as the critical friend was not available at times. Furthermore, it was difficult to familiarize with the students, as they did not know each other. Hence, in the second time, he carried out action research in his own classroom with his colleague and his students. He further states that the purpose of the action research is to look over the teaching methods and to find out which will be more relevant as measured by

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This narrative is based on data from Interviews 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 32, 33, 48 and 50.
test score results. The re-constructor tried out three variants of teaching methods, such as student-centred, teacher-centred and knowledge interest-centred methods. In conclusion, he found that the student-centred method was more reasonable.

Re-constructors’ understanding of action research is mainly related to the role of a teacher or lecturer who attempts to find the better ways for improving their teaching and learning activities according to the student-centred education as a new teaching approach recognised in the national educational policy reform:

*Research in the classroom is very new for us, but we continue to do it, because there still exists a lot of problems amongst students and in teaching. It becomes our duty, as we are science teachers. We need to solve the problems in our work, so we have to do research at the same time as we are teaching* (Interview 50, ethnic majority male).

However, action research is not too popular for many and it is often understood and called ‘research in the classroom’ or ‘practical research’. Some re-constructors explain that knowledge of action research allows them to find out the problems related to their teaching and learning and to know the students’ situation that might challenge their learning opportunities. Therefore after training, they urgently started to introduce action research in their school in cooperation with their critical friends. Action research seems to become a reasonable choice for teaching and learning improvement. Other re-constructors report that they have all used the action research cycle, because they would like to know the diverse problems that affect the classroom and occur among their students. They think that by doing action research they could get coherent answers to their research problems. One re-constructor says that action research processes are practically similar to what the teachers have done before with class observation.

*We did it without the instruction from the staff or without support from projects, because we recognised it as our duty. We didn’t know or notice that we have done research, because we didn’t hear the term research or action research before* (Interview 32, ethnic majority female).

They just did not know it was research, because they knew the term action research only when they had been trained. With class
IV. REFORM AS A TRAVERSE FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

observation they did not make a report, they only carried out some feedback and withdrew for discussions at the end of the class or later by the end of the week. Another re-constructor states that, because of the introduction of practical research in the classroom she has understood and recognised that the teacher is the main factor for change in the teaching and learning process. However, the teachers are responsible, not only for teaching the lesson content, but also for nurturing their students’ wellbeing.

To know the students’ problems it is necessary to be close with the problematic students. The teacher’s role is not only for teaching, but nurturing is also important (Interview 48, ethnic majority female).

Therefore, they should follow closely what can and has happened and what influences the abilities and feelings of the students.

In general, re-constructors consider action research as a convenient approach, which involves aspects beyond teaching and learning improvement. Most of them reply that action research should be widely accepted among the teachers and disseminated for all teachers in the future. Several re-constructors express a promise to continue with action research in their classrooms, even when the support of donor projects has ended. Currently, the role of action research has been recognised amongst the institutional authorities. One re-constructor explains that action research has been included in the syllabus program for 3rd year teacher students and the authority of the institution has arranged a budget to further its introduction. Other re-constructors inform that after training workshop attendance, they have organised training courses in action research for other teachers in their schools. Moreover, they report that the director staff and district PAs are interested and willing to introduce action research among other schools in the district. Therefore they should assess and follow the teachers who start to carry out action research in their classroom.

Re-constructors at the Southern College

Introduction: This College is another important institution for our data collection and prepares teachers for primary and junior secondary schools, mainly for the four southern provinces of Lao
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PDR. The data collection from this college is based on interviews with four re-constructors, all being lecturers at the college.

Action research was introduced to the re-constructors through training workshops provided and supported by the TTEST project. They had heard from its introduction several years ago, that it did not focus on teaching and learning improvement, but aimed mainly for the general renovation of educational management for each institution. One re-constructor argues that in the first phase, the director of his institution was invited to attend a training workshop in action research. During this, there were talks about research for improving the management work in the office, and the application of action research was not carried over to the classrooms. Only in 2002-03, when the implementation of the TTEST project started, was action research introduced with a focus on teaching and learning improvements. In this period the key trainers’ team had been organised in order to conduct further training workshops for teachers under the supervision of a regional foreign employee from the TTEST project. Another re-constructor says that action research is a new type of knowledge to her and was introduced to her under the label ‘practical research’. She later became the head of the research unit in her institution and went to observe how teachers at demonstration schools and lecturers at the college have carried out practical research. She also claims that there were some teachers who did not do ‘proper’ action research, as they only carried out class observation, discussed the weakness in their teaching with colleagues, and later tried to improve, and did not follow the whole action research cycle. When her responsibility to follow the action research in the demonstration school finished she started to carry out action research by herself in her classroom.

Re-constructors’ understanding of action research is related to its possibility to develop the teaching and learning processes. In general, they think that action research contributes to the improvement of teaching and learning skills, while one re-constructor also express some doubts:

Some teachers understand that action research and student-centred education go together and are related to each other,

This narrative is based on data from Interviews 7, 8, 9, 10 and field notes.
whereas other teachers are still unclear about the importance and meaning of that research. They question the benefits and interests that action research could create and are also worried about the reactions from the top management and whether they will accept and approve their results (Interview 10, ethnic majority male).

Re-constructors certify that they will continue to carry out action research even when the project support is ended, because of its contribution to the teaching and learning process. They report that action research has been included in the syllabus program for third year student teachers. They also propose that the authorities of the institution should promote incentive and encouragement for the teachers who have carried out action research, as some teachers do not properly understand the meaning of action research and say that it is costly, need extra material, and more time. The college has set aside some money for training of newly recruited teachers.

As a tentative conclusion about the constructors’ and re-constructors’ narratives, we want to point to the similarities in their descriptions of action research.

Further institutional development related to action research

After the introduction of action research through the PAR project the involved institutions continued their efforts in different ways. For example, the Northern College has established links with a TEI in Thailand in a cooperation that is also considered to be an action research project. The focus of the cooperation is ‘integrated teaching’ in Science and Mathematics. The integration is an attempt to break with the common practices to teach isolated topics and to enhance students’ learning and understanding by creating integrated teaching combining different topics to broader themes. The project started in 2007 when Thai educators organised a short training session and study visits for the Lao educators. After visits to each other’s classes to carry out observations they organised feedback meetings to discuss weaknesses and strengths. This project was financed by the TTEST project. The plans are to extend the activities also to other subject areas.

A PA in a district close to the Eastern College has reported about a seminar organised by RECSAM in Malaysia that introduced a model
of action research in 2008 to educators from different provinces. The seminar took place at one of the colleges in Lao PDR. After the initial seminar the PA introduced the model to teachers in the district and instructed them to observe their own teaching, the students’ learning and problems that appeared during the lessons, and to document their findings after the lessons. The teachers came together in a Friday meeting to discuss the issues and to give each other advice on how to deal with the situations. The PA developed these ideas further into an organisation of friendship schools amongst the 18 schools in the district, through which teachers could observe each other’s teaching and come together 2-3 times in a semester to discuss their experiences.

The Southern College has established cooperation with an institution in Thailand that they consider to be an action research project based on the introduction of teaching competences following a model from the Thai institution. This model includes nine areas of teaching skills related to teaching material, summary of a lesson, questioning, organisation and control of the class, communication, explanation and narration, encouragement, motivation, and evaluation. Each skills area is defined by a number of behavioural criteria that add up to a total of 92 criteria with a variation from 4 to 16 on individual skills areas. The teacher educators use these skills areas when they carry out classroom observations of student teachers and teachers (former students) at schools. The teacher educators then use these data to improve their own activities at the college.

In conclusion, the institutional development that followed after the introduction of action research through the PAR project showed examples of different developments, which were still organised with support from donor projects. Furthermore, at the Central Institution we developed an action research project that is reported below.

**Action research towards participation and empowerment**

We also wanted to further develop our own understanding and experience of action research and for that reason we carried out action research as an integrated part of our studies. Through our own action research we also became part of the group of re-constructors
and developed ‘inside’ experiences that could help us in our broader analysis of action research in Lao PDR.

Our own action research emanated from discussions carried out during preparations for our PhD studies. The discussions started in an analysis of the national constitution of Lao PDR (Government of Lao PDR, 1991) and the so-called ‘Concept Paper’ (Teacher Development Centre, 1994). The constitution brings forward five aspects summarised under the concepts sex/gender, social status, education, ethnicity, and faith. The constitution states in article 22 that “Lao citizens irrespective of their sex, social status, education, faith and ethnic groups are all equal before the law”. Further on, in article 24 it is stated “Citizens of both sexes enjoy equal right in the political, economic, cultural and social fields and family affairs”. The concept paper talks about differences in teachers’ roles and qualities, course content, and organisation of learning and teaching as important aspects of the reform efforts. Based on these focuses and a proposal from the FOE at NUOL (undated) that emphasised student-centred methods, gender, and action research, we decided to carry out our interventions with a focus on gender and ethnicity within a framework established through contextual studies, student-centred methods, and action research. The reasons for selecting gender and ethnicity as the focuses for our interventions were twofold. Firstly, it was related to the official policy of education. This expressed a concern for both gender and ethnicity in its emphasis on ‘education for all’ and the ’new pedagogy. This emphasis was articulated in both in policy documents and donor publication; a concern which was for instance spelled out also in a research project on changes in ethnic student enrolment in Lao PDR sponsored by the ADB (Ministry of Education, 2002). Secondly, it was based on our experiences of male domination, lack of female participation, and the marginalisation of ethnic minorities during lessons. Our plan was to create a gender and ethnicity sensitive student-centred education through action research with an underlying ambition to develop participation and empowerment.

Policy considerations

Our inquiry started in the policy call to Lao educators to use the new pedagogy of student-centred education, instructionally summarised
as ‘the five-pointed star’, which we have referred to previously (Bounyasone et al, 2006). The five-pointed star includes the following instructions as expressed in the Primary Education curriculum (1998, p. 8) and with similar instructions elsewhere in Lao policy documents (e.g. MOE, 1994, p.4, and FOE, 2009, p. 3):

- Teaching should be followed by activities.
- Teaching should go with questions.
- Teaching should have teaching aids.
- Teaching should divide students into groups.
- Teaching is connected with real life.

This reduction of student-centred education to five methodological aspects dealing with activities, questioning, teaching aids, group activities, and the connection of teaching to real life has had some practical implications. Our field studies at colleges and schools in 2006 showed an adaptation of the new pedagogy to the status quo as a ‘hybrid version of student-centred education’ that we summarised as:

- Teaching from the textbook in the absence of other material.
- Asking closed factual questions on the textbook content, as teachers do not know how to relate the real life to the content of teaching.
- After the teacher has delivered the content of the lesson students are expected to discuss the topic in groups. (Bounyasone, et al, 2006, p.9)

Furthermore, “the understanding of the five points, or the principles behind them remains superficial among much of the education establishment as well as among teachers” as noted in a report commissioned by the MOE to a donor-financed project (MOE, 2004, p. 1).

Our ambitions were to move the new pedagogy beyond the present hybrid application. We wanted to create a situation where female and ethnic minority students were given more opportunities to participate in the lessons. We hoped to make space for the students’ voices to be heard. We also strived to broaden and anchor their knowledge beyond the stipulated curricula by integrating informal learning with the formal classroom learning as a way towards empowerment.
We built our understanding of participation and empowerment on the idea that participation and empowerment authorise the self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-strength of individuals, groups, and communities and that this authorisation makes the participants able to act and reflect critically in dialogue with diversified perspectives. Empowerment is a collective activity and empowering learning situations encourage participants to move beyond the taken for granted.

We realised during our field studies in 2006 that our ambitions were dependent on how power operated in the ordinary Lao classrooms even under the new policy. Therefore, we have summarised our view on the power situation that we wanted to change, in the following narrative:

Many classroom situations are characterised by a double agenda, where the teacher has a hegemonic power over the situation when it comes to curriculum content, mainly exercised through the constant reference to the textbook and its stipulations. The textbook content is often read or summarised to the students by the teacher without any discussion, but rather as a factual transfer from the textbook to the students’ notebooks. When communication is taking place it is often a matter of one-way communication between the teacher’s questions and answers from male majority students. On the other hand, teachers are expected to use the new pedagogy of student-centred education through dialogue with all students and to create opportunities for the students to find information and facts and to transform these into knowledge. However, such situations are often turned into a laissez-faire event when students are left to themselves to discuss issues from the lesson with minimal guidance from the teachers and under the direction of male majority students. As long as the power of the examination, based on textbook content, is the overwhelming rule, the new pedagogy of student-centred education can be seen as an obstacle to the fulfillment of the traditional curriculum content. Since the knowledge that might be developed from the new pedagogy of student-centred education, is seldom or never, included in the examination, the official measurement of ‘knowledge production’ through learning outcomes.
Empowerment could mean that this situation is changed along the following ideas. The power of the curriculum as expressed through the textbooks, the teacher’s mediation of textbook content, and examinations could be challenged by the inclusion of knowledge from alternative sources and experience-based learning from outside and inside the classroom. The power position of the male majority students could be challenged by the way the teacher organises lesson preparations and group activities. These challenges were introduced with an aim to empower the weak and marginalised.

The contextual studies were carried out collectively while other activities like observations and video-recordings of teaching activities were either carried out individually or in pairs.

**Broad contextual situation**

The Central Institution is situated at the outskirts of Vientiane. It had a total of 209 employees at the beginning of our inquiries in 2005. The education staff is divided into five departments corresponding to different professional areas. The main objective of these departments is to train upper secondary teachers and teacher educators at bachelor level for the colleges of education, which are responsible for the training of primary and junior secondary teachers.

The students in the classes that we taught during the reported action research inquiries had entered the institution through three available tracks. These are examination, quota, and nayobay. Examination means that applicants sit for an entry examination arranged by the institution and the examination result decides whether applicants can enter the studies or not. The quota system is an affirmative action system that gives priorities to applicants from different provinces in the country. The quota system gives priority to students with good study records; and students with what is acknowledged as valuable backgrounds, i.e. untrained teachers and students from different ethnic backgrounds with low access to higher education. The MOE decides the number of quota places from each province. The third track, nayobay, can also be seen as an affirmative action system, but with some limitations. It is also comparable to the informal social aspects of politics in other third world countries, where formal merits are not the sole reason for advancement in the society. Nayobay is also related to the view of an individual as a collective being as
opposed to the individualistic western view. Nayobay is an informal system, even though the literal meaning of the concept is ‘policy’, which can give a second opportunity for students to enter a course or programme if they have not managed to get a place through examination or quota. Nayobay builds on experiences like relatives participation in the liberation struggle for Pathet Lao or the social capital generated by relatives’ position in the administration or the communist party. However, the nayobay system is also open for other interpretations as government officials who are approached by poor farmer’s families can apply nayobay based on the families’ social situation.

The entry into higher education for the students involved in our action research inquiries is summarised below:

Table 3. Students’ entrance to the courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examinations</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quota</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nayobay</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures show that the majority of students entered the courses through examination results, while close to every fourth student entered through the quota system, and a small minority through nayobay.

The unbalanced gender representation amongst the students involved in our action research inquiries is also shown in Table 3. The
percentage of female students in our groups (14%) was much lower than the average (around 40%) amongst all students at the institution at that time (FOE, 2004).

Ethnicity and the attached aspects of languages and culture are complex issues, which have attracted international interests and concerns in Lao PDR. An UNESCO document from 2005 focusing on the language issues concludes that it is only around half of the population in Lao PDR that is taught in their mother tongue as public education is carried out through the media of Lao, the official language (Kosonen, 2005:2). The document also states that local languages are not used in education, even though local languages are widely used orally in areas with ethnic minorities. It is also estimated that there are 82 languages spoken in Lao PDR, according to UNESCO. Pholsena (2006) gives an example of the complexity of ethnicity in Lao PDR by referring to the national census carried out during 1999-2000 by the Lao Front of National Construction (LFNC). In 1985 the government approved that there were 47 ethnic groups and the 1999-2000 census agreed on 49 groups distributed between four ethno-linguistic categories, named Lao-Tai, Hmong-Mien, Sino-Tibetan, and Mon-Khmer. These categories are seldom used in daily talk where instead the three categories of ‘Lao Lum’ (lowland Lao), ‘Lao Theung’ (Lao on the mountain slopes), and ‘Lao Sung’ (Lao on the top of the mountains) are more common, even though officially forbidden by the present government as they were introduced by the RLG and followed the categorisation introduced by the French colonial administration. Our own reference to ethnicity is reduced to a majority and minority representation, because of this complex situation, even though our reduction gives a false impression. The false impression is based on the notion that, if taken together, the minority groups add up close to half of the population. In spite of this false impression, a majority and minority representation makes sense for us if paralleled with the categories of ‘powerful’ and ‘powerless’ social groups and therefore relevant to our action research inquiry.

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22 See for example Benson (2003), Fox (2003), Kosonen (2005:2) and Pholsena (2006).
The groups of students that participated in our inquiries were a mixture of majority and minority students or to use the daily language in Lao PDR a mixture of the social majority group (Lao-Tai) with the minority groups (Hmong-Mien, Sino-Tibetan, Mon-Khmer). All groups had a majority of Lao-Thai students.

It should also be noted that all groups/classes of students entering the same programme have a mentor teacher who has the role to assist students will problems like absenteeism and unaccepted behaviour. Each class selects three student representatives, called president, first vice-president, and second vice-president. These representatives have different duties such as contact with the mentor teacher, responsibility for extra curricula activities related to subject areas, news boards, sports activities, and labour tasks at the institutions. Furthermore, the class is also divided into smaller units of 5-7 students. These units function more or less as support during homework and other studies outside the ordinary lesson time.

We present our inquiries as four series of action research inquiries.

**Series of action research inquiries**

Under these conditions we wanted to develop our teaching situation through a series of action research inquiries towards a more gender and ethnicity sensitive student-centred education with an underlying ambition of participation and empowerment.

**First series of action research**

The first series was carried out with a group of third year biology students composed by 19 male students and six female students. Most of the male students (16) were majority students and only three were minority students. Five female students were majority students and one was a minority student.

*Activity 1: Investigating participation and empowerment in relation to groups with similar backgrounds (lesson content: group work on transfer of genetic characters. 2 hours, 20 March, 2006).*

The class was divided into 5 groups. The groups were composed by students who belonged to the same ethnic groups as a way to investigate the category of sameness within the groups and how that affected participation and empowerment.
A question sheet was distributed to the groups who then had to collect information based on their own characteristics as a way to investigate the topic. After the group work, the teacher called on individual students to report back, but none volunteered. The teacher asked the only female minority student to report and she reported her own observations. The lesson continued with questions from the students to the teacher, who explained and tried to develop a dialogue with the students. Many of the male students brought up concrete examples that could be related to issues of inheritance, diseases in the development stage of the embryo, or environmental and cultural factors.

This was the first time for students to work in groups and many of them contributed by sharing their ideas and opinions. However, they were hesitant and less confident in reporting their findings, and more keen to ask questions to the teacher. We wanted to develop this situation further by mixing the groups.

Activity 2. Work within mixed groups according to gender and ethnicity (lesson content: group work on DNA and protein synthesis. 2 hours, 24 April, 2006).

This time the class was divided into 5 groups that were mixed according to gender and ethnicity as far as possible considering the unbalances between different categories. Four of the groups were mixed both in gender and ethnicity, while male majority students composed the fifth group. A different dimension was introduced in this session as the male group of majority students composed by former officials and untrained teachers was also split up into the different groups. The pre-understanding was that the group of male majority students and former officials was a powerful group because of the combination of their gender, ethnicity, age, and experiences. We wanted to investigate whether this pre-understanding affected participation and empowerment in the group work.

The teacher distributed instructions to the groups. When the groups had read the instructions some of the group leaders asked for clarifications from the teacher before the groups started to work on their selected tasks from the instruction.

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23 Deoxyribonucleic acid.
In the first group, one student was absent, leaving two female and two male students to carry out the work. All students had collected information from the textbook. After discussions, one female student dictated to a majority male student who wrote the information on a wall chart. The group leader, a male minority student, did not consider a suggestion from one of the female students.

The second group searched for information from the textbook and other documents. The group decided together what to include and dictated that to the reporter, while a male minority student did not participate much in this activity. A female minority student came up with a suggestion and the teacher asked for further explanations. The student hesitated and asked the male head of the group to help her. This information was then added to the presentation.

One female and one male minority student and three male majority students composed the third group. After collection and sharing of information from the textbook, a male student dictated the collected information to the male minority student, who was the one to present the wall chart. The female student copied the information on the wall chart in her own notebook and she did not respond to a question from the head of the group whether she had something to add.

The fourth group, composed by three male majority students, one male and one female minority student, collected information from the textbook and then discussed it to make it understandable. Two of the male students dictated to the male minority student, who prepared the wall chart for the presentation. There were some spelling problems and there was a discussion about this amongst the group members. At the end, a male student added some new information to the chart.

There were only three students in the fifth group because of absenteeism. The students were all majority males. They took most of the information from the textbook. At the beginning one of the students was worried about how to present their findings and moved to other groups to check with them. After that he came back and discussed with the others, and started to write on the wall chart. The group discussed and compared their findings until they were ready with the wall chart.
In most cases the untrained teachers took a leading role in the group activities even though some female and minority students also tried to contribute to the group discussions. Before the next activity we had informal talks with the group leaders to encourage them to support group members to participate and contribute in the activities.

Activity 3. Opening up for more flexible group reports (lesson content: group presentation of DNA and protein synthesis. 2 hours, 25 April, 2006)

Before this activity the teacher organised a meeting with the heads of groups to encourage female and minority students to contribute during presentations. There were four groups reporting as there was not enough time for the fifth group to report. The male minority student reported from the first group by reading the text from the wall chart. The information was not clear so another male student asked for clarifications. One female and one male student from the group as well as male students from other groups added some information from their own notebooks.

Two students presented the second group report. The male majority group leader started to report fluently and with confidence, while some of the students in the class took down notes in their notebooks. A female minority student continued the presentation and after that the head of the group finished the reporting event by a drawing on the board. A question from a male student made him explain further.

The third group had some problems with their chart and helped each other to fix it on the board, while the head of the group started to explain in a fluent way. Most students were attentive and some even took down notes. Another male student continued the reporting and later a female minority student had been persuaded by the group to report the last part but she did not dare to do it and asked a male student to do it for her. The head of the group finished off the report with an example from a photograph that was appreciated by the whole class.

A female student started the presentation by the fourth group and was applauded by the class after the presentation. The head of the group continued while some of the students recorded in their notebooks and followed attentively. The presentation ended with a
female student who got some help from a male student in her presentation.

This time we experienced more activities from different students, even though the male group leaders were still very dominant during the reporting, and students listened carefully to their reports. We still believed that students, especially female and minority students, could be more active so we called the group leaders together with the class representatives to a meeting to discuss this issue. The meeting agreed that teachers and students should encourage all students to participate and share their opinions and to encourage students who have never participated in reporting to do that. It was further decided that all students should hand in individual reports at the end of the week when a topic has been introduced, work on during group work, and presented to the class.

**Activity 4. To develop group reporting into collective efforts (lesson content: group presentations of concepts of evolution. 2 hours, 29 May, 2006)**

The class was divided into the same groups and they had prepared their group work during previous lessons. We had observed that many of the groups worked well during the previous activities and that there was a possibility that both cooperation and empowerment could be further developed by using the same groups. The teacher also had talks with the group leaders before the presentations as a way to encourage all students to participate in the activities with obvious effects on the presentations.

Two male students, one majority and one minority, did the first presentation. The minority student had some problems with the presentation and read the text without looking at the class. Anyhow, when the presentation was done the class applauded the student.

In the second presentation all group members reported one part each. Some of the students had never reported before and the class applauded the female majority student who reported for the first time.

Four students carried out the third presentation. A female minority student had to consult her notes at her desk and also lost her words, but regained strength and finished her report, which was applauded
by the class. Another student brought in examples from daily life in his presentation, which also generated some further discussions and explanations.

Four students shared the last presentation. This presentation also included students who had never reported before.

Most of the students contributed actively during the reporting. It was encouraging to see and listen to students who had never reported before. This was a good start that we wanted to develop further in relation to participation and empowerment.

Second series of action research

These activities were carried out with a group of third year students specialising in Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. There were a total of 130 students including 97 male and 33 female students. Most students (72 male and 31 female) were majority students and 26 were minority students (25 male and one female). Most students came directly from secondary school, while 32 students (three female) had been working as untrained teachers.

Before the interventions started the teacher made observations of the class during two hours. These observations showed that the observed teacher did not introduce the topic to the students but started immediately with the topic of the lesson by reading from the textbook, which consisted of mostly abstract content. There was no oral communication and no questions asked between the teacher and the students. This was something that made us concerned. Therefore, we wanted to organise our intervention in a different way.

Before the intervention started the teacher met the students to discuss the issue of students’ participation in the classroom processes. The teacher encouraged especially female and minority students to contribute with their experiences and ideas.

Activity 1. Creating dialogue during lectures (lesson content: Introduction to the properties of basic management. 2 hours, 8 May, 2006)

The teacher followed the content in the textbook but elaborated the text by introducing examples and asking the students’ for more concrete examples related to each duty of a school manager following
the four steps to make a ‘school development plan’. These steps were presented in the textbook as (1) to identify problems and needs, (2) to make a plan, (3) to implement the plan, and (4) to evaluate the plan. Students were encouraged to come up with ideas based on their own experiences from school and by that we hoped that they would get a broader and more concrete understanding of what the role of a manager might be.

At most occasions students encouraged each other, but there were also occasions when the opposite happened. When one female student stood up to answer a question about the characteristics of a good school director, some of the closest male students started to laugh and gave comments to the student, which made her embarrassed and uncomfortable. The teacher told the students to stop their behaviour and the student could continue her explanation.

At the end of the lesson the teacher distributed a sheet with four general questions to the students. Two of the questions were related to school management as presented in the textbook (What does school management mean to you? and What is planning?) and two related to common social activities in the Lao society (How to make a plan for a wedding ceremony? and How to make a plan for the Lao New Year ceremony?) Each student should study these questions as a way to prepare for the group work. The inclusion of the social activities was another way to bridge between the abstract descriptions of planning in the textbook and social life in the community.

We recognised that students in general were keen to contribute with their experiences and ideas, even female and minority students. Some students who sat at the far end of the classroom were not attentive during the lesson. There were also occasions of ridicule when a female student talked, so we wanted to develop our efforts further through the use of group work as a way to make students more participatory.

*Activity 2. Group work as a way to develop content and participation (lesson content: group work on basic management. 2 hours, 15 May, 2006)*

The class was divided into twelve groups with 8 to 13 students in each. All groups were mixed according to gender, ethnicity, and former teaching experiences. The idea behind this mixture was to
encourage minority students to participate in the activities based on the idea that the group work would create more opportunities for participation. The reason to include former teachers in all groups was based on the fact that they knew the Thai language and that would enable each group to get access to the information in books on management in the Thai language that were available in the library.

The teacher walked around the groups before the group work started to help them with the tasks and to answer any questions from the groups. The teacher carried out selected observations of some groups during the group work. The observations showed that many of the students were active during the group work and also contributed to the brainstorm activities, probably an effect of the mixed nature of the tasks.

Most groups carried out open discussions and helped each other and shared ideas and agreed continuously on what to report. One group prepared their answers individually before they shared their ideas and came to a conclusion for the reporting. Before the next activity the teacher met the group leaders to encourage them to create more participation in the presentations.

Activity 3. Creating collective group presentations (lesson content: Presentation of group work on basic management. 2 hours, 22 May, 2006)

The presentations of the group work were mostly carried out by three students, both male and female and at times also including ethnic minority students and students who had never reported before. Each group reported on the technical and abstract aspects of management from the textbook as well as the social and cultural managerial experiences. When a question was raised about the reasons for working on tasks related to social activities, one student pointed to the similarities between formal administrative work and collective work in the society. At one occasion when a female minority student reported to the class other students started to laugh. The student then asked: Why do you laugh at me? and the students stopped their behaviour.

At the end of the lesson the teacher collected the students’ individual reports. These reports indicated that the mixture of formal and social assignments could have the effect that students learnt about
management in a broader sense beyond the formal understanding of management as a list of behavioural rules in the textbook.

The most encouraging moment during this session was when a student did not accept the bad and ridicule behaviour of some students. We recognised this situation as a moment of improved self-confidence and a sign of empowerment.

Third series of action research

This series was carried out with the same group of students as in the second series that is a mixture of students specialising in Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. The topic was about school management.

Activity 1. An attempt to create participation by recognising students’ experiences and to allow critical comments (lesson content: Introduction to School Management Planning, 2 hours, 29 May, 2006)

The teacher introduced the six areas of school management according to the textbook. These were academic management, student affairs, human resources management, department and building management, financial management, and school and community management. After each area presentation the students were encouraged to come up with comments or additional information from their own experiences that could be related to the area. Both students with experiences from teaching and other students came up with ideas that were examples of good or bad management according to the students. This was another example of an attempt to create participation amongst the students by recognizing their former experiences and to allow critical comments.

At the end of the lesson the teacher distributed the sheet with questions that students should work on as a preparation for the coming group work. The questions were related to How to manage and administer the office and monetary work? How to be a good and skilled manager? How to administrate and direct the personnel
organisations? How would you, as a director of school, improve teaching and learning in your school?

The teacher encouraged the students to get more information from books in the library and also by interviewing teachers and administrators at the faculty and the demonstration schools. During this activity we expanded the area of available information beyond the abstract content of the textbook by including information from the students’ own school experiences related to management. Some of that information also included critique of school management that became an important aspect of a broader basis for learning. This was confirmed by the examination where the teacher included questions beyond the textbook content that created opportunities for students to develop a broader knowledge about management.

Before next session started the teacher organised a meeting with the group leaders. This meeting was motivated by the teacher’s previous observations that some students, mostly female and minority students seldom participated in the discussions or presented the findings from the group work. The teacher instructed the group leaders to encourage at least one non-participatory student to take on the role as one of the two reporters as a way to encourage a more diverse representation amongst reporters.

Activity 2. To encourage a more diverse representation amongst reporters (lesson content: group work on school management. 2 hours, 5 June, 2006)

The group leaders brought up this issue when the group work started with the effect that the observed groups selected new reporters. The discussions within the groups became livelier than before and the

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34 There are three mass organisations in Lao PDR all linked to the party; the Labour Union, the Women’s Union and the Youth Union. These are represented in all spheres of society from villages to government institutions, including schools. Teachers and other staff are members of the different organisations. In some cases one person can be a member of all three organisation; e.g. if you are a women, under the age of 40 and employed at the university you would be a member of all three mass organisations, since the Youth Union organises people under 40, the Women’s Union, women and the Labour Union workers.
students who had been chosen as reporters became more active during the group work as an effect of their new responsibility.

The discussions were also affected positively by the fact that students had interviewed teachers and administrators that added to the information from the textbook.

We experienced more lively discussions in the groups as more students had reasons to become involved as a result of the additional information gained from interviews and the preparations for the presentations.

*Activity 3. Breakthrough to participation (lesson content: group reports on school management. 2 hours, 12 June, 2006)*

In most groups at least one student who had never done it before reported the group work. The groups focused on the managers’ role to facilitate teaching and learning. The groups also discussed the problem for managers to develop enough income for schools in urban areas. A lively discussion was created when one of the groups brought up the issue of the new curriculum. It was reported that the curriculum did not include enough information for the teachers to be able to carry out their teaching and new subject methodologies were included that was not followed by proper instructions. These curriculum problems affected the way the school activities could be managed, according to the students.

The group reporters acted with confidence at most occasions and at times the whole class became involved in sharing ideas. At the end of the lesson the teacher collected the students’ individual reports on the issues of school management.

The presentations from the groups were carried out in a participatory way including also students with less or no experiences from own presentations. These students showed an improved self-confidence and braveness in standing in front of many people. The issues of management problems and the new curriculum generated lively discussions that involved many students, even though some students were still not attentive. There was also a mixture of textbook content with information from practical examples based on own experiences and information from interviews. This was also illustrated in the individual reports from the students.
Fourth series of action research

These activities were carried out together with a mixed group of 12 students from year 2 and 11 students from year 4. Most were majority students including eight students with teaching experiences. There were only three students from minority groups including one female student.

*Activity 1. Creating participation through the use of real specimen*
*(lesson content: group work on the classification of arthropods. 2 hours, 10 January, 2008)*

The students were instructed to collect insects by themselves before the lesson. This was the first occasion for students to collect material to a lesson as that was usually considered to be the job of the teacher. We hoped that the students’ interest in and activity during the lesson would be affected positively by this new way to prepare for the activities in the class. The class was organised in five mixed groups and all students received a sheet with instructions on what to look for during the activities and how to report their findings. Students were also encouraged to report any interesting facts from their investigations that could assist them in classifying the insects. The exercise was organised so that the groups had to identify the classifications criteria themselves. Each group was given a magnifying glass to help them in their observations. Many students had never used a magnifying glass before. The groups were given 30 minutes to carry out their investigations. After that each group had to prepare their presentation. Each group selected a majority student with teaching experiences as a group leader. This was interpreted as a way to acknowledge the social and cultural capital that comes with such experiences.

During the group work most students were active and contributed with information from their observations, including female and ethnic minority students. Interestingly, it was the students from rural areas who had a lot of information about the different insects. Students had by now learnt to organise their group investigations including to find information from the library and to combine that with experience-based knowledge. Even though female students were active during the work, they often spoke with low voices and were
not as active as the male students. We think that the manipulation with real objects made a difference for this session.

**Activity 2. Specimen as a media for participation (lesson content: group reports on the classification of arthropods. 2 hours, 10 January, 2008)**

We hoped that by activating the students in the collection of material for the lessons also would have a positive effect on the reporting of the group work based on a higher motivation for learning as well as the acknowledgement of experience-based learning.

Each group had 20 minutes for the presentation. The reporting followed the ordinary procedures where the class was encouraged to ask questions after each group report. Most groups wrote the main information on the board before they started their reporting. The oral presentations were in some groups a combination of textbook information and information based on experience-based learning. Some groups also illustrated their oral presentation with examples from the insect samples shown to the class. The groups answered questions from the class after the presentations accurately.

The students were asked to hand in individual reports after the group reports had been presented. Most students followed the information in the textbook in their individual reports, while a few also integrated experience-based knowledge into the reports.

There were a few references to the real objects in the reports, but not as many as expected, as the tendency to rely on the textbook content still is strong. The reporting was influences by the fact that rural students knew more about the different objects that they studied and therefore became more involved.

**Activity 3. Physical manipulation as a way to create participation (lesson content: dissections and reports on fishes and frogs. 2 hours and 40 minutes, 25 February, 2008)**

Students were asked to bring frogs and fish before the lesson started as a way to get engaged in the activities and by that to stimulate learning. During the lesson students were instructed when the different activities started. They were instructed to start by observing and noting the external structures of the species. During the dissection students were instructed to make descriptions of the
internal organs and after the dissection they had to prepare a presentation paper and individual reports.

During the first activity all students were interested in making proper observations and to give instructions to the note keeper in each group on the external structures of the frog and the fish. When the dissections started students became even more curious to examine the internal organs and they helped each other to describe the different organs.

The presentations of the findings were heavily influenced by the texts in the textbook and very little reference was made to the actual investigations of the species, e.g. by showing how an organ looks like in reality. The groups made drawings on the board of the different internal organs, but failed to refer the drawings to the actual reality on their desks. Students were generally very interested in the presentations and questions were asked that called for further explanations also from the teacher. There were no laughs when students presented as we had experienced previously. Both minority students and female students participated fully most of the time.

A concluding remark about our own action research is that it is possible to use action research as a way to change the learning situation for groups of marginalised students, even under rather restricted and limited conditions.

**Reflection on the traverse from policy to practice**

This chapter has described our findings related to action research in Lao PDR by addressing policy and donor documents, instructional materials produced for training purposes, and reports from action research projects. We have also collected data from Lao educators involved in action research. We have focused on how they have described the introduction of action research, how they understand action research, and what possibilities and constraints they relate to action research. Furthermore, we have carried out our own action research inquiries as an attempt to challenge the power patterns in the classrooms and to get an insider view on action research.

Before we start our analysis of these findings we want to make a few comments about the findings. The policy documents published by the government of Lao PDR do not say much about action research.
IV. REFORM AS A TRAVERSE FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

Much of the information on action research is from donor documents that primarily seem to be produced for the benefits of the donors in the form of donor project evaluations. The instructional materials, placed between policy and practice, are all dealing with a specific model of action research rather than giving an overview over the many ways that action research can be used in education. The similarities in the way that constructors and re-constructors present their views about action research come as no surprise, following from the above, while our own series of action research show a somewhat different focus and idea about what action research eventually can develop.

In the following chapter we will attend to an analysis of our findings about action research as part of ‘the new pedagogy’ within a context influenced by the agendas of international donor projects. When a concept like action research is introduced and included in an attempt to develop and change the educational practices something happens to this concept and the way it is understood and practiced that is influenced both by external forces and by internal historically grounded conceptions and practices.
V. MATTERS OF REDUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION – IS THERE A LAO WAY?

This chapter concludes our present inquiries into action research in Lao PDR. Our aim and research questions related to how action research became an approach for the introduction of a new educational policy, student-centred education; what broader contextual factors influenced action research; and perceptions amongst Lao educators about the introduction of action research, their understanding of the concept, and its potentials and constraints. We looked into the education context from a historical perspective until present day by investigating different periods; the traditional, the colonial, the war, the socialist, and the neoliberal periods. The aim of this investigation was to broaden and to include the context as an important part of our research perspective of global policy studies.

In our attempts to build a theoretical foundation we started to investigate broader legacies and regimes of influences, such as the legacies of globalisation and donors operating within the EFA doctrine and student-centred education. We also looked into the broader international aspects of action research and how these could be divided into three main perspectives: Action research as a technical, practical, and critical approach. Further on, we explored educational approaches that could create a basis for a cross-cultural dialogue about a vision for the future.

A beginning of a tentative theoretical foundation started in a concern about hidden policy ensembles attached to what we call the global EFA doctrine and international legacies of action research. Our interpretation of the situation with hidden policy ensembles and globally ‘imposed’ doctrines and practices is related to the common situation when external consultants deliver their messages in technical ways, often ignoring the problems of the attached policy ensembles grounded in foreign logics and cultures. This might leave the
receivers of the messages frustrated and in a state of uncertainty. Double misunderstandings can also appear in the meeting points between the local and the global, because of a mutual lack of understanding of each other’s policy ensembles. This can happen when external consultants take for granted their own policy ensembles and lack insight into the local context. This can be the case when the benefits of formal education are taken for granted without considering the social situation and the family situation that e.g. demands the children’s labour for the survival of the family.

We were also concerned about the discourse - conception - practice processes that create mismatches between the three levels. For example, what is introduced at discursive level in policy statements and donor documents at a certain point in time might be re-interpreted and altered on the conceptual level, because of influences from previous discourses, conceptions, and practices. These might then end up in new practices that do not follow the intended ideas or simply resemble past practices as policy backlashes.

We also had a forward looking perspective in our theoretical foundation. It was intended as a basis for a relation between ‘good examples’ in our data with a critical pedagogy of place that combined a concern about re-inhabitation and decolonisation developed through a cross-cultural dialogue and ‘good examples’ from elsewhere. This part of our theoretical foundation followed a logic that was different from the hidden policy ensembles and the policy backlashes. The previous was flexible and organic in the sense that it was open for alternatives that together could impact Lao education practices, while the latter were either technically or backward oriented.

Our theoretical foundation places the reform arena of action research in a system of coordinates with time at the x-axis and space at the y-axis model (see chapter II, Figure 1). This made it possible to illustrate the complexities of the forces influencing the reform arena for action research. The hidden policy ensembles operated from outside, while policy backlashes operated from the past, and the combined forces of a critical pedagogy of place through a cross-cultural dialogue operated from inside towards the future with selective influences from the outside past. With this summative
description of the intention with our research perspective we are prepared to present our analysis. We will do that by combining the data from our findings with the hidden policy ensembles and the policy backlashes. After that we will make an attempt to combine a critical pedagogy of place with a cross-cultural dialogue as a way to draw up some visionary aspects for the future, within a Gramscian framework of ‘good sense’.

Hidden policy ensembles

When hidden policy ensembles from outside hit the ground in countries like Lao PDR, they do it by only showing parts of their surfaces, because hidden policy ensembles have their deep basis somewhere else and in our case that is the western and globalised culture and its individualistic perspective. When Lao educators are expected to act based on surface knowledge, they can only rely on the technical rationality that this surface offers, because that is what remains of the policy ensembles on the reform arena.

The reform arena for action research was pressurised by the hidden policy ensembles from outside. The first sign of this pressure was observed in relation to policy and instructional documents, whether officially labelled as government or donor documents. Most of the documents that we found were produced within donor projects or by consultants operating on behalf of donor organisations. Furthermore, most of the documents, even instructional documents written in English, a language with a very narrow functional literacy sphere in Lao PDR, are written in a style that is more suited for the globalised donors than Lao educators in the local context.

Stephens (2007) raised questions concerning the transfer of an educational approach like action research. Action research is according to him anchored in western ideas about individualism, democratic involvement by practitioners, and change. This is then introduced into a culture that Stephens characterises as obedient, hierarchical, and centralistic, and the whole process can be related to hidden policy ensembles. This dichotomy between western ideas and Lao culture can create problems if confronted, but survives in the dynamics of social life when the external ‘intrusion’ is reduced to technical rationalities as shown by our data, and confirmed by the
examples from Namibia, Botswana, and Mongolia. However, it is also possible to look at action research as something beyond the common western paradigm, if referred to the type of critical action research developed in Brazil and Australia based on for example Freirian conceptions of emancipation that Diniz-Pereira, Kemmis and others refer to (see chapter II).

The issue of technical rationalities is central to the hidden policy ensembles that enter Lao PDR. There are at least two sides of technical rationalities that we want to address here. Today, when the field of education is influenced by neoliberal marketisation, we also see the global importance and consequence of the central concepts of quality, transparency, and accountability and their definitions as measurable entities in the EFA-doctrine. Furthermore, a specific type of surveillance follows with the EFA-doctrine (see chapter II). This surveillance acts as a global machinery of control and must therefore by its very nature follow a technical rationality. This puts its mark on the national context for action research in Lao PDR through management and control. As a consequence, it becomes taken for granted to use a rigid view on action research that for example forces educators to strictly follow a predesigned and ‘true’ model of action research. An expression of this can be found in the constructors’ narratives where they talk about action research as the cycle including reconnaissance, action plan, acting and observation, reflection and re-planning. Furthermore, constructors explained that if a member of the team found mistakes in the cycle, the action research had to be repeated. The action research handbooks that we have analysed show how this works through the application of hypothesis, control, and the search for truth, lists of descriptive behavioural rules, and the instructions for how an action research report should be written. This creates further simplifications of the action research process.

The other side of technical rationalities is related to the way action research was introduced in Lao PDR through the so called cascade model and the type of instructional material that was developed. The cascade model fits well when you reduce educational development into technical rationalities, because of donor demands. Then the deeper understandings are left behind and by that reduce what can be dynamic educational approaches like action research into techniques and ways of behaving. This became particularly obvious in
connection with our analysis of reports from action research projects. These reports were more or less repetitions of taken for granted aspects of student-centred education like the problem with uncooperative students during group work. A commissioned research study of school clusters in Lao PDR is saying in its recommendation concerning the training of staff involved in the cluster school system that “The cascade model of training currently used should be reviewed in terms of its effectiveness” (Teacher Training Department, 2004, p. xiii)

An alternative view might be that Lao PDR has through the NEM already accepted the global neoliberal capitalist system to develop within a socialist political framework and by that also the individualistic culture that comes with it. However, our interpretation is that it was not the attraction of the neoliberal system that created the NEM, but the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the consequences this had on foreign support to Lao PDR. The country was left with only one option; namely to open the door for western donors and their financial support. With that came also the global neoliberal system and its hidden policy ensembles, even though some kind of implicit opposition could be identified through policy backlashes.

Policy backlashes

The hidden policy ensembles operate on a more systemic level, while policy backlashes appear mainly on practical levels, as the theoretical reasoning behind these concepts are developed respectively by Ball (2006) and Asplund (1979).

In a way, policy backlashes can be seen as a common humanistic behaviour based on the notion that humans often feel safe and comfortable in situations that are well known to them. These situations are sometimes called ‘comfort zones’ and might work against the willingness to develop new thinking and new practices (Akhlaq, 2008).

In our data we have found policy backlashes that officially are explained by a lack of practical experiences and lack of training to carry out action research. Our data does show that action research has been disseminated through training sessions and seminars. There is
however reason to believe that these sessions have been too few and organised through the 'cascade model' where much of the basis for understanding risks getting lost on the way. Our finding also point out that re-constructors who actually are expected to carry out action research instead are operating as constructors and become the controllers of ‘critical friends’, while they themselves remain in a managerial role. The actual action research in the practical classroom situation therefore risks being turned into a control station instead of a transformation process where educational change is in focus.

There is also a reference to old practices of classroom observation which is well known in the Lao education context. Our data shows that respondent have a tendency to talk about action research as a synonym to the already existing observation practices. This means that action research is turned into a practice where observations are made and reported to higher levels in the system, thus deferring the focus on change in the classroom by the teachers. This is an interesting reference that obviously has not been taken into account when action research was introduced, but can still be seen as a kind of policy backlash if it operates as a reconstruction of action research.

Another policy backlash is related to the connections made between action research and student-centred education. In principle, action research is seen as a way to implement student-centred education. This has a tendency to narrow action research to the teaching and learning process. The problems to solve are then narrowed down to the students, as most action research reports deal with students who do not behave in expected ways. This stepwise narrowing down of ‘problems’ to the individual level can both be seen as an emphasis on individualism, and a way to avoid inquiries that include contextual factors in the development of society as well as managerial factors. Such a policy backlash can as many others, be explained by perceptions and practices grounded in previous periods of development in Lao PDR that we referred to in chapter I.

In our preparations for our own action research we have referred to the common hybrid version of student-centred education in Lao PDR, which is another sign of a policy backlash. In this hybrid version, student-centred education continues to be textbook and teacher-centred focusing on hypotheses presented in the textbooks
rather than the life experiences of the students. Indirectly, this can change the focus of action research that might end up in an ‘improved’ teacher-centred education.

Furthermore, the double agenda, that we referred to as a way of describing the power situation in Lao classrooms, deals with the new pedagogy of student-centred education and the strong examination system, focusing on textbook content and an examination system structured according to this. In these situations action research as a way to strengthen student-centred education can be seen as an obstacle not only to the fulfilment of the curriculum content but also to the examination system and therefore dismissed because of the time it takes to carry out action research or that action research hinders teachers to go through the whole content of the curriculum.

To avoid this policy backlash there is a need to change the examination system so that both action research and student-centred education can operate fully in a stronger focus on educative knowledge, if that is what people in power want to happen.

**On a reflective note**

As a final reflection on the role of hidden policy ensembles and policy backlashes, before we move to a discussion about the possibilities for action research in the future, we want to say a few words about reductions and reconstructions. In spite of what are good intentions by donors and their technical advisors, it often happens that implementation processes of donor projects become either reductions to technical rationalities or reconstructions that resemble the practices that at first were the official target for change. This is a dilemma especially for the donors, but comes as no surprise for us when donor driven reforms, like action research in Lao PDR, are introduced and carried out in a way that is economically, professionally, and mentally a top-down process for the receivers.

In our study of educational reform in Lao PDR we have found that an educational approach like action research, that is introduced as part of a taken for granted global agenda of change, is reduced to a technical rationality and practices that resemble previous experiences. Our findings are explained from the theoretical perspectives of hidden policy ensembles and policy backlashes. Hidden policy
ensembles reduce action research into a technical rationality due to their alien cultural and social connections that are not brought into the open at the reform arena. Policy backlashes become a way for practitioners to create meaning based on previous contextual practices, conceptions, and discourses as a consequence of the technical rationality created by the hidden policy ensembles and the use of the cascade model. Our concluding interpretation is that the basic ideas underlying the reform process are diluted. Therefore the reform process becomes difficult to understand locally. An example of this is how hidden policy ensembles turn action research into a technical rationality. Action research is then disseminated through the cascade model, and gives rise to policy backlashes among re-constructors, i.e. practitioners of action research, when they attempt to create meaning out of action research.

However, the positive traits that action research has left in the educational system in Lao PDR are appreciated and should be taken advantage of in future development. For example, this applies to what re-constructors said about how action research has broadened their views on educational activities and new attitudes towards students, created an awareness of that social backgrounds influence students’ performance, and that the teacher’s role is also to nurture the students’ wellbeing.

Educational action research is an approach that can have many faces. Therefore, we will elaborate the beginning of a vision for the future that hopefully will be further developed and eventually carried out on Lao grounds.

**Is a future vision of an action research approach possible in Lao PDR?**

This last part of our thesis will combine data from our inquiries with a critical pedagogy of place and use a cross-cultural dialogue to establish ‘good examples’ that together can become a starting point for a future vision turned into practice. The concept of ‘good examples’ follows the notion by Gramsci (1971) on ‘good sense’ elaborated by Dahlström (2002) with reference to a teacher education reform in a country in a similar situation as Lao PDR. Gramsci’s concept ‘good sense’ was developed within a context of a
class society, where he made a difference between common sense and good sense. According to Gramsci, the interests of the ruling classes are transformed to common sense in a process where these interests become taken for granted and considered as legitimate also by the working class, against their own interests. A counterforce is possible to develop within the working class that creates a 'good sense', i.e. a sense based on the working class interests. If we move this reasoning into our present elaboration we can say that the externally driven interests to include the Lao society into the global doctrines emanating from the west is part of what has become common sense in Lao PDR. A good sense could then be developed from a locally generated reasoning of re-habitation and decolonisation together with a cross-cultural dialogue, if looked at from a Gramscian perspective.

Such a good sense will include examples from our own data and the present situation in Lao PDR, ideas of connectedness, mindfulness and impermanence from action research influenced by Buddhist thinking, pedagogical ideas from Freinet such as the Working Library and meaningful production, and from the Shatskii model of an integrated schooling including the 'complex method'.

With this approach we also want to demonstrate and develop an action research approach that moves beyond the college and school classrooms. In this way, action research can get new meaning for education in Lao PDR as it will expand its focus beyond what it is often portrayed to be; namely a way to improve teaching and learning through student-centred education understood as group learning and individual learning, according to Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh (2011).

We will start by looking at what was accomplished in our own series of action research as a way to forward participation and empowerment. After that we will return to the approaches we identified through a cross-cultural dialogue and from critical pedagogy of place before we make an outline for a future action research network.

Challenging curriculum and classroom power

Our series of action research inquiries was an attempt to create participation and empowerment amongst female and minority
students and to do that we had to challenge the power that was resting with the teacher, the textbook, and male majority students in ‘the old pedagogy’. Our view of ‘the new pedagogy’ (student-centred education) was influenced by its common methodological reduction to the technical rationality of the five-pointed star, but we also wanted to move beyond that understanding. To be able to analyse our practices we constructed a power continuum that at one end represented a hegemonic and at the other a shared power. We looked at power as relational and operating both socially and intellectually in the educational processes. The power was played out through the two fields of ‘Space and visibility’ and ‘Information and truth’.

‘Space and visibility’ was defined as the field for different actors in the classroom to use the social and intellectual space available to make themselves, as members of the classroom collective, and their voices visible. This could be done through the sharing of experiences, ideas, and intellectual reasoning in the educational processes. According to ‘the old pedagogy’ and our own previous experiences this field was to a large extent occupied by the teacher and male majority students. Our attempts were to open up this field also to female and minority students.

‘Information and truth’ was defined as the field where information could be transformed to individual and collective knowledge and where information operated as hegemonic truth or shared reasoning. The tradition in ‘the old pedagogy’ was that information and truth rested with the teacher and the textbook as an undisputable and hegemonic truth. Our attempt was to open up this field for experience-based and shared reasoning for all students and by that challenge the hegemonic truth. Figure 2 below, shows a schematic outline of the power continuum and the fields we used for our analysis.
We will now place our findings in the framework created by the analytic fields to be able to assess our practices along the power continuum.

**Space and visibility**

The common understanding amongst students and teachers, at the time when we started our action research inquiries, was that this field belonged to the teacher and male majority students. Therefore, we had to introduce measures that opened up this field also to female and minority students. This was attempted through three types of activities. Firstly, the teacher encouraged students to come up with ideas in connection with the introduction of a topic. During these occasions the teachers opened up for students to contribute with comments, mainly based on their own experiences. Many students were hesitant from the beginning, especially minority students who had experiences of frustrations and embarrassments in the classroom because of ridicule behaviour from majority male students. These situations were related to oral expressions and Lao dialects because of different mother tongues. These situations changed as minority students became more willing and confident to contribute especially during the second and third series of action research inquiries. A female student even challenged behaviour of ridicule at one occasion towards the end of the second series of action research. Secondly, different measures were taken by the teachers to create space and visibility amongst female and ethnic minority students during group work. Group constellations and preparatory tasks were modified for that reason and we found that female and ethnic minority students became more active and visible during group work processes;
especially when groups were organised homogenously (only female or ethnic minority students) and when they were given strategic responsibilities, like being reporters. Thirdly, the reporting of group work was modified. The tradition was that the group leaders, usually male majority students, were the ones who reported the findings from the group work to the class. We encouraged students to report their group findings collectively by including more than one reporter and we also encouraged the groups through the group leaders to select inexperienced female and ethnic minority students to participate in the reporting.

All these efforts changed the social patterns during class work in favour of a more even representation of gender and ethnicity in the field of space and visibility, even though we still experienced some hesitations amongst female students to participate fully in the processes. One of our reflections was that the traditional culture of subservience amongst female and minority students is still prevailing in the Lao education system, while our action research inquiries showed a possibility to change this subservience towards a more shared utilisation of space and visibility.

**Information and truth**

The old pedagogy rests on a tradition of transferring information from textbooks, mediated by the teacher, copied by the students, and eventually memorised for the examination. This tradition is to a large extent still prevailing under the new pedagogy that we have characterised as a 'hybrid version of student-centred education'. In our action research inquiries we wanted to move our practices beyond this hybrid version by broadening the basis for the students’ learning and to allow other sources to influence the field of information as a way to challenge the hegemonic truth of the teacher and the textbook. Therefore, students were encouraged to bring in their own experiences, to collect information from alternative sources like reference books and interviews, and to collect the specimen like insects for investigations. Concrete investigations for example through the dissection of fishes and frogs were other ways to broaden the basis for information during biology classes. Further on, students’ critical comments to their previous schooling became alternative sources of information on school management issues that contributed
to a broader understanding through the integration of informal experienced-based learning with the formal textbook learning.

By challenging the hegemonic power of the teacher and the textbook we hoped that students would develop a broader understanding of the issues brought up during the action research inquiries, even though we also realised that to create a sustainable and broad knowledge base amongst students we also have to look into the present examination system as a way to develop more flexible measures to assess and validate learning.

*Lessons learnt from our own action research*

Our own action research inquiries were carried out as an integrated part of our studies and was an attempt to broaden our understanding of possibilities and constraints related to the introduction of action research as part of ‘the new pedagogy’ in Lao PDR. We carried out four series of action research inquiries. Each series contained three or four sessions of around 2 hours each, adding up to roughly 26 hours of classroom activities. Two of the series were carried out as continued activities during a period around two weeks each and together with the same group of students, while the other two series were more unevenly distributed over a period of more than one or two months and with two different groups of students. Additional time was also spent in classroom observations, lesson preparations, and meetings with selected students.

Our overall assessment of the action research inquiries is that it is possible to change the social patterns of power distribution in the classrooms, even under our rather limited conditions and time frames.

We still believe that more fundamental changes are only possible when more continuous efforts are carried out within a modified educational context that includes a broader view on how learning is developed and changes in the way that students’ learning are assessed and examined.
Lessons learnt from cross-cultural dialogue and critical pedagogy of place

In our outline of a theoretical foundation in chapter II we included two concepts that are central to our suggestion of a future national network. These are cross-cultural dialogue and critical pedagogy of place.

The lessons learnt from the cross-cultural dialogue are that Buddhist ideas are possible to integrate with action research. The aspects that we want to include are mindfulness, impermanence, and connectedness. Mindfulness can be related to the pre-studies that are needed in a future action research network, connectedness has its significance in relation to the way education can be related to community, and impermanence can be related to the changes that take place in society that education must relate to.

Furthermore, the Freinet pedagogy has taught us that learning is enhanced when it is socially related and has a communicative meaning. Shatskii’s complex method demonstrates that school learning has a broader aim beyond the classroom and the examination as a way to understand the outside world. Therefore, education becomes more functional when carried out as integrated social activities.

The lessons learnt from critical pedagogy of place that combines a re-inhabitation and decolonisation are related to the re-introduction of local knowledge and skills that often are left behind when modernisation arrives. It also recognises the role of local knowledge and skills in modern schooling as part of a decolonisation process.

An outline of a Critical and Educative Action Research Network in Lao PDR

As an outcome of our research we would like to suggest a network to be developed, informed by the pedagogical aspects presented in this thesis. The network could use action research in an alternative way to what has been practiced so far in Lao PDR. The critical part of this network is related to the concept critical pedagogy of place as a way to forward an educative action research network that recognises decolonisation and re-inhabitation. It will also be educative, meaning it will have an integrated ambition to make students more
knowledgeable and skilful. We will start by describing the organisational structure.

**Reversing the flow**

There are presently many attempts in Lao PDR to create a decentralised system of education by handing over responsibilities to regional, district, and village levels. These attempts are applauded by the international donor community. For example, there is a possibility in the curriculum for primary and junior secondary education to localise the national curriculum up to 20% as a way to develop community participation in education, according to the education vision (Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2000).

In addition, an elaborated system of schools clusters has been introduced with a varying number of schools in each cluster. The idea behind school clusters is to encourage local cooperation and at the same time increase the efficiency of the national distribution system from the centre (Teacher Training Department, 2004). Furthermore, there are educational Resource Centres and even Community Learning Centres available all over the country that could be utilized also for the present purposes. There are also approximately fifteen PAs available at each of the eighteen Provincial Centres, who work as subject specialists at junior secondary level. There are also PAs at district level who are responsible for support in primary education. However, many of the functions of PAs are today carried out as inspectorial services by checking on the accuracy of teachers’ behaviour. These functions would be turned into more educative and developmental activities within the suggested network. Add to this a tradition of Friday meetings and an introduction of action research at college level and we get a number of infrastructural and pedagogical ingredients that can be used for more progressive purposes.

Our idea is to reverse the flow from the top to the bottom and create a network that by its very function starts from the local and expands to the national. We want to start from what is in place today and develop it into a national system through an educative action research network with strong collective, sharing, and productive characteristics. This network will have a focus on the local and
expand that as an answer to the lack of contextually relevant educational material and textbooks in Lao PDR.

The network
The nodes in this network are the schools in each cluster, the provincial teacher education colleges, and a national education production unit. A selected number of teachers from each cluster representing the schools in the cluster, a group of teacher educators at each college, and educators at a centrally placed education production unit have the function as network facilitators together with PAs who will become the professional lines through which the network is connected. The facilitators and PAs will be introduced to the operations of the network through hands on workshops at cluster, regional, and national levels as a way to become acquainted with the way the network will operate.

The main objective of the network is to develop educational material, mainly in written and pictorial forms at cluster, regional, and national levels with a more advanced production technique at each level coupled to critical and educative action research at cluster and college levels, while the national level will focus on nationally produced educational material drawn from samples that are locally produced.

The critical and educative action research process at district and provincial levels
The critical and educative action research process at the local level is the core activity of the network. Each action research process starts in a topic from the syllabus. This topic is theoretically analysed by the group of cluster facilitators to find out how the content of the topic can be related to local artefacts, natural objects, or social aspects and practices in the community.

The next step is to investigate the students’ relationship to the topic. This investigation is carried out through an open dialogue where the students’ pre-understanding of the topic is analysed and brought forward as one of the foundations for the action research process.

The combined pre-understanding of the students and the theoretical analysis of the facilitators are used as the starting point for the
production of written or pictorial learning material for the students. This production should as far as possible a joint effort by the facilitators and students to collect information from the community and the physical surroundings.

The facilitators meet again to combine the information they have collected into learning material for the students. The use of the material is planned and then integrated with the teaching and learning process together with the students.

The final stage is an evaluation of the critical and educative action research process. This evaluation is carried out through a dialogue with the students to find out what they have learnt from the process. The cluster facilitators meet again and combine their evaluations into a collective text that is accompanying the learning material when it is handed over to the PA.

The PA hands over the material to the provincial teacher education college. A group of college facilitators take care of the material that comes from different clusters and use it as part of teacher education as a way to encourage critical and educative action research processes amongst student teachers.

The last step in the network is that all material produced at cluster and college levels are collected nationally at an educational production unit. This production unit is selecting material that can be included in textbooks or other educational material for later distribution back to schools and colleges in the country.

This outline of a critical and educative action research network in Lao PDR is an idea that needs further development and also financial support before it can be realised as a counter-hegemonic force following the ideas of re-inhabitation and decolonisation of a critical pedagogy of place.

A reflection before the future starts

As a final reflection, we want to say some words about the intellectual journey that we have made in our efforts to write this thesis. We are really pleased that our research has revealed some important findings related to the national education policy. Firstly, it is quite clear that much national policy is heavily influenced by and interwoven with
western donor policies, especially in the fields of action research and student-centred education. Secondly, we have come to understand that both action research and student-centred education are in fact not national policy constructs but rather global policies operating well outside the Lao context. In this sense we have come to understand action research and student-centred education as part of ‘hidden policy ensembles’. In Lao PDR these have commonly been understood as Lao policies but in fact they are international with many hidden legacies. Thirdly, we have also found other influences which relate to the historical education context. Here education practices with long traditions produce policy backlashes, with the effect that changes in education practice is difficult to reach, especially when the changes are donor driven. Neither action research nor student-centred education has consequently made much difference to education in Lao PDR presently.

There still remains much research to be done on the topic of Lao education. These past six years have made it possible for us to work with a large empirical study which has given rise to even more questions that remain to be researched. Among these, we would like to continue investigating how the quality and relevance of Lao education can be developed in a direction that mirrors the life experiences and realities of learners. Here, continued knowledge building on the situation of ethnic minority learners is one important field of inquiry. Another question which interests us is the potentials of cluster schools.

On a more general research level, we are very interested in continuing to develop research practices. Therefore, we see the development of both methodological and theoretical skills as one important task for future research in the Lao context. This is something that we hope to be able to pursue in collaboration with our colleagues in higher education in Lao PDR.

Epilogue

We have a saying in Lao: ‘Cho vaiphiang neekon, gnangmee lay banha cha vaou nai theuana’. It means that we will stop now, but there will be many issues still to discuss in the future.
We started this thesis by asking if action research was going to keep its promise to create something from within or if it was going to burn like a rice stem and then disappear? Provided our findings and suggestions are taken seriously we hope that action research will become something that will grow everywhere and be adapted to the specific context where it is taking root in the same way as the many types of rice that grow in Lao PDR.
SUMMARY IN LAO LANGUAGE

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SUMMARY IN LAO LANGUAGE

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เช่นบัง พวกตัวอย่างต่างๆ จึงเป็นปัญหาแม้ พวกที่ต้องการ เคลียร์
และรายงาน ที่เป็นปัญหาในหลายๆสาขากฎหมาย. ใครๆก็ถูก คู่
ที่ยังอ้อมท่าที่มีสองกลุ่มพวกวิจัยวิเคราะห์ที่จะมีส่วนร่วมเช่นเป็น
บุค ทายนำเสนอทบทวน - ทบทวนไปก่อน แนะนำวิจัยด้วย
ทบทวนทั้งหมด และย้ำทบทวน สะดวกที่สุดจุด. เหตุนี้มัน. จึงไม่ลึกซึ้่ง
ทุกข์เยี่ยมสุขจุดมวย สวย ทบทวนขั้นอีก.

• ยุ่ใหญ่แนะวิจัยด้วย สวย ลัพธ์เชื้อและผู้ติดต่อกัน
ให้เจาะจงوجهใจ ที่ทบทวนด้วย ยุ่ใหญ่รวมทั้งบุคกิจ
ทุกข์เยี่ยม?และยุ่ใหญ่แนะวิจัยด้วยการบริการและรู
ลักข์อน ผู้ติดต่อกับวิเคราะห์ได้สะดวกหรือไม่?

• มีทบทวนทั้งหมดมีกิจการรู้ว่ามีที่ทำเป็น
ทบวิเคราะห์ทุกข์เยี่ยมเช่น ผู้ติดต่อกับทบทวน?

• มีทบทวนทั้งหมด มีกิจการเชื้อใจว่า ทบวิเคราะห์ทุกข์
ทุกข์เยี่ยมมีแน่นอนขั้นตอน่ะได้หรือไม่?

• ลงมติสำคัญจากในทบวิเคราะห์และเข้าถึงรู้
ที่ทำเป็นทบวิเคราะห์ทุกข์เยี่ยมมีแน่นอนมีไม่?

• ยุ่ใหญ่ทศุปะที่เหล่าขั้นการที่ลับกิจการที่ผูก
ทบวิเคราะห์เรียกในทบวิเคราะห์กับทบวิเคราะห์?

• บางทีนี้,anyakขั้นเพื่อเจ้าเครื่องเล่มบางขั้นเพื่อถึงที่พวก
ยากถือที่จะเป็นไปโดยกลุ่มทบทวนที่จะทบวิเคราะห์ทบวิเคราะห์ทุกข์
ทุกข์เยี่ยมเช่นเป็นไม่ในทีวิเคราะห์ทบทวนที่

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ยกตัวอย่างคือ เศรษฐกิจ เศรษฐกิจแบบหัวข้อย่อย ในประเทศลาว ตลอดทั้ง 20 ปีที่ผ่านมา ยิ่งเผยแผ่มาโดยทวารุณและรู้ได้ไหม เศรษฐกิจของทรัพยากรที่มีอยู่ที่พื้นที่และทรัพยากรที่มีอยู่ในประเทศลาวทำให้เกิดการพัฒนาทรัพยากรที่มีอยู่ หรือการพัฒนาทรัพยากรที่มีอยู่

การศึกษาเป็นการสร้างและพัฒนาทรัพยากรทรัพยากรทั้งปวงทั่วไป ทั้งที่เป็นอยู่ในปัจจุบัน: ทุบทวารุณทรัพยากรที่มีอยู่ในปัจจุบัน แต่ทั้งนี้ต้องมีการทบทวน และพัฒนาตามบูรณาการทั้งหน้าของความรู้

(hegemonic and encounter hegemonic)
(one size fits all); vezajhāp bōi - visi moi preventative - thaam phathak - dōn hōi dēy bām, ʔhōo allow, dēn hōi (discourses change quickly and continuously, conceptions are firm and difficult to change, while practices are solid and almost constant); phāsāh for phāmān: ðuam bōi yahā bām báñ jōo hōi (hidden policy ensembles), phāy bōi phām lām (policy backlash), phō seqhāh lōh jīm lān dzhīm yám bām phō kēng bōi (critical pedagogy of place).

San phām kēn dzhīm lām bōi dzhīm lām phō kēng bōi (discourses change quickly and continuously, conceptions are firm and difficult to change, while practices are solid and almost constant); phāsāh for phāmān: ðuam bōi yahā bām báñ jōo hōi (hidden policy ensembles), phāy bōi phām lām (policy backlash), phō seqhāh lōh jīm lām bōi dzhīm lām (critical pedagogy of place).
CULTIVATING EDUCATIONAL ACTION RESEARCH IN LAO PDR

"วิสาหกิจการปฏิบัติการทางการศึกษา เอกสารเรียนรู้เพื่อการสร้างสรรค์และพัฒนารูปแบบการศึกษา เพื่อให้สามารถ ดูด吸取教训 และทบทวนหลักการ สามารถ ดูด吸取教训 และทบทวนหลักการ การจัดการคัดเลือกให้เป็นลักษณะการศึกษา ทั้งในระบบการศึกษา ผู้ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา ที่มีความรู้ ทักษะทางการศึกษา
SUMMARY IN LAO LANGUAGE

嗦姆 ละ ผู้ทำช่าง ที่มีโอกาสทุกๆจะรับมือได้ยูกุ่มเป็น
Καιเป็นเรื่องที่ยุ่งยาก ตั้งแต่ในเมื่อที่ได้เข้าทวิปแบบถึงด้วย
บีกับบุญกุ่มตอนเป็นทั้งเอา แล้วจึงได้ใช้ผู้ทำช่างที่มี
กรุณา ที่ผ่านมาเคยที่ได้ที่เร็วๆนี้ ปัจจุบัน จุดประสงค์จะเป็น
เพื่อการให้การมีเด็ก ๆ ที่เป็นบุญกุ่มบ้าง
ด้วย ตั้งแต่ ระดับการสนับสนุน จงสมควรสนับสนุน แล้ว
ธรรมวิจจะแบบสอบถามข้อมูลพิธีกรรม - ทั้งหมด เฉลี่ย
ข้อมูลที่ต้องการ สอบถามไป สอบถามไป สอบถามไป และ
หากท่านสัญญาว่าจะใช้หน่วยงานบุญกุ่ม ให้ปฏิบัติตาม
ใน ที่ผ่านมาการสนับสนุนทั้งหมดในรายละเอียดและแผนการ
ที่สมควร ให้ท่านพิจารณาว่าจะเป็นน้อยหรือไม่ ในการ
นั้นจะการสนับสนุน จึงต้อง จงยินยอม แล้วสำนักสนับสนุน
ข้อมูลที่มีทั้งหมดในการบุญกุ่ม การอบ จงสมควรให้สัมพันธ์
กับผู้ทำช่างบุญกุ่ม ที่ได้ที่สายขอ ทางผู้ทำช่างบุญกุ่ม ที่
เฉพาะกิจ ระดับการสนับสนุน ให้ปฏิบัติตาม การสนับสนุน
จากการที่ผ่านมาโดยทั่วไป ที่ผ่านมา ซึ่งมีผลดีที่
การสมควร แล้วมีผลดีที่เป็นคุณสมบัติที่ดีต่อการที่จะ
ไปพิจารณาไปยังต่อไป.

สาทิ 4: แม่ภรรยาชะนะ และ อดีตภรรยาภรรยา ที่มีวิเศษ

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CULTIVATING EDUCATIONAL ACTION RESEARCH IN LAO PDR

From the author's perspective, there are several key points to consider: first, educational action research is a critical tool for implementing and evaluating educational policies in Lao PDR. This approach involves collaborative efforts between educators, policymakers, and researchers to address specific educational challenges.

Secondly, the adoption of modern technologies, such as digital learning platforms, can significantly enhance the quality of education. The World Bank, ADB, and EQIPI have been instrumental in promoting these technologies in Lao PDR.

Finally, the integration of EQIPII and TTEST with EFA’s Goals and Millennium’s Goals is essential to ensure that educational reforms are aligned with national and global developmental objectives. This alignment is crucial for achieving sustainable educational outcomes.
Summary in Lao Language

(Updated policy ensembles)
CULTIVATING EDUCATIONAL ACTION RESERCH IN LAO PDR

From this point and onwards, we proceed to cultivate educational action research (Action research and Participatory action research), placing the primacy on educational equity (Education for All) and inclusivity. The implementation of this approach involves policy backlashes (Policy backlashes) that can lead to the postponement of initiatives aimed at educational improvement. The struggle against the backlashes of implementation is a constant challenge, requiring perseverance and commitment. This is the essence of educational action research in Lao PDR.
สังคมมีบทบาทในหลากหลายและหลากหลายด้านที่ก่อกำเนิดขึ้นในยุคปัจจุบัน ที่เหล่านักบริหารและผู้บริหารในสถานศึกษาต่างๆ ที่มีอยู่ในที่ต่างๆ ทั่วโลก โดยทั่วไป พวกเราถูก框ไว้ในระบบการศึกษาที่เราเจอกัน เกิดนิยามความเห็นจากที่เราได้รับความรู้จากสถานศึกษา ซึ่งมีบทบาทในการวิจัยแบบมีส่วนร่วม การเรียนรู้และการเปลี่ยนแปลงสังคม ที่เกิดขึ้นในระบบที่เราได้รับการศึกษา แบบมีส่วนร่วม เกิดจากการที่เรียนรู้และแสวงหาความรู้สึกและการรับรู้ ซึ่งมีความสำคัญในชีวิต ช่วงการเรียนรู้ เราจะต้องมีส่วนร่วมในทุกเรื่อง ทั้งเรื่องการสอน การเรียนรู้ที่มีคุณค่าและมีความหมาย.
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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Multinational donors and donor countries operating in the educational sector in Lao PDR
(based on UNESCO, 2008)

*Early childhood development (3 donors)*
Save the Children Norway, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

*Primary education (12 donors)*
Asian Development Bank (ADB), Australia, European Union, France, Japan, Republic of Korea, Save the children Norway, Sweden, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, World Food Programme (WFP)

*Lower secondary education (2 donors)*
ADB, UNESCO

*Upper secondary education (3 donors)*
ADB, Australia, Republic of Korea

*Technical and Vocational education and training (5 donors)*
Belgium, Germany, Republic of Korea, Luxembourg, UNESCO

*Teacher education (3 donors)*
ADB, Japan, Sweden

*Higher education (7 donors)*
Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Sweden, United States, Viet Nam.

*Literacy and non-formal education (2 donors)*
UNICEF, UNESCO
Policy, planning and management (7 donors)
ADB, Australia, France, Sweden, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank

HIV/AIDS and Health education (2 donors)
Japan, UNESCO

Government officials training (3 donors)
China, Singapore, Viet Nam
Interview guide  
(translated from Lao language)

Background information
Institution Date of interview
Gender Teaching subject
Graduation Graduation subject
Graduation system Graduation year

About action research and its introduction
What do you know about Action Research? When did you hear about it the first time? When was it started at your institution?

Who introduced AR in Lao PDR? Why was it introduced? Who have informed you about AR? How was it introduced to you?

What kind of training have you got in AR? Workshops? Seminars?
Anything else?

About the understanding of Action Research
What is AR for you? How do you understand it? How would you describe AR?

Are there different ways to carry out AR? How? Why – not? Why should educators do AR? Any other reason for doing AR?

Who are doing AR in Lao PDR? For what reason? Where? How?

How do teachers understand AR? Any further information?
Doing action research
Have you done AR yourself? Why not? Where? With whom? Why?
Describe how you do / did AR? How often have you done AR?
What is your experience from AR? Easy/difficult? Why? Good/Bad? Why?

Has your understanding about AR changed since you heard about it the first time? How has it changed?


Anything more to add?

Possibilities and constraints with action research
What can you improve by doing AR? Explain further! What are the problems with AR? Explain further! Any further ideas? How to improve AR?

What will happen with AR when the AR donor project finish? Will AR continue? How? Why not?

How does your institution (leaders) look at AR? Positive? Negative? Why?

Anything else you want to add?

Thank you!
List of Constructors and Re-constructors interviewees

Constructors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>National Implementation Team</td>
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<td>Male, majority</td>
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<td>National Implementation Team</td>
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<td>Male, majority</td>
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<td>Director of research centre</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Working Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male, majority</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical Advisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
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<td>Working Team</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Female, majority</td>
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**Re-constructors (Central)**

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<td>Female, majority Lecturer</td>
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<td>42</td>
<td>Female, majority Primary school director/teacher</td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>Female, majority Primary school teacher</td>
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<td>44</td>
<td>Female, majority Primary school teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Female, majority Lower and upper secondary school teacher</td>
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**Re-constructors (Northern)**

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<td>12</td>
<td>Female, majority Lower secondary school teacher</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Female, majority Primary school teacher</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Female, majority Teacher educator</td>
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<td>36</td>
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Re-constructors (Eastern)

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Re-constructors (Southern)

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<td>Male, majority Teacher educator</td>
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<td>Field notes</td>
<td>Male, majority Teacher educator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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