



Students enjoy reading time at a Summer Pre-Primary (SPP) class in Lao PDR.

A Proven Innovation to Accelerate Access to Pre-Primary Education in Lao PDR

Many children from disadvantaged households in Lao PDR cannot access quality pre-primary education (PPE). PPE is a critical component in a child's life, and evidence shows that it can significantly increase a child's level of readiness for school and lifelong learning. Through an action research project called LEARN Plus, an accelerated pre-primary education model has been adapted and recognized by the government as an innovative strategy to provide disadvantaged children access to quality, gender-responsive early childhood education services.



KEY FINDINGS

1

The SPP program bridges the gap in children's access to pre-primary education in communities where PPE services do not already exist.

2

By leveraging existing resources and teachers, the SPP program is easier and less costly to implement and scale than other pre-primary education models.

3

The SPP program goes beyond gender parity in enrolment by promoting a gender-responsive and inclusive learning environment in PPE.



Students at an SPP class point to the next activity in the daily routine poster.

What's At Stake?

In Lao PDR, a country in Southeast Asia with a population of over 7 million, 30% of children do not have access to pre-primary education. Those from disadvantaged or rural areas are the most excluded, and for those who enter primary school without PPE experience and unprepared, many will often underperform in school, drop out and never come back. When children are prepared for primary education, they tend to thrive and stay in school longer, and this project seeks to facilitate that, especially for those who are traditionally excluded.

PPE is a critical component in a child's life, and evidence shows that it can significantly increase a child's level of readiness for school. When a child receives quality pre-primary education (PPE), they perform consistently better in school, are more likely to enter school on time, are less likely to drop out or repeat grades and are more likely to complete primary and secondary school.¹

Through an action-research project called LEARN Plus, Plan International Canada (PIC), in partnership with Plan International Laos and the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV), are supporting the Government of Lao PDR in adapting and scaling the Summer Pre-Primary (SPP) 10-week education program. The SPP program provides disadvantaged children access to quality, gender-responsive pre-primary education. The project was launched in Lao PDR in 2021 with support from the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange and is set to be completed by December 2024.

This policy brief shares findings and recommendations from the project implemented in Lao PDR with an aim to inform policy responses by the Lao PDR Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES).

Methodology

The SPP program is a proven innovation that was adopted from the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) in Turkey and has now been adapted, tested and scaled in Cambodia, Tanzania and Lao PDR. It consists of an 8–12-week intensive program that is delivered during the academic break that precedes the start of a new school year. It seeks to develop the physical, language, cognitive and socio-emotional skills of children who are about to enter Grade 1 (typically ages 5–6) with no preschool experience, and it aims to prepare children for primary school through gender-responsive and inclusive approaches.

Plan International Canada, Plan International Laos and AÇEV first tested the SPP program in Lao PDR between 2014–2018. They collaborated closely on the program with the Lao PDR Ministry of Education and Sports through a project called LEARN. The results of an evaluation of this initial program showed that there were significant increases in on-time Grade 1 enrolment, school readiness at the start of Grade 1, and

in the number of children completing Grade 1. Successful advocacy of the program led to the Government of Lao PDR including the program as an innovative strategy in its Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP) 2021–2025.

In 2021, the LEARN Plus project began implementing the SPP program in additional communities in Lao PDR to continue to build knowledge and evidence to support the scale-up of the SPP model. Building off the successes of the original LEARN initiative, the LEARN Plus project rolled out the SPP program to 15 villages in the Pha-Oudom district of the Bokeo province in Lao PDR to generate more evidence about the relevance of the model in different settings. Children participating in the program were taught for 6 hours/day, 5 days/week over 10 weeks. Classes were held in Grade 1 classrooms or any safe spaces with access to clean water and toilet facilities. The program consisted of a daily routine of play-based activities designed to support the acquisition of social skills, Lao language, numeracy

A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH TO SKILLS BUILDING

Through a daily routine of child-centred and play-based indoor and outdoor activities, the SPP program focuses on skills building in the following four domains:

1

PHYSICAL

To promote the development of self-care skills and encourage movement, physical activity and healthy eating.

2

LANGUAGE

To promote reading readiness and oral communications.

3

COGNITIVE

To stimulate conceptual development and the acquisition of pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills.

4

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL

To promote the ability to recognize and communicate emotions and establish positive relationships with peers and adults.

skills, foundational skills in science and the environment and it helped nurture a curiosity to learn among the students. It also promoted gender-responsive and inclusive teaching and learning approaches, good hygiene and good nutrition. Parents/caregivers with children participating in the program were also educated on gender-responsive parenting skills and how to support children's learning at home by participating in four parenting sessions over the 10 weeks of the program.

Teacher training was an important component of the LEARN Plus project and essential for the rollout of the SPP program. Given the comprehensive nature of the program, teachers were required to be well versed in child-friendly and gender-responsive classroom techniques and instill good classroom management practices. Quality teacher training benefited both the teachers who were leading the classes and the children who were participating in them.

Building the capacity of key partners at national and sub-national levels as SPP trainers and implementors and sustaining relationships with education policy makers and key decision makers was another important element of the program. The LEARN Plus project team worked closely with national and local government stakeholders to implement the program in a holistic and comprehensive manner. This included the Ministry of Education and Sports of Lao PDR, the Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS) and the District Education Sports Bureau (DESB). This collaboration culminated in the public endorsement and ownership of the SPP program by Lao PDR's Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). This endorsement was made twice in 2022 – once at UNESCO's World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (WCECCE) conference and again at the Southeast Asia Policy Dialogue on Early Childhood Care and Education held in Jakarta, Indonesia. The latter endorsement took place when

the Director of the ECE Department presented on alternative ECE and parenting education programs, which included the SPP program. Collaborating with key government stakeholders is important for ensuring program ownership and sustainability once an intervention is complete and for the advocacy and scale-up of this type of education program.

Overall, the SPP program provided an effective stopgap measure to increase access to PPE and prepare disadvantaged children for primary school in remote and rural areas, especially in small, minority ethnic communities. It is contextually relevant to Lao PDR and builds on existing education system and community resources, which reduces the financial and resource constraints that often come with traditional PPE programs.

Parents take turns cooking for children at an SPP class.



Research Approach

The results of the first LEARN project in Lao PDR (2014–2018) were captured in an impact study conducted by the American Institute of Research (AIR). Overall, the findings from this project demonstrated that the SPP program is a promising approach to building school readiness and that there is a need for it to be expanded and scaled to more communities. For greater context on these results, please view Annex A at the end of this brief.

Since 2021, when the LEARN Plus project was started in Lao PDR, the focus has shifted to scaling and advocating for this model to more communities across Lao PDR. In alignment with the ESSDP, the LEARN Plus project conducted feasibility and cost studies to inform the decisions of the MoES. The feasibility study was developed to support with the policy advocacy and uptake of the SPP program in Lao PDR, and the costing study was meant to support budgeting for scaling of the program in additional districts in Lao PDR. A child assessment study was also conducted to assess the level of knowledge of children prior to and after their involvement in the SPP program.

Findings from LEARN Plus (2021–2023)

1. The SPP program bridges the gap in children’s access to pre-primary education in communities where PPE services do not already exist.

Given the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP) 2021–2025, there has been a considerable expansion of PPE services offered by the government of Lao PDR. In general, the government program offers two models of formal pre-school, either kindergarten (anuban), which is a three-full-year program, or pre-primary classes (hong kiem), a one-year program prior to entering Grade 1 and that is more commonly found in remote rural areas.

The SPP program is best fit for communities and districts without kindergarten, pre-primary classes or other community-based forms of PPE. The purpose of the SPP program is not to replace existing PPE programs offered by government, but rather to fill the gaps in PPE services and accelerate children’s access to PPE in areas where these services are non-existent. It is meant to complement the efforts of government as they expand the coverage of PPE services throughout the country.



An instructor explains to a group of parents and caregivers things they can do for their children, including supporting their education, playing with them and encouraging their participation at home and at school.

Rural and remote communities in Lao PDR should be prioritized for the implementation of this program as they often have the least access to PPE services, particularly villages without roads. Therefore, prioritizing remote communities for the implementation of the SPP program in 40 priority districts, especially small, minority ethnic communities, will help provide these essential services when there are no other services available. It can also help resolve one of the prominent barriers to accessing PPE in Lao PDR, which includes the distance children have to travel from home to pre-primary classes.

2. By leveraging existing resources and teachers, the SPP model is easier and less costly to implement and scale than other pre-primary education programs.

The SPP program leverages existing resources of the Ministry of Education and Sports and communities (i.e., teachers, head teachers, community volunteers, classrooms), which makes replication less costly. Estimates were obtained for implementing the program under the full packageⁱⁱ and light packageⁱⁱⁱ. During the first year of implementation, the cost per child for the full package of the program is USD \$131, while that of the light package is USD \$101. Costs are significantly reduced, on average, by year 2 as some costs are not recurrent. These amounts are typically lower than regular PPE programs.

In addition, the program engages existing Grade 1 teachers from the schools where SPP classes are held to teach participating students. Training needs for these teachers are slightly lower since they are already teachers and have some experience. As a result, trainings delivered by the LEARN Plus project focused more on the delivery of the SPP program in gender-responsive, inclusive and age- and developmentally appropriate ways for 5–6-year-old children.

Despite the use of existing resources to lower costs of the SPP model, the financial needs of the program as well as ownership of the program at the local level were noted as the main constraints

to the program's sustainability. For example, while almost all DESB officials surveyed (94%) thought that the SPP program was a good solution, they were not able to fully support it from their existing resources and budget, and they lacked the knowledge and skills to support the implementation of SPP activities. Therefore, future capacity building should focus on supporting district education officials to plan, cost, fundraise, implement and monitor the program.

3. The SPP program goes beyond gender parity in enrolment by promoting a gender-responsive and inclusive learning environment in PPE.

Some results from the feasibility study contradicted generally accepted ideas regarding parents' attitudes toward ECE and around gender inequality and inclusion and education. Parents' attitudes toward ECE were based less on ethnicity and mainly on availability of access to ECE services, infrastructure and programs. In addition, young girls were not discriminated against regarding access to early education and were enrolled in equal or slightly higher numbers than boys in remote and minority ethnic communities that already had existing ECE services/programs. In addition, beyond parental encouragement, support from relatives, Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) members and influential community members were found to be an important component to strengthening the participation of children in the SPP program. VEDC members are meant to support early childhood development, including the establishment of pre-primary classes in schools; therefore they participated in school decision making and implementation.

Although girls did not face discrimination in accessing early education in this context, it's important to note how crucial it is for children to receive gender-responsive and inclusive education. The LEARN Plus project placed a great deal of emphasis on ensuring that teachers and classroom materials did not portray discriminatory social and gender norms, attitudes and practices in the classroom.

Recommendations

The findings that have emerged from both the LEARN and LEARN Plus model in Lao PDR demonstrate that the SPP program is an innovative PPE program that enables children in rural and remote areas, especially in small and minority ethnic communities, to access PPE and be ready for school. The following recommendations will support funders and policy makers with the effective continuity and scale-up of the program in Lao PDR.

1. Scaling this proven education program will enable more children to access pre-primary education.

The scale-up of the SPP program across additional communities in priority districts in the country will enable more children, especially the most disadvantaged, to access pre-primary education and be prepared for school. This will contribute to the government's efforts to meet SDG 4.2 and address systemic challenges of high repetition and drop-out in early grades, especially among disadvantaged populations. Scaling the program will likewise help to generate greater evidence on the effectiveness of the program and enhance its uptake beyond priority districts in the country and potentially other countries in the region that are facing similar PPE challenges.

Students practice oral hygiene at an SPP class.



2. Tailored capacity building of government partners and resource mobilization are required for this model to be scaled effectively.

Government officials across the MoES, PESS and DESB in Lao PDR are instrumental in the implementation of the SPP program. Hence, it is important that they are supported with training on planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the program. Training and capacity-development support encourages greater ownership, sustainability and scaling of the program. The LEARN Plus project worked very closely with the MoES to develop an implementation manual and teaching and learning materials to facilitate the scale-up of this program by government and other development partners. These materials are now available on Khangpanya, the MoES online platform. The project likewise supported capacity building of SPP trainers at national, provincial and district levels and SPP advocates who can support the roll-out of SPP in the future.

However, training and capacity building can only go so far when there are not adequate funds in government budgets to support the scale up of the SPP program. Even when government officials are on board with an intervention, they will face roadblocks in taking action on the evidence of a promising approach without any funds. As a result, the LEARN Plus project identified several ways to further reduce costs of the program, including working with VEDC members to identify how the community can contribute to things like teacher

compensation, either in kind or with cash; reducing the number of days for “refresher trainings” offered to teachers following the first year of the SPP program; and providing remote monitoring support for teachers by phone or online, to name a few. Other measures that can be taken when public financing is constrained is to leverage other funding streams such as official development assistance and public-private partnerships.

3. Knowledge and evidence must be demand-driven to increase uptake by government.

The LEARN Plus project built a coalition of champions for the SPP program across various levels of government in Lao PDR. They achieved this by identifying critical stakeholders, engaging with them intentionally and contextualizing the program to diverse communities in the country. Generating evidence and advocating for its use among public officials is not enough to encourage policy uptake or further scaling. Instead, greater focus should be placed on fostering relationships with public education officials over time and embedding them into the project to ensure that the knowledge and evidence generated by the program align with their priorities and respond to their needs.

REFERENCES:

- i. UNICEF (2019). A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education. UNICEF, NY, USA. E.g., see https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/opportunities-lost-the-impact-of-grade-repetition-and-early-school-leaving-en_o.pdf
- ii. “Full package” is the ideal package and will be implemented the way it was originally designed.
- iii. “Light package” is not as comprehensive as the “full package” but contains the minimum inputs and components that ensure quality implementation. For example: reduce the list of imported materials and replace them with local materials

ANNEX A:

SNAPSHOT OF RESULTS FROM LEARN (2014–2018)

The results of the first LEARN project in Lao PDR (2014–2018) were captured in an impact study conducted by the American Institute of Research (AIR). The study compared the performance of children who participated in the original SPP program, participants in a government-run PPE program and children who did not receive any PPE interventions. The results demonstrated that the SPP program increased on-time Grade 1 enrolment, improved school readiness skills for children and led to an increased number of children retained to the end of Grade 1. Some highlights from the study included:

- A 37% higher rate of transition from PPE to primary school for children participating in the SPP program than those with no intervention, and an 18% higher transition rate compared to children in the government’s 9-month PPE program.
- Participants in the SPP program improved most in numeracy and familiarity with print when compared to children who received no intervention at the middle of Grade 1. Similarly, children in the SPP program made greater gains in each of the forementioned domains, including receptive vocabulary, compared to those in the government’s 9-month PPE program.
- Although trends continued to be higher for SPP program participants compared to children with no intervention, the program did not lead to significant differences in learning outcomes in comparison to the government’s 9-month PPE program by the end of Grade 1, a finding that is consistent with other similar school readiness interventions in low-income contexts, which is linked to the quality of Grade 1 schooling.



Children practice their language skills during circle time at a Summer Pre-Primary class.

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