



BEQUAL NGO CONSORTIUM FINAL EVALUATION REPORT



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Acknowledgements

This report is prepared for Plan International Laos by Dr Santi Owen (Insitu Development Consulting). The evaluation findings and conclusions reflect the author's assessment and the views in this report are not necessarily shared by Plan International Laos. Any errors in the report belongs to the author.

This final evaluation was made possible by the collective efforts of the BEQUAL NGO Consortium (BNC) Co-ordination Management Unit, BNC partners (ChildFund, Plan International, Save the Children, World Vision), MoES, PESS and DESB officials. The evaluation team included Salika Khoonbarthao (Evaluation Co-ordinator), Bouasavanh Khanthaphat (Lao Social Research Survey Manager) and the Lao Social Research field team.

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Abbreviations

BEIF	BEQUAL Education Innovation Fund
BEQUAL	Basic Education Quality Access in Laos
BNC	BEQUAL NGO Consortium
CMU	Consortium Management Unit
COPE	Cooperative Orthotic & Prosthetic Enterprise
CRS	Christian Relief Service
CWS	Child with a Disability
DESB	District Education Sports Bureau
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australian government)
EOPO	End of Program Outcomes
FGD	Focus group discussions
GDA	Gender Development Association
GIZ	German Cooperation with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH
GoL	Government of Lao PDR
HI	Humanity and Inclusion
IEP	Inclusive Education Plan
LADLF	Laos Australia Development Learning Facility
LDPA	Lao Disabled People's Association
LEARN	Lao Education Assess, Research and Networking
LSR	Lao Social Research
L2NL	Lao to Non-Lao language 4 week course
MEL	Monitoring Evaluation Learning
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
PESS	Provincial Education and Sports Services
TA	Technical Advisors (NGO staff)
TAG	Technical Advisory Group
TOR	Terms of Reference
VEDC	Village Education Development Committees
WASH	Water sanitation and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme

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Executive summary

The BEQUAL NGO Consortium (BNC) was designed to contribute to achieving the Basic Education Quality Access in Laos (BEQUAL) End-of-Program-Outcomes for access and participation: *more educationally disadvantaged children and young people enrol and regularly participate in primary education*. The BNC is a group of four INGOs (ChildFund, Plan International, Save The Children and World Vision,) and is sub-contracted by the BEQUAL managing contractor to deliver a package of activities developed in consultation with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The BNC was intended to complement the work of other areas of BEQUAL and directly support the broader work of MoES related to participation. The BNC commenced implementation in early 2016 and will conclude late 2018.

The BNC objectives are:

Objective 1: To enable access and increase participation of children disadvantaged by language, gender, disability and ethnicity in schools through improved oral Lao language skills and reading promotion in early grades.

Objectives 2: To strengthen community mechanisms to create healthy supportive learning environments in homes and communities for all disadvantaged children.

Objective 3: 171 target schools adopt good hygiene practices.

The baseline study for the BNC intervention was conducted in July-Aug 2016 and the final evaluation of the interventions covers the implementation period from April 2016 to Sept 2018, approximately two school years. This final evaluation assesses the BNC outcomes in relation to five evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. Data collection in 28 villages in seven districts was carried out from 17th October to 5th November 2018. A total of 1,404 people participated in the evaluation. Of this 48% (676) were females.

Findings

Relevance

The BNC objectives are aligned with the BEQUAL outcome for increased participation: *more boys and girls, especially those experiencing disadvantage, participate in basic education*. The BNC was designed to complement BEQUAL's improvements in teaching quality which focused on the change in teaching quality, teacher development and support systems. The BNC objectives and community level intervention has a clear link with BEQUAL's design intention to improve the participation of disadvantaged boys and girls in primary education.

Effectiveness

Since 2016, both female and male students have decreased the period of time absent from school in the last school year. Students in all districts have shown to have decreased the period of absenteeism since the baseline.

Student experience of learning Lao language has improved with better instructions and techniques used by teachers. The proportion of students who understand their teacher's instructions in Lao

language 'most of the time' increased from 21% (2016) to 40% (2018). More students can respond to their teacher in Lao language. For instance, 57% of students in the 2016 survey reported they could respond to the teacher's question in Lao language, this increased to 69% of students in 2018.

Schools are providing opportunities for reading. Most students are reading story books at school. More girls (87%, n= 371) reported reading than boys (84%, n= 357) at school. These results indicate that teachers, parents, VEDC members and volunteers have actively encourage equal opportunities for girls and boys to read.

Students have increased their reading at home. Baseline data on proportion of children who have access to story books at home was 64% (2016) and this increased to 98% in 2018. In addition, students reporting that they study at home 3-4 days a week have also increased from 26% (2016) to 34% (2018). More students in Houn (35%), Nambak (26%) and Xamneua (26%) districts read at home five days a week than other districts.

The majority of VEDCs used the small grant to support learning and reading (65%) at school through a range of materials for music, sports, craft, writing and reading for boys, girls, ethnic children who are experiencing poverty and support for children with a disability.

Most of the target villages in the BNC have improved WASH facilities by installing handwashing stations, providing hygiene supplies and conducting school-based activities. Progress towards behaviour change in regular handwashing and teeth brushing at school is incremental. Many students in this evaluation recalled that they should use soap and water (92%) to wash their hands. Messages about regular hygiene practice are inconsistently received by students. 61% (n= 520) of students reported washing their hands and 44% (n=377) of students brushed their teeth the day before the evaluation team visited. Reasons include some schools (37/171 schools) have issues with water access, delays in the delivery of WASH equipment and materials and inconsistent practice and messaging of WASH at school and in the community.

Efficiency

The BNC expenditure is expected to be underspent by approximately 1%. A basic cost efficiency analysis of expenditure to date and benefits distributed to beneficiaries for the period from April 2016 to September 2018 show that \$283AUD was spent per community beneficiary. A total of 20,757 beneficiaries were reached, (15,120 children, 178 teachers, 612 volunteers, 1,521 VEDC and 3,326 parents/ carers). Of this group, 49% are female beneficiaries and 91 are children with a disability.

The BNC expenditure also contributed to the employment of 54 national staff which represents 82% of the BNC personnel. The level of personnel allocated to implement activities are aligned with the intended effort to achieve behaviour change in disadvantaged communities.

Impact

The BNC focus on early grade learning has provided teachers with practical tools and skills to teach pre-literacy in Lao language. Of the 85 teachers in this evaluation, the 36 (42%) who received training on L2NL reported that they found the content and techniques useful to their teaching. Teachers would like more support with teaching Lao language, particularly in Nambak, Houn and

Houamueng districts. Of 36 teachers have been trained in L2NL, 25% would like the learning materials to be restocked more regularly in the second year; 33% reported they would like a refresher training, or for training to be expanded to other teachers in the school; and 25% would like more coaching after the training from DESB and BNC staff.

The BNC reading activity has generated children's demand for reading and books. In this evaluation, 92% of students would join more readings activities in the future and 96% of students would continue to read if there were more books were available in their community.

Village volunteers effectively raised awareness about reading among community members and increased children's participation in reading outside of school. Local ownership of solutions and results in this case relies on motivated VEDCs and volunteers. To ensure impact beyond the BNC, a strategy for community ownership of reading promotion should be incorporated into the programming for capacity building of volunteers, VEDCs, teachers and parents.

Delays with implementing handwashing stations and distributing hygiene materials have occurred due to water access issues in the village or school; procurement and logistics issues. 134 (78%) out of 171 schools have a functioning hand washing station. A lack of systematic monitoring of this component has affected the impact on changing hygiene behaviour at school.

The BNC has raised awareness among teachers, parents, VEDCs, children and DESBs about children with a disability and their right to access education and learning. This was achieved by mainstreaming the messages about disability inclusion in training content for reading promotion in class and community, WASH and VEDC small grants. Children with more complex issues who require specialist treatment and care in the community, need more intensive and planned support at school and in the home. Greater consultation with and input from children with a disability and their parents is needed to ensure support is relevant and sustained after the program.

Gender mainstreaming in the BNC has emphasised equal participation of females and males as the initial step towards equality. The BNC ensured its activity processes are gender sensitive and consistent messaging about equal participation appears to have been adopted by DESB, VEDC, teachers and parents. Monitoring data show that equal access was effective. A lack of defined purpose for gender equality and disability inclusion for participation at the community and school levels has resulted in a singular focus on outputs participation and limited articulation of expected change at the individual and community levels.

Sustainability

The BNC community-based literacy and reading promotion activities has demonstrated improved children's participation in reading and demand for materials. In a context where reading is low among teachers, parents and children, the literacy and reading promotion activities in the community provide a mechanism by which classroom learning can be extended outside of school hours. The success of this has contributed to Houn DESB and Khammouane PESS adopting the L2NL material to be used by teachers in these locations after the BNC. Scale up in terms of geographical expansion to enhance Lao language teaching is occurring at selected DESB and PESS. Close collaboration with these line agencies has enabled local ownership of addressing Lao language teaching.

The WASH activity has political support and aligns with PESS and DESB targets. Geographical expansion to other areas is possible, however the WASH component needs to be strengthened to

have impact. Such as, the WASH infrastructure designed to suit local use by beneficiaries; a strategy to address water access and supply issues; and a planned intervention for behaviour change.

The VEDC is a mechanism for local participation. The VEDC is a conduit between school and community and has traditionally functioned to manage, administer and monitor school development and planning. Functioning VEDCs in the BNC have demonstrated there is scope in their role to influence reading promotion, learning and hygiene practice in the community. The VEDC small grant, has on the whole, demonstrated that VEDCs can be incentivised to support learning; gender equality and disability inclusion. Greater focus on community planning during implementation for continuing activities and results beyond the BNC would strengthen the investment in the VEDC mechanism.

The BNC Partnership Agreement enhanced results and supported efficient implementation through shared resources. The efficient access to technical in-house expertise by BNC partners was possible because the relationships between Consortium member organisations. Cross learning and sharing of resources within the BNC occurred efficiently. A Partnership Agreement, or similar mechanism, is important for the effective collaboration between multiple organisations of different sizes, capacity and specialisation.

L e a r n i n g s a n d R e c o m m e n d a t i o n s

Participation

Learning: BNC community-based literacy and reading promotion component has generated positive participation and has demonstrated improved children's participation in reading and demand for learning. These activities are effective in supporting classroom learning outside of school hours. The BNC has shown that through repeated exposure to relevant reading materials and activities, demand or appetite for reading can be stimulated among children and the community.

Recommendation: The positive response from beneficiaries was an opportunity for sustainability. The BNC should support target villages to develop a plan for reading promotion in the community after the program.

Learning: The community-based approach to improve learning and reading requires intensive engagement of key community stakeholders- parents, children, VEDC, DESB and teachers and principals.

Recommendation: Participation by these stakeholders needs to be staged. For example, the program plan should articulate or explain how stakeholders will be engaged in stages of sensitisation, knowledge, skills development and practice.

Community based reading promotion

Learning: Recruiting and retaining village volunteers to conduct reading promotion has proved to be a challenge for community - based reading promotion. The risk of ineffectiveness due to high turn-over of volunteers and low literacy among volunteers needs to be addressed as part of the activity plan.

Recommendation: Program planning for the phase out of support and stipends should be included in the program close out plan. For example, at least six months prior to close out, program staff should facilitate planning among the VEDC, schools and volunteers to identify actions the community can take to sustain activities that are important to them. A participatory approach to planning for sustainability, applying similar processes to that used in the VEDC small grants proposal development, would ensure impact beyond the program.

Learning: Reading behaviour of students, particularly those in early grades, reveal that reading outside of the classroom often takes place with older siblings. This makes sense in a context where children have responsibilities for caring and domestic work.

Recommendation: Future reading promotion activities should consider including older siblings in group reading, buddy reading activities and workshops to develop and tap into this community resource.

VEDC Mechanism

Learning: VEDCs traditionally function to monitor education and promote compliance with regulation through school planning and management. The BNC has demonstrated the potential for VEDCs to orient their function to support learning and reading and promote gender equality and disability inclusion.

Recommendation: A facilitated approach is needed to capacitate VEDCs if they are to be a strong local mechanism. For instance, follow up post training and coaching by DESBs and program staff in the first year of implementation would support VEDC members to become orientated in their responsibilities. A phased approach to capacity building could include, incentives in the subsequent year(s) for VEDCs to achieve agreed results and demonstrate behaviours, such as developing a proposal for action or a plan for sustaining results. Program staff would also need to be equipped to assess VEDC functions and provide appropriate coaching responses. This approach of encouragement and rewarding initiative will take time to develop among VEDCs as an entity, since they currently serve to comply and monitor.

WASH

Learning: Health and nutrition of children affects their ability to participate in school and learning. The BNC partly addressed this through school hygiene activities, however more opportunities to strengthen children's health and hygiene is needed. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) was present in Houn and Nga districts, Oudomxay province, however the school meals program supported by WFP and the BNC school hygiene activity appears to have been implemented in silos.

Recommendation: Future programming should seek collaboration with health/ nutrition projects and approach behaviour change through a phased approach where changes are identified in the short, medium and long term. In the planning stage, a stocktake of all projects in the target area should be conducted to identify areas of synergy. Where possible, partner organisations in the same target area should be involved in discussions about strategies for co-ordinating activities to enhance opportunities for behaviour change. For

instance, school meal workshops could incorporate cooking demonstrations and messages about handwashing before cooking and eating and after meals.

Learning: Regular handwashing and teeth brushing practices are yet to be adopted. Some teachers identified issues with co-ordinating these activities with a large number of students and managing time for teaching and hygiene activities.

Recommendation: In the short and medium term, follow up support in the form of coaching (face to face or telephone) and fortnightly refresher sessions for teachers should be provided for those who struggle to conduct regular handwashing and teeth brushing with students. The coaching and refresher sessions should provide strategies for teachers to use to integrate hygiene in lessons, at play time, support to develop a roster for using the wash facility by all students in the school and ways to look after the wash facility and keep equipment (tooth brushes and drinking bottles) clean.

Learning: Water access and supply is important for adopting good hygiene practice. The lack of accessible water supply coupled with procurement delays has limited the effectiveness of the WASH component in at least 22% (37) of schools.

Recommendation: Close collaboration with VEDC, DESB and PESS to address water access should be a priority before WASH facilities are installed. For example, a thorough assessment of water sources and quality in the village and school should be conducted and establishing a WASH plan for the use, monitoring and maintenance of the facilities and hygiene activities would strengthen this component.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Learning: The indicators (gross enrolment, net enrolment and drop-out rates) for BNC outcome could be better aligned. The outcome, objectives and indicators were developed in late 2016 and reviewed in 2017. The indicator- gross enrolment rate as a proxy for change in the proportion of children entering primary school is superfluous as the net enrolment rate is adequate.

Recommendation: The addition of the cohort survival or completion rate is a better indicator to show access to grade 1 and continued participation in primary education to grade 5.

Learning: If cost efficiency is of interest to donors and programmers, budget data for a cost efficiency analysis should be built into the M&E plan and systematically collected by program staff.

Recommendation: Financial data for reporting by activities, gender and disability status should be identified during the program planning and as part of the M&E framework. Procedures for monitoring and data collection should use simple and clear tools and instructions for program staff and DESB officers to use. Appropriate training and follow up of staff in district teams should be provided to ensure consistent and accurate data collection.

Equality and Inclusion

Learning: The BNC demonstrated that a dedicated budget for disability and flexibility in the program budget to facilitate girls and women's participation has resulted in good participation from these groups. The BNC also focused on developing the capacity of program staff, procuring technical specialists in disability and disability tools to use with teachers.

Recommendation: A commitment to addressing gender and disability should also be reflected in the program resourcing. To strengthen gender equality and disability inclusion, the program should consider additional investment in a contextual analysis of gender and disability in target areas, a baseline to ensure change is measurable and technical input for gender. As disability inclusion and gender equality are important commitments, this needs to be reflected in the program budget and financial reporting. Program staff should be supported to collect and report on disability and gender expenditure data. These inputs will take time to implement and to produce results, which is not always compatible with program efficiency, however this will enhance program impact.

Disability

Learning: Understanding about the prevalence and nature of disability among teachers and the community is still emerging. BNC partners have systematically collected disability data from the reading promotion activities and VEDC grants proposals and implementation. Data on the results of support provided for health check-ups, Inclusive Education Plans (IEP) and assistive devices are limited.

Recommendation: Accurate data on the prevalence of children with a disability (CWD) and the quality of their participation is needed to enhance activities for this group. To ensure accurate and detailed data on CWD, a number of stakeholders need to be involved in the data collection process. 1) program staff should be adequately trained on disability inclusion and data collection procedures; 2) community members who will collect monitoring data on behalf of the program should be adequately trained and supported throughout the program to increase their understanding of disability and data collection; and 3) implementing partners have a shared understanding of objectives for disability inclusion, the term disability, ways to identify disability, and methods for systematic data collection.

Learning: Disability inclusion activities in the BNC have addressed awareness among stakeholders, individual needs of CWD and forged a network of support for CWD by bringing INGO and government service providers together. Disability inclusion in Laos is an emergent area and the BNC has demonstrated what can be achieved in approximately two years with dedicated resources.

Recommendation: Disability inclusion interventions need a medium to long term view of change at different levels- individual, family, school and community. Interventions should include a range of participatory approaches and stakeholders to address the understanding of disability, cultural bias about disability, provide non-technical knowledge and techniques that are accessible by teachers.

Learning: Human resource and expertise in the disability field is limited in Laos. Existing health support is fragmented and expertise in the development sector is low.

Recommendation: Systems solutions for referrals, service linkages, institutional capacity building of education and health agencies and DPOs, partnership between INGOs are needed to maximise in country expertise. Using the BNC experience, documentation of the disability service landscape could be mapped to support the implementation of the BEQUAL strategy for Gender, Disability and Social Inclusion.

Learning: Children with complicated disability issues and disadvantage have received targeted support from the BNC. Feedback from children and parents in this situation revealed that a more sensitive approach is needed to ensure the experience of support is meaningful for beneficiaries rather than transactional.

Recommendation: A consultative and participatory approach should be used when working with CWD and their family. Support for CWD should include support at home and at school. For example, children and parents should be consulted at all stages of treatment and activities to ensure the intervention is relevant and enhances the quality of participation. Feedback mechanisms should be included in activities to allow beneficiaries to have input into activities and their support. For instance, consultations could document suggestions from CWD and their carers; follow up with CWD could review agreed actions by the family, the school and program staff and group activities could include a feedback activity.

Gender

Learning: Issues associated with inequality and discrimination are not easily addressed in the short and medium term. Complex factors such as poverty, remoteness, social norms are beyond the scope of the BNC. Instead, inputs such as grants, training and materials have been used as rewards for communities to promote gender equality, specifically equal participation and access. Other equality objectives such as improved girls and women's participation in the decision-making process, agency and leadership will require medium to long term planning.

Recommendation: Methods to increase access and quality of participation in the short and medium term can include gender quotas for committees and training workshops, and improved efforts to conduct in-village activities that are participatory and appropriate for low-literate environments rather than formal workshops.

Learning: Gender mainstreaming in BNC activities have emphasised individual and group (parents, VEDC, students, teachers) support to increase access and participation. Increased access and participation have been largely effective in terms of raising gender equality awareness, participation in activities and activity monitoring that supports gender mainstreaming.

Recommendation: Gender, along with disability, is a commitment in the BNC objectives, the program would be strengthened by articulating its approach in the program plan and M&E framework for achieving gender equality (and disability inclusion) in the short, medium and long term. Additionally, clarifying the scope of the program's gender equality (and disability inclusion) for the life of the program. For instance, the program plan and M&E framework should recognise how the activities will or will not affect gender and disability at the individual, community and institutional levels.

Sustainability

Lesson: Sustainability and scale up thinking has been ad hoc. If the BNC components were intended to be sustainable and scaled up, how this was going to occur is not articulated in the program plan or M&E framework. The L2NL component has organically resulted in various forms of scale up. See examples in section 3.5.1. A weakness in the WASH activity in improving good hygiene practice is the emphasis on installing hardware with limited planning for embedding good practice during implementation and beyond the BNC. The VEDC participation has demonstrated there is potential for the committee to play a central role in supporting learning and reading in the community. A limitation is the lack of community planning for continuing results after the BNC.

Recommendation: Planning for sustainability should occur at the program planning stage and reviewed annually with the activity plan. This planning process should include inputs from key stakeholders (donors, implementing agency, government partners and community) about their understanding of sustainability and how best to achieve this. For example, DFAT may understand sustainability in terms of government ownership of the activity and resources, while the PESS may view sustainability as an activity that has leadership support but no resources to implement. It is important to gauge the range of views to understand and manage stakeholder expectations of what should be left behind after a program. In addition, the process is an opportunity to engage and influence stakeholders who may be important implementing partners.

1 Background

BEQUAL is a flagship, ten-year program led by the Government of Lao PDR, with the support of the Government of Australia and the European Union (EU) to support educationally disadvantaged children to complete quality basic education. Five components contribute to achieving the Basic Education Quality Access in Laos (BEQUAL) objectives: 1) Better resourcing; 2) Increased participation and 3) Effective teaching.¹ The components or Key Result Areas (KRA) include: KRA 1 Policy, planning and co-ordination; KRA2 Increase participation; KRA3 Teacher education; KRA4 Teaching and learning resources; and KRA5 School infrastructure. The BEQUAL NGO Consortium (BNC) was designed to contribute to achieving the BEQUAL End-of-Program-Outcomes (EOPO) for increased participation: more educationally disadvantaged children and young people enrol and regularly participate in primary education.² The BNC is a subcomponent of KRA2 which also includes the BEQUAL Innovation Fund (BEIF). The BEQUAL investment design (DFAT 2014) recognised the contribution of INGOs in the education sector. It states that *“Complementing the work of DESBs, the experience of NGOs and NPAs at the local level will be an asset to the implementation... They have considerable experience involving communities in supporting learning, performance monitoring and accountability; and working with sub-national education administrators in delivering education services in hard to reach areas.”* (DFAT 2014, 29).

BEQUAL NGO Consortium (BNC)

The BNC is a group of four INGOs (ChildFund, Plan International, Save The Children and World Vision,) and is sub-contracted by the BEQUAL managing contractor to deliver a package of activities developed in consultation with MoES and the DFAT. The BNC was intended to complement the work of other areas of BEQUAL and directly support the broader work of MoES related to participation (BNC Action Design 2016). The BNC commenced implementation in early 2016 and concluded late 2018.

The BNC outcome is: all children, particularly non-Lao speakers, girls and children with disabilities, in 171 disadvantaged schools and villages, enrol in and complete a quality primary education, supported by their parents and communities (BNC MEL Framework, 2017). Objectives to achieve this are:

Objective 1: To enable access and increase participation of children disadvantaged by language, gender, disability and ethnicity in schools through improved oral Lao language skills and reading promotion in early grades.

Objectives 2: To strengthen community mechanisms to create healthy supportive learning environments in homes and communities for all disadvantaged children.

Objective 3: 171 target schools adopt good hygiene practices.

BNC activities were implemented in six districts in four provinces by four INGO partners. The table (Figure 1) below summarises the location and key BNC activities. A package of activities was delivered by all BNC partners and some variations of key activities were implemented to ensure local relevance and enabled INGO partners to draw on their organisation expertise.

¹ BEQUAL, 2015, Monitoring and Evaluation Plan 2015-2018 (revised January 2016), p.14.

² BEQUAL is implemented by the managing contractor, Coffey, a Tetra Tech Company.

FIGURE 1 SUMMARY OF BNC ACTIVITIES AND LOCATIONS

		Huaphan		Oudomxay		Luang Prabang	Khammouane	
		Houa-mueng	Xamneua	Houn	Nga ³	Nambak	Nhommalath	Xaybouathong
Number of target schools/ villages		32	25	30	10	30	32	22
INGO Partner		ChildFund	ChildFund	Plan	Plan	Save	World Vision	World Vision
Intervention components	Activities							
Literacy	L2NL	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Reading Promotion	Reading groups/ camps	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Reading buddies ⁴	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Drama groups	•	•	•	•			
	Child Club			•	•			
	Caregiver's Workshops (10 mothers 10 fathers)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Community Engagement Mechanism	VEDC training	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	VEDC small grants	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
WASH	Handwashing stations and activities	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Teeth brushing activities	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Disability Inclusion	Inclusive education plans			•				•
	Disability sensitization	•	•	•	•			•
	Disability support ⁵	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Evaluation of the BNC

The baseline study for the BNC intervention was conducted in July-Aug 2016, the baseline findings focused on indicators for children's enrolment and attendance segregated by gender, ethnicity and disability, Lao language proficiency, parent and community engagement, children's reading habits, availability of reading materials and behavioural change in hygiene practices among children in selected schools. The BNC final evaluation of the interventions covers the implementation period from April 2016 to Sept 2018, approximately two school years.

³ Nga district project in 10 schools and villages was funded by WFP.

⁴ Reading buddies (older children reading together with younger children) was included in the reading camp.

⁵ Disability support included health checks for children identified with disabilities, provision of assistive devices (where appropriate) and provision of learning materials.

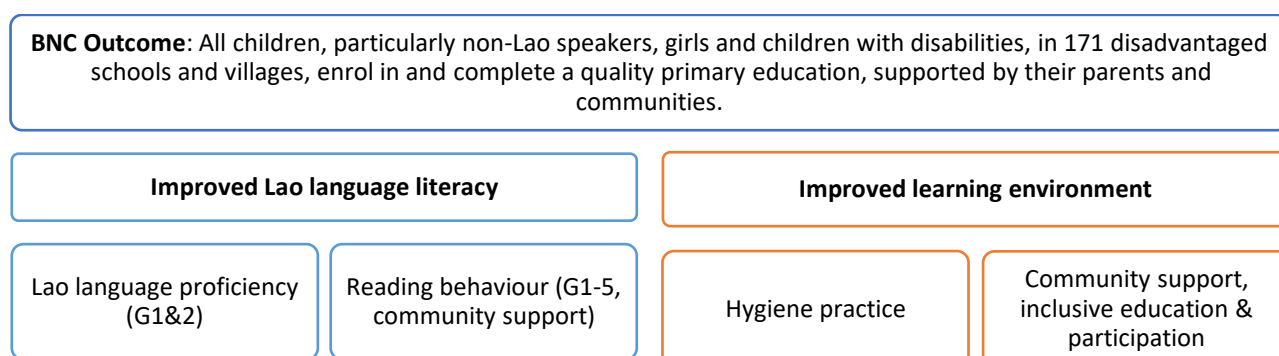
2 Methodology

This final evaluation assesses the BNC outcomes in relation to five evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. Outcomes are also be assessed against baseline results for enrolment rates, Lao language proficiency, community support for children’s participation in reading and completion and utilisation of WASH facilities. The evaluation report also focuses on lessons learned to share with key stakeholders in the BEQUAL program and with the education development sector. Annex 1 is the evaluation Terms of Reference. Key evaluation criteria and questions are listed in Annex 2 with data sources and tools used to answer each evaluation question.

Contribution analysis is used to assess the relationship between the observed intervention results, the BNC inputs and other external factors. The analysis examined the BNC inputs and workplan against the evidence of results achieved towards outcomes and draw conclusions about the project’s contribution to BEQUAL’s access and participation outcome.

The analytical framework uses key concepts in the BNC MEL framework (2017) as areas of investigation. For example, the first key concept is ‘literacy’ which is made up of Lao language proficiency and reading behaviour. The second key concept is ‘learning environment’ which is made up of hygiene practices and inclusive education and participation. The BNC activities address these concepts in various ways. For instance, activities to improve literacy include, improving teaching techniques for literacy instructions, increasing children’s access to reading materials and increasing parent engagement in reading awareness. The proposed conceptual framework is described in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2 KEY CONCEPTS IN THE BNC EVALUATION CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



The units of analysis in this evaluation include individual beneficiaries (students, teachers, parents) and institutions (VEDC, DESB) who have received and/ or implemented the BNC interventions. The units of analysis are also disaggregated by gender, disability, ethnicity and age (for child participants). Analytical procedures for integrating the qualitative and quantitative data are described in Annex 3.

Data collection

Tools used in the baseline study were reviewed by the lead evaluator and Lao Social Research (LSR) in consultation with the CMU and BNC Technical Advisors (TA). Additional tools to gather information have also been developed. Figure 3 lists the data collection tools for the evaluation.

FIGURE 3 DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Data Collection Tools	Details
1 Document review	BNC progress reports and monitoring data. The KRA 2 Rapid Appraisal report and informant data (LADLF 2018) is used to address key questions. Data on enrolment (net and gross) and dropout sourced from EduInfo and BEQUAL (for 2017-18). The analysis compares district level results between BNC target districts. The full baseline dataset for enrolment and dropouts are not available. The final evaluation compares district level data for the period 2014-15 to 2017-18. The BNC Partnership Agreement is assessed through a review of the document and interviews with BNC country directors and BNC manager.
2 Parent focus group discussion	To gather information on family and child reading practices at home after school. Parent/ caregiver support for reading and literacy.
3 Teacher interviews	To gather information on changes to classroom practices, such as teacher’s use of Lao to non-Lao language (L2NL) materials and techniques in lessons. Use of reading promotion materials in classroom. Use of ‘One Word a Day’ technique in Huaphan province site.
4 VEDC focus group discussions	To gather information on their participation in students’ access to and participation in schools (including involvement in village education mapping and any follow-up with individual families). VEDC grants development, implementation and management. Support for reading promotion and WASH activities.
5 Student survey	To gather information on reading practices, language proficiency (letter recognition, most used words and decoding) using Literacy Boost tools from Save the Children’s global tools, disability status and hygiene practices. Self-reported attendance, use of book banks, participation in reading camps/ events held.
6 Village volunteer focus group discussions	Village volunteers who implemented the reading promotion activities were not initially included in the baseline study, however this group is included in the final evaluation.
7 DESB FGD	DESB staff are important implementation counterparts. FGDs will focus on their role, perspectives on BNC impact and sustainability of activities and approaches.
8 Interviews with BEQUAL, EU and DFAT	As key stakeholders in the BNC implementation and management, informant interviews sought perspectives on BNC achievements, challenges and sustainability.

Sampling approach

The evaluation sampling approach is guided by the BNC baseline and intervention activities. In consultation and guidance from CMU and BNC TAs, locations and participant groups were purposefully selected from intervention sites. A control group was not selected in the baseline. Nga district in Oudomxay province is not part of the BNC target area, rather it is a replicated BNC model funded by WFP. Sampling of participant groups were selected from criteria developed by the lead evaluator in consultation with BNC CMU, BNC TAs and LSR. See Annex 4 for the participant group selection criteria.

Locations

28 villages were included the BNC baseline and was sampled again in the evaluation (Figure 4). Due to heavy rain and flooding in 2018, four villages were changed in the evaluation in Houn, Nambak and Xaybouathong districts, see Annex 5 for a list of villages. Schools and villages in the baseline and evaluation was selected based on the criteria of: ethnic profile, rural and remoteness and access by vehicle.

FIGURE 4 SAMPLE LOCATIONS

Province	District	BNC partner
Huaphan	Houamueng Xamneua	ChildFund
Oudomxai	Houn Nga	Plan International
Luang Prabang	Nambak	Save the Children
Khammouane	Nhommalath Xaybouathong	World Vision International

Data collection

A team of 15 enumerators, supervised by the lead evaluator and the LSR survey manager, conducted data collection in seven districts from 17th October to 5th November 2018. A total of 1,404 people participated in the evaluation. Of this 48% (676) were females. Figure 5 lists the participant groups and numbers.

FIGURE 5 PARTICIPANTS IN BNC EVALUATION 2018 BY GENDER

Participant groups	Females	Males	Subtotal
Participants from DFAT, EU, BEQUAL and BNC interviewed	6	2	8
Students surveyed in BNC target schools	427	424	851
Parents in focus groups	128	93	221
Teachers in focus groups	35	50	85
VEDC members in focus groups	41	93	134
Reading activity village volunteers in focus groups	32	50	82
Children with a disability interviewed	2	3	5
Total	671	715	1,404

Up to ten parents who participated in BNC activities were recruited for focus groups. This included five females and five males. Participation of parents varied as this depended on the availability of participants on the day the evaluation team arrived at the village. Every attempt was made to recruit a minimum of six parents and up to ten parents, with gender parity.

Up to five VEDC committee members were recruited for the focus groups. This included the VEDC president, Lao Women’s Union representative, Lao Youth Union representative, Lao National Front representative and parents’ representative. Deputy officers were included if the representative was not available. School principals and teachers were not included in this focus group as these participants were included in the teacher focus group.

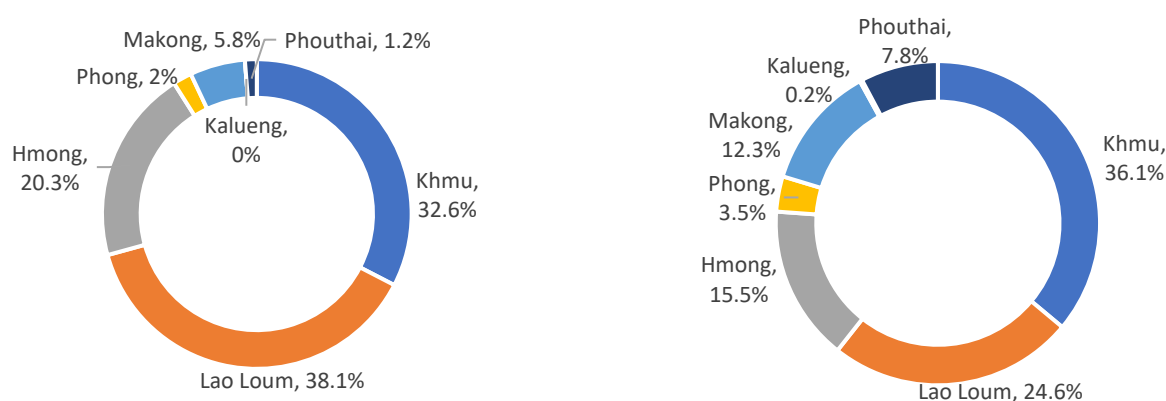
Females and males participated in the same focus group and to ensure equitable participation the evaluation team conducted the focus group in a semi-circle and manage interviews to allow all participants to join in discussions. Fewer males than females participated in the parents focus group. An explanation for this was that men who participated in the BNC activities were absent on the day of the focus group due to agricultural work or wage labour. Focus group moderators included one female and one male. LSR recruited experienced focused group moderators and moderators who are bilingual in Hmong, Khmu and Lue. Bilingual team members were used in focus groups and student surveys when needed. See Annex 4 for more details of participant selection criteria and sample size.

FIGURE 6 STUDENT SURVEY PARTICIPANTS BY GENDER, BASELINE 2016 AND ENDLINE 2018

	Female		Male	
	2016	2018	2016	2018
Number	420	427	418	424
% total students	50.1	50.2	49.9	49.8

The proportion of male and female students in the student survey are comparatively similar between baseline and endline (Figure 6). The sample size of 30 students per school in this evaluation followed the baseline sampling approach. To allow for some student attrition (student refusal to participate in the survey or absence from school during data collection), the evaluation team approached 32 students in the school. With assistance from the school, a list of student names was provided to the evaluation team. The evaluation team selected seven to eight students from grades 2 to 5 in each school. More students were interviewed in the evaluation (851) than the baseline (838). One explanation for the difference in the number of students is that the baseline was conducted during the summer school holidays and the evaluation was conducted at the beginning of the new school year.

FIGURE 7 STUDENT SURVEY PARTICIPANTS BY ETHNICITY, BASELINE 2016 AND ENDLINE 2018 BY ETHNICITY



Source: BNC baseline 2016 (n=838), endline 2018 (n=851)

More ethnic minority students participated in the evaluation than the baseline. 61.9% of students in baseline (2016) were ethnic minorities, in 2018, 75.4% of students were ethnic minorities (Figure 7). The increased proportion of ethnic students in the evaluation is likely to have influenced student responses to the literacy questions in the survey. Positive improvement in reading since the baseline appears to be incremental and is likely to be associated with the increased number of ethnic students. Ideally, the same group of students should be surveyed, however, it was not possible to interview the same group of students from the baseline as student identifiers were not collected.

FIGURE 8 STUDENT SURVEY PARTICIPANTS BY GRADE, BASELINE 2016 AND ENDLINE 2018

	Grade 2		Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5	
	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018
Number	151	214	190	214	195	215	177	208
% total students	21.2	25.1	26.6	25.1	27.3	25.3	24.8	24.4

The proportion of students per grade in the evaluation is approximately 25%. In the baseline grade 3 and 4 represented 26.6% and 27.3% of the sample, more than grades 2 and 5 (Figure 8).

Some challenges were experienced by field teams; however, these were minor and were resolved quickly. For example, to ensure adequate number of focus group participants, teams arrived in the village early and prior to the schedule in the morning before adult participants left the village to tend to their fields. In northern districts, some ethnic adult participants and students had difficulty speaking Lao, the field team used team members who speak Khmu and Hmong or engaged local villagers to translate. Field teams conducted warm up activities comprising of songs and games with students before conducting the student survey. Warm up activities had to be adapted to the available space at school, wet weather and manage children who were not included in the survey.

Data management and analysis

Student surveys were conducted using the Kobo digital form administered on a tablet. Digital forms were uploaded to a Cloud storage. Once the data was cleaned, it was exported to an Excel format for analysis. The LSR team and the lead evaluator had access to the Kobo Cloud account. No personal identifiers were collected from students.

Focus group data was collected using hard copy forms, then entered into a Word file. Each evaluation team also provided field reports with observations about the social and geographical context of each school and village. Focus group data were coded and thematic analysis was used to interpret the results. See Annex 3 for details of the analytical procedure.

Caveats

This evaluation has some minor limitations that the reader should be aware of, however these do not affect the strengths of the findings or weaken the lessons learned.

School and district data on gross enrolment, net enrolment, dropout rate and school attendance from the baseline was not available for comparison with the endline. Instead, the evaluation has used district level data sourced from Lao EduInfo to show trend changes between 2015-16 (baseline timeframe) and 2017-18 (most recent data). The district level data provides indicative changes in the BNC outcome indicators for enrolment and drop outs. Lack of attendance data in EMIS means the evaluation will rely on self-report from students.

Four villages in the evaluation were not included in the 28 villages in the baseline, due to road access and flooding in Sept- Oct 2018. The four replacement villages were selected based on the same criteria as the baseline villages which aimed to sample a mix of ethnic minority villages from rural areas.

The BNC evaluation scope is clearly defined in the TOR and focused on assessing the effectiveness of key interventions against the project objectives. The context of the BNC is that it is a component of the larger BEQUAL program which is undergoing change management and implementation. This context is important in so far as to say that it is not possible for the evaluation findings to provide exact answers for BEQUAL programming, but it may contribute to planning. Data from this evaluation could be re-analysed for additional questions about district and school level perspectives.

3 Findings

Findings from this evaluation are based on a thematic synthesis of primary data (interviews, focus groups and observations) and secondary data (documents). Findings are presented below in sections discussing findings in relation to the evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, impact, sustainability and efficiency. Key evaluation questions set for each of the criteria are described in the TOR (Annex 1).

3.1 Relevance

Relevance of the BNC intervention is defined as the extent to which progress has been achieved towards outcomes and the contribution of results towards the overall BEQUAL goal for access and participation. Overall, the BNC has made significant progress in a relatively short period of two and half years. More specifically, activities and outputs have enabled the BNC to largely achieve its three objectives of 1) increased participation of children through improved Lao language skills and reading; 2) strengthen community support for learning; and 3) target schools adopt good hygiene practices. Looking at each objective, BNC results demonstrate achievements towards project objectives. In this way, activities and outputs are consistent and linked to objectives.

BEQUAL KRA2.1 OUTCOME: All children, particularly non-Lao speakers, girls and children with disabilities, in 171 disadvantaged schools and villages, enrol in and complete a quality primary education, supported by their parents and communities.

BNC OBJECTIVE 1: To enable access and increase participation of children disadvantaged by language, gender, disability and ethnicity in schools through improved oral Lao language skills and reading promotion in early grades.

100%	Target schools had volunteers to conduct reading activities in the community. 616 (267 females) volunteers were mobilised to conduct weekly reading activities with children.
100%	Reading festivals have been or will be held in target villages (by Dec 2018) to promote reading in the community and raise awareness of reading among parents. 13, 191 people have attended these festivals.
82%	Children read books (non-textbooks) at school. 85% read with other students. 5,609 students (2,842 girls) have used book banks in the community.

BNC OBJECTIVE 2: To strengthen community mechanisms to create healthy supportive learning environments in homes and communities for all disadvantaged children.

95%	VEDC grants have been used to support learning at school and improved inclusion. 1,096 VEDC members (425 females) were trained to plan and implement activities using the grant.
100%	Teachers (63/ 21 females) in target schools in Xaybouathong district have received training on Individual Education Plans to support students with a disability and learning difficulty.
91%	Children read at books (non-textbooks) at home. 63% read with older siblings and 47% also read with their parents.

BNC OBJECTIVE 3: 171 target schools adopt good hygiene practices.

- 100% Of target schools have handwashing stations installed. This objective is partially met as good hygiene practice is yet to be adopted by all schools. 37 target schools have significant water access issues that prevent the regular use of handwashing stations.⁶
- 100% Students in target schools who participate in regular handwashing. Included in this group are 15,120 students (7,703 are girls and 62 are children with a disability).

The indicators (gross enrolment, net enrolment and drop-out rates) for the BNC outcome (*All children, particularly non-Lao speakers, girls and children with disabilities, in 171 disadvantaged schools and villages, enrol in and complete a quality primary education, supported by their parents and communities*) could be better aligned. The outcome, objectives and indicators were developed in late 2016 and reviewed in 2017. The indicator- gross enrolment rate as a proxy for change in the proportion of children entering primary school is superfluous as the net enrolment rate is adequate. The addition of the cohort survival or completion rate as an indicator would be relevant to show access to grade 1 and continued participation in primary education to grade 5.

The BNC objectives are aligned with the BEQUAL outcome for increased participation: *more boys and girls, especially those experiencing disadvantage, participate in basic education*. The BNC was designed to complement BEQUAL's improvements in teaching quality which focused on the change in teaching quality, teacher development and support systems.⁷ The BNC objectives and community level intervention has a clear link with BEQUAL's design intention to improve the participation of disadvantaged boys and girls in primary education.

Since the inception of the BNC in early 2016, the operating context has influenced the synergy between the BNC and BEQUAL. For instance, the BEQUAL design document assumed that the program would address demand for education by poor families, via the BNC modality. This assumed that there would be complementary rural livelihood, health and nutrition projects in target communities, but this has not been realised due to changing priorities of the Australian Government and other donors. Another assumption was that the concurrent implementation of the BNC and roll out of new grade 1 curriculum would maximise the BNC intervention for Lao language, reading promotion and strengthening community mechanisms for participation, however curriculum roll out is delayed to 2019-2020 school year.⁸ In response to these changes, the BNC selected activities that have demonstrated to work in the Laos context such as the Fit 4 School Model (GIZ), Lao to non-Lao 4 week language course (LEARN project) and Right to Learn disability support (CRS). The BNC sought collaboration with GIZ, LEARN, CRS and many other organisations as well as drawing on in-house education specialists. At the same time, the BNC CMU liaised with BEQUAL and MoES to ensure input in all BNC activities.

Limited overlap between BNC target districts and other BEQUAL target districts has also posed a challenge for program alignment, however the targeting decision was made before the BNC. The BEQUAL mid-term review (July 2017) identified a lack of synergy within BEQUAL components and

⁶ To cater for high student numbers, some schools built multiple units, making the total number of handwashing stations 221. All schools received hygiene supplies (soap, tooth brushes, toothpaste) provided by the project. BNC, 2018, Annual Narrative Report, November.

⁷ DFAT, 2014, *Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR Investment Design Document*, pp.29-30.

⁸ BEQUAL, 2016, *Annual Plan*.

made recommendations to address this. As a result of the overall mid-term findings, BEQUAL has undergone a review of its program logic, including an update on its participation outcome.⁹

3.2 Effectiveness

The BNC has demonstrated results against its set indicators for the three objectives relating to Lao language teaching for early grade teachers, reading promotion, supportive learning environments and adopting hygiene practices at school. The BNC Monitoring and Evaluation Framework provides a qualitative measure of success of objectives. For example, results statements focus on ‘increase’, ‘reduction’ or ‘improved’. In the absence of quantitative targets for successful achievement of objectives, this section of the findings about BNC effectiveness will compare results between baseline and endline; discuss the intended changes; and explain factors that contribute to the achievement or non-achievement of objectives.

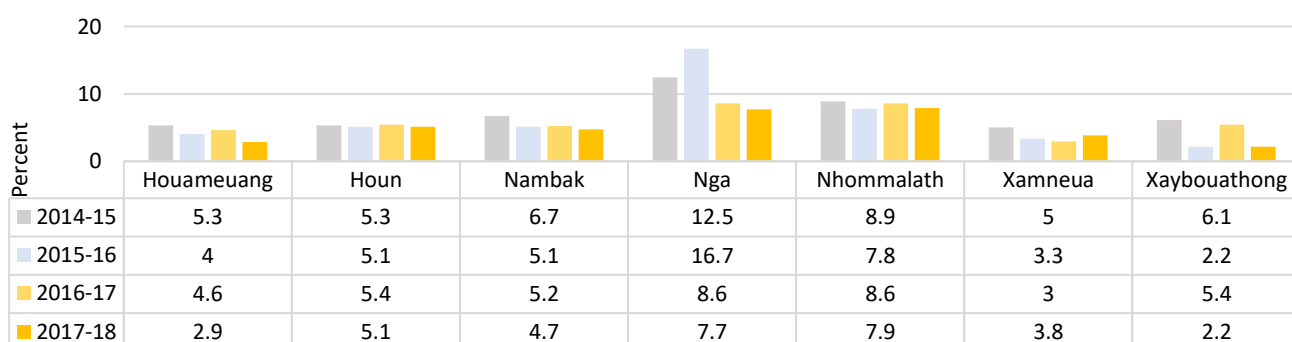
3.2.1 Contribution towards BNC outcomes

The achievement of objectives has contributed towards the BNC outcomes for enrolment, drop out and attendance.¹⁰ District level data for enrolment and drop-out rates for the most recent four years (2014-15 to 2017-18) are presented below to show trends over time in the seven districts.

The dropout rate in primary school over the last four years has been declining in all districts.

Significant declines appear to have been achieved in Nga, Xamneua and Xaybouathong districts (Figure 9). Dropout rates in Houameuang district (Houaphan province 3.1%) and Xaybouathong district (Khammouane province 3.7%) in 2017-18 are below their provincial rates.

FIGURE 9 DROPOUT RATE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION, 2014-15 TO 2017-18



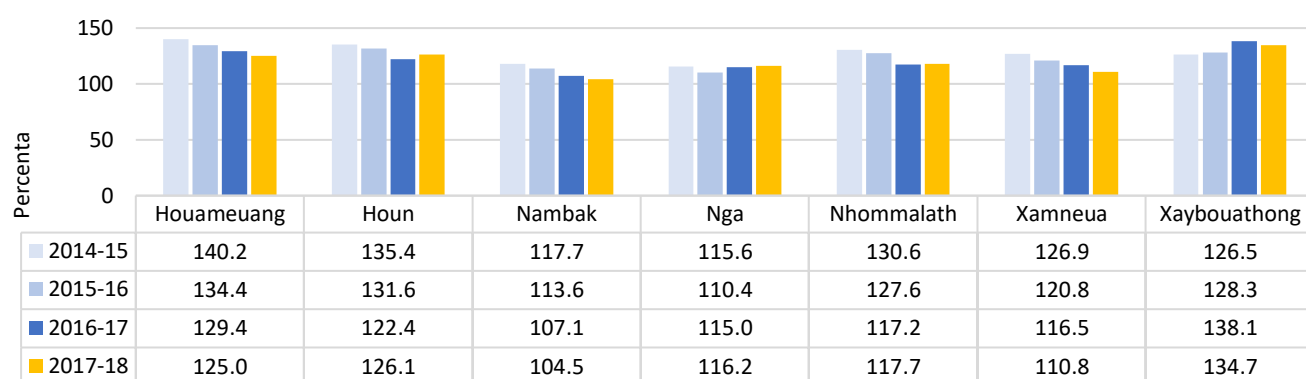
Source: Lao EDUInfo 2014-15 to 2016-17 and MoES School Census 2017-18.

⁹ LADLF, 2018, *BEQUAL revised program logic*.

¹⁰ BNC Outcomes: 1) more boys and especially more girls including those with disability and those from ethnic minority groups enrol in primary school; 2) more boys and especially more girls in targeted schools, including those with disability and from ethnic groups attend school daily; 3) Reduction in the number of boys and girls who drop out from primary school in target districts.

Gross enrolment rate in three districts (Houamueng, Nambak and Xamneua) have been declining in the last four years (Figure 10).¹¹ For other districts the trend appears slightly upward from previous years. The provincial trend where BNC target districts are located, all show a downward trend over the last four academic years. Nambak district (Luang Prabang province 106.4%) and Xamneua district (Houaphan province 113.7%) are the only districts showing gross enrolment rates below the province rate for 2017-18. Several factors are associated with the fluctuation of gross enrolment rates, these may include, an increase in the population of older children who enrol; the influence of village and school consolidation in a catchment area; or changes in data collection methods at the district and provincial levels.

FIGURE 10 GROSS ENROLMENT RATIO IN PRIMARY EDUCATION, 2014-15 TO 2017-18



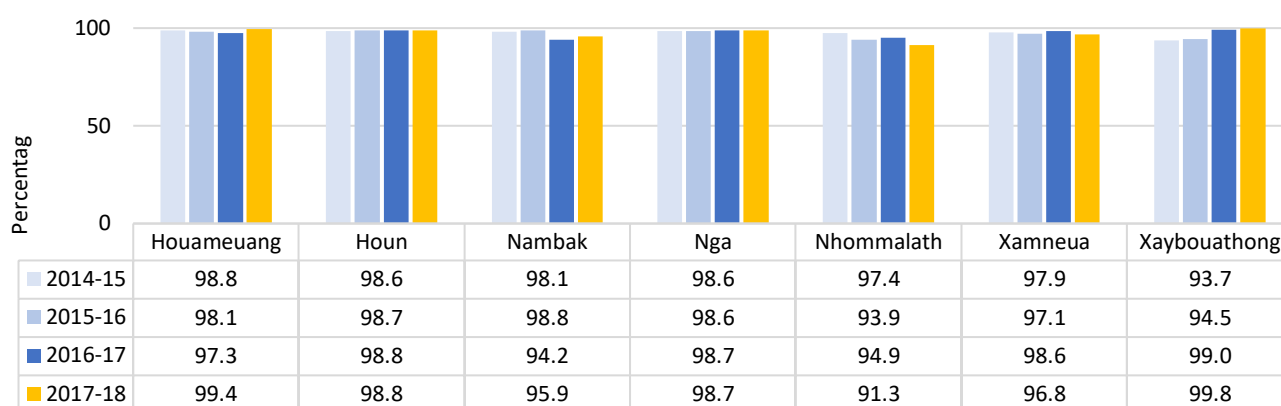
Source: Lao EDUInfo 2014-15 to 2016-17 and MoES School Census 2017-18.

Over the four years, net enrolment ratio has fluctuated annually but on average, net enrolment has remained steady for Houamueng, Houn, Nga and Xamneua (Figure 11).¹² Nhommalath district net enrolment rate appears to be in decline, while Xaybouathong district net enrolment seems to have increased by 6.1 points over the last four years. The net enrolment rates for all provinces in which the target districts are located show incremental increases over time towards 100%. Net enrolment rates in Houamueng district (Houaphan province 98%) and Xaybouathong district (Khammouane province 99.1%) are slightly above their provincial rates in 2017-18.

¹¹ Gross enrolment rate (grades 1 to 5) measures the percentage of students across all grades and ages compared to the number of children at the correct recruitment age(s) in the school catchment area population at each grade. For instance, gross enrolment rate for grade 1 above 100% indicates that a significant proportion of students entering grade 1 are older than the age admission criteria of 6 years old for primary school in Lao PDR.

¹² Net enrolment rate (grades 1 to 5) measures the proportion of students who match the age(s) of admission criteria for their grade compared to the number of children at the correct recruitment age(s) in the school catchment area population for each grade. For instance, net enrolment rate for grade 1 over 100% indicates children from outside the school catchment area are traveling to attend school. If rates are significantly above 100%, it is possible that other villages without schools have been resettled into the sample school catchment area. If rates are below 100%, the population age for each grade has not enrolled in school.

FIGURE 11 NET ENROLMENT RATIO IN PRIMARY EDUCATION, 2014-15 TO 2017-18



Source: Lao EDUInfo 2014-15 to 2016-17 and MoES School Census 2017-18.

To achieve the Millennium Development Goals, the Government of Lao PDR (GoL) and education line agencies have focused on improving access to primary education in the last decade. Policies put in place by MoES to encourage parents to enrol their children in primary education has improved the gross and net enrolment rates. Feedback from parents and VEDC members in this evaluation confirm that the financial penalty for parents who fail to enrol their children in primary school has been effective. VEDC members in this evaluation also describe supportive measures used by the committee to facilitate enrolment, such as reduced or waived school fees for poor or large families; donations of uniform and stationary for poor families and home visits by VEDC members and teachers to encourage parents to send their children to school.

Attribution of the BNC intervention for the improved gross and net enrolment rates is difficult as policy to penalise parents for not enrolling their children appears to be a strong influence on parental behaviour. To motivate parents to enrol their children requires addressing a myriad of complex issues related to household poverty that is beyond the scope of the BNC.

Inclusion of primary education completion rate as an indicator for the BNC outcome would be relevant for monitoring student cohort continued participation from grades 1 to 5. Particularly for interventions that have a medium to long term horizon covering multiple districts. The completion rate will provide aggregate trends that will show change over time and locations.

The **main reason for student absence from school is illness** (50% for boys and 45% for girls). Health issues affecting student attendance was identified in the baseline and remains a significant issue reported by students, parents, VEDCs and teachers in this evaluation. The student survey relied on self-reporting of reasons for absence from school. Student response for 'illness' included general descriptions of: fever, headaches, stomach aches, feeling unwell or sick. As children could not identify the condition or cause, responses were classified as an 'illness'. In this evaluation, five students identified as having 'difficulty' with walking to and from school of this, three reported the main reason for absence from school was being ill. It is difficult to assess through the survey if the illness was related to a child's disability as respondents could not describe their condition.

While the evaluation did not assess the health context of villages, the self-reported illness causing absence from school is likely due to the poor levels of nutrition and hygiene in rural communities in Laos. Recent data from the World Health Organisation identifies: 44% of children under five years old suffer from stunting, 27% are underweight and 6% suffer from wasting. Children in the poorest

households are three times more likely to be stunted than children in the richest households. The stunting rate among young children living in households with poor water and sanitation facilities is higher (51%) than that of children in households with access to improved water and sanitation facilities (34%). Infant and young child feeding practices are generally poor with only 40% of children being exclusively breastfed for 6 months.¹³ This issue of health and nutrition of children affects their ability to participate in school and learning. The BNC partly addressed this through the school hygiene activities. Opportunities to strengthen children's health and hygiene should be sought through collaboration with health/ nutrition organisations and projects in target areas and approach behaviour change through a phased approach where change is identified in the short, medium and long term. For example, The World Food Programme's (WFP) school feeding was implemented in Houn district, Oudomxay province, however there was no link evident between school meals program provided by WFP and the BNC school hygiene activity. The promotion of nutrition and hygiene together at school level would have strengthened messages to students, teachers and the community about good nutrition and learning.

Helping parents or family at home was the second most common reason for student absenteeism, followed by farm work for both girls and boys (Figure 12). Compared with the baseline, there is a decline in the proportion of students who work to help parents at home and on the farm. In 2016, 38% of students reported being absent from school to help parents, this reduced to 29% in 2018.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, more girls than boys are absent from school due to caring for younger siblings (5%). On a positive note, more girls report they have not missed school (24%) than boys (18%) in the last school year.

Feedback from teachers, parents and VEDC members about student attendance suggests that there is a small proportion of children in some villages that frequently miss school due to the child's reluctance to attend. A common explanation provided by participants in the evaluation is that the child is 'naughty'.¹⁵ Another common reason for absence from school as observed by teachers, VEDC members and parents is the demand for child labour during periods of planting and harvest.¹⁶ Most households in villages that the evaluation team visited rely on agriculture for livelihood, participants in focus group discussions report that it was common for children to be away one week during planting and harvest times to help parents tend to their fields. Families that rely on cash wages from farm labour work may take their children out of school for up to three months. Frequent and prolonged absenteeism are associated with complex social and economic pull factors that are beyond the scope of the BNC interventions.

Examples of the complex livelihood factors affecting student attendance and learning from focus groups include the following:

¹³ <http://www.wpro.who.int/laos/topics/nutrition/en/>

¹⁴ The decline may be artificial as the baseline was conducted in July 2016 during the wet season and school holidays and this evaluation was conducted in Sept- Oct 2018 at the beginning of the school year and before harvest period.

¹⁵ It is likely that this group of children who frequently avoid attending school despite being counselled by teachers and VEDCs are experiencing complex underlying cognitive, social and health issues.

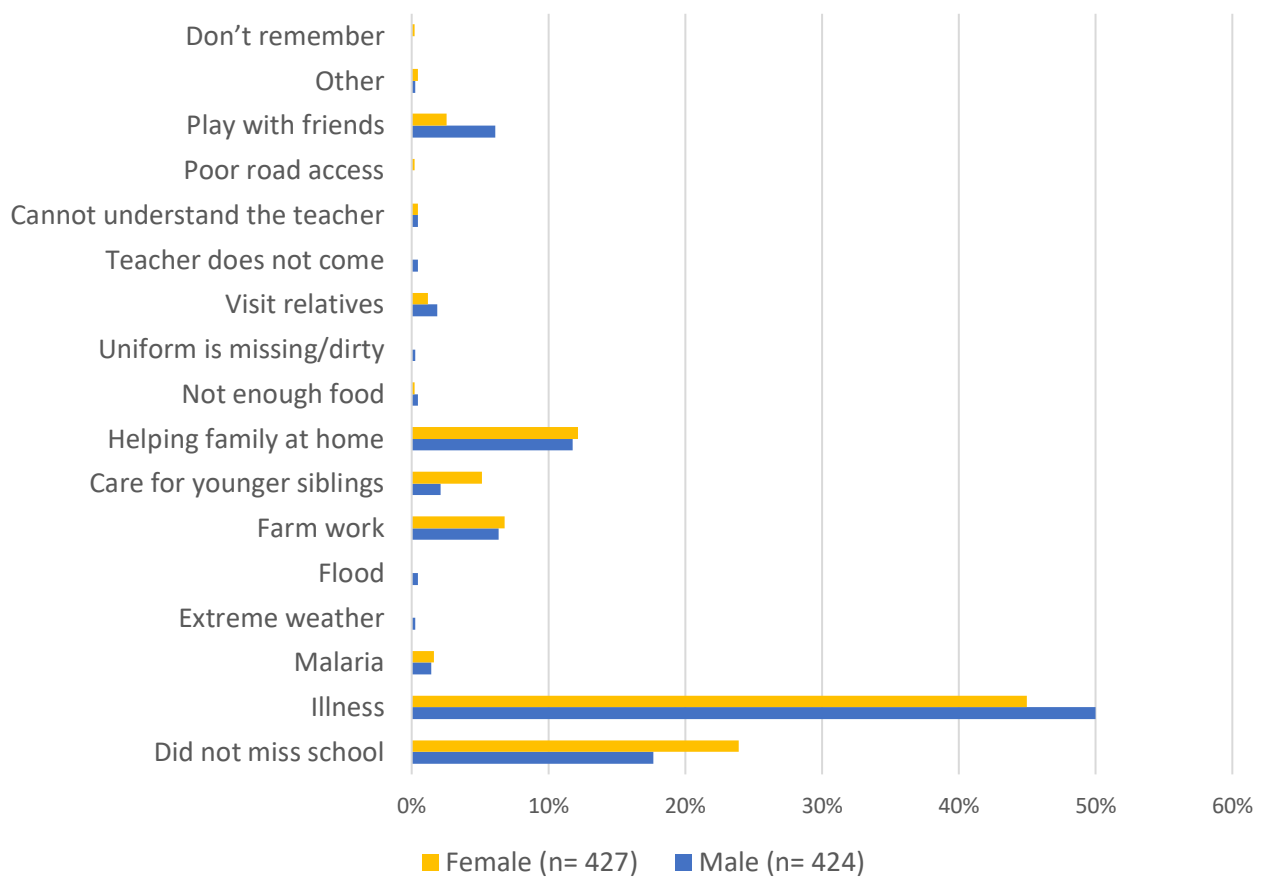
¹⁶ Teachers, parents and VEDC members report that children in grade 3 to 5 are more likely to attend school regularly as they are independent enough to get ready for school, travel to and from school and be left unsupervised at home.

There are six families in our village that live and work in their fields and it is too far for their children to walk to school every day. -Parent Focus Group, Tadtalae village, Houn district, Oudomxay province.

Our children missed school last year because they had to help with looking after the buffalos and rice planting. – Parents Focus Group, Nongpheu village, Xaybouathong district, Khammouane province.

In this village, families do not have rice to eat 3 to 5 months in a year and so they have plant maize to sell for money to buy rice. Parents who come to ask us about their children’s participation in activities are those that are better off and those parents that can read and write. -Volunteer Focus Group, Tadtalae village, Houn district, Oudomxay province.

FIGURE 12 MAIN REASONS FOR STUDENT ABSENCE FROM SCHOOL BY GENDER, 2018



Source: BNC evaluation, student survey (n=851) 2018

Since 2016, both female and male students have decreased the period of time absent from school in the last school year. Students in all districts have shown to have decreased the period of absenteeism since 2016 (Figure 13). Of all students in this evaluation 90% (n= 767) of students report that they attended school five days a week, the week before the evaluation team visited. Students in Houamueng and Xamneua districts in Houaphan province had the highest

proportion of students attending school five days the previous week, respectively- 96% and 97%.¹⁷ Based on student recall of their attendance, five -day attendance at school by ethnicity appears to have improved for all groups, except Lao students.¹⁸ For instance:

- Phong students improved attendance from 82% (2016) to 97% (2018)¹⁹;
- Hmong students improved their attendance from 84% (2016) to 89% (2018);
- Makong students improved their attendance from 87% (2016) to 90% (2018);
- Phouthai students improved their attendance from 90% (2016) to 92% (2018);
- the proportion of Lao students who attended school five days a week reduced from 95% (2016) to 90% (2018).

Although these results are based on student recall of the last school year, reports from parents, VEDC and teachers concur when asked about school attendance in the last school year. Parents and teachers often attribute improved school attendance by most students to a range of BNC activities that engage students in learning. Namely, learning Lao language through stories, activities, songs and reading activities in the community. Common observations from focus groups include the following:

Children are learning better than before because at school, the teachers have new teaching techniques and activities for children to play. This makes children want to come to school and read more.- Parents Focus Group, Paja village, Houamueng district, Houaphan province.

The reading activities are very effective because students who participate in the reading groups seem more engaged in learning in my class. For example, these students can answer questions I ask them. The learning materials provided by [BNC] project are interesting to children so it motivates them to want to go to school and enjoy with their learning. -Teachers Focus Group, Kengmouang village, Nhommalath district, Khammouane province.



Learning materials used by a teacher for Lao language, Houamueng district, Houaphan province.

¹⁷ Houamueng and Xamneua districts have lower poverty rates than other BNC districts. Teachers and VEDCs in these districts reported that households have adequate income and livelihoods to enable their children to attend school regularly.

¹⁸ Baseline dataset for attendance was not available. Comparisons between 2016 and 2018 uses data from the BNC baseline report. Emerging Markets Consulting (2016), *NGO Consortium Key Result Area 2.1 Baseline study*, p.15.

¹⁹ Phong students are from Houamueng and Xamneua districts.

FIGURE 13 STUDENT ABSENCE DUE TO HELPING PARENTS BY DISTRICT, 2016 AND 2018

	Total		Houn		Houamueng		Nambak		Nhommalath		Nga		Xamneua		Xaybouathong	
	2016 (n= 329)	2018 (n= 851)	2016 (n =56)	2018 (n= 121)	2016 (n= 31)	2018 (n= 109)	2016 (n= 26)	2018 (n= 122)	2016 (n= 55)	2018 (n= 127)	2016 (n= 49)	2018 (n= 120)	2016 (n= 33)	2018 (n= 120)	2016 (n= 79)	2018 (n= 132)
Not absent from school	2%	48%	4%	49%	6%	55%	0%	35%	0%	43%	2%	41%	6%	65%	0%	48%
One day	35%	23%	57%	17%	48%	21%	23%	30%	24%	28%	45%	17%	58%	11%	11%	34%
<1 wk	35%	28%	23%	29%	26%	24%	46%	33%	40%	28%	35%	41%	21%	22%	47%	18%
1 to 2 wks	14%	2%	13%	4%	10%	0%	19%	2%	15%	1%	12%	2%	6%	3%	20%	0%
2 to 3 wks	12%	0%	4%	0%	6%	0%	12%	0%	22%	0%	4%	0%	6%	0%	22%	0%
3 wks to 1 mth	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
> 1 mth	1%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%
Don't Know	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

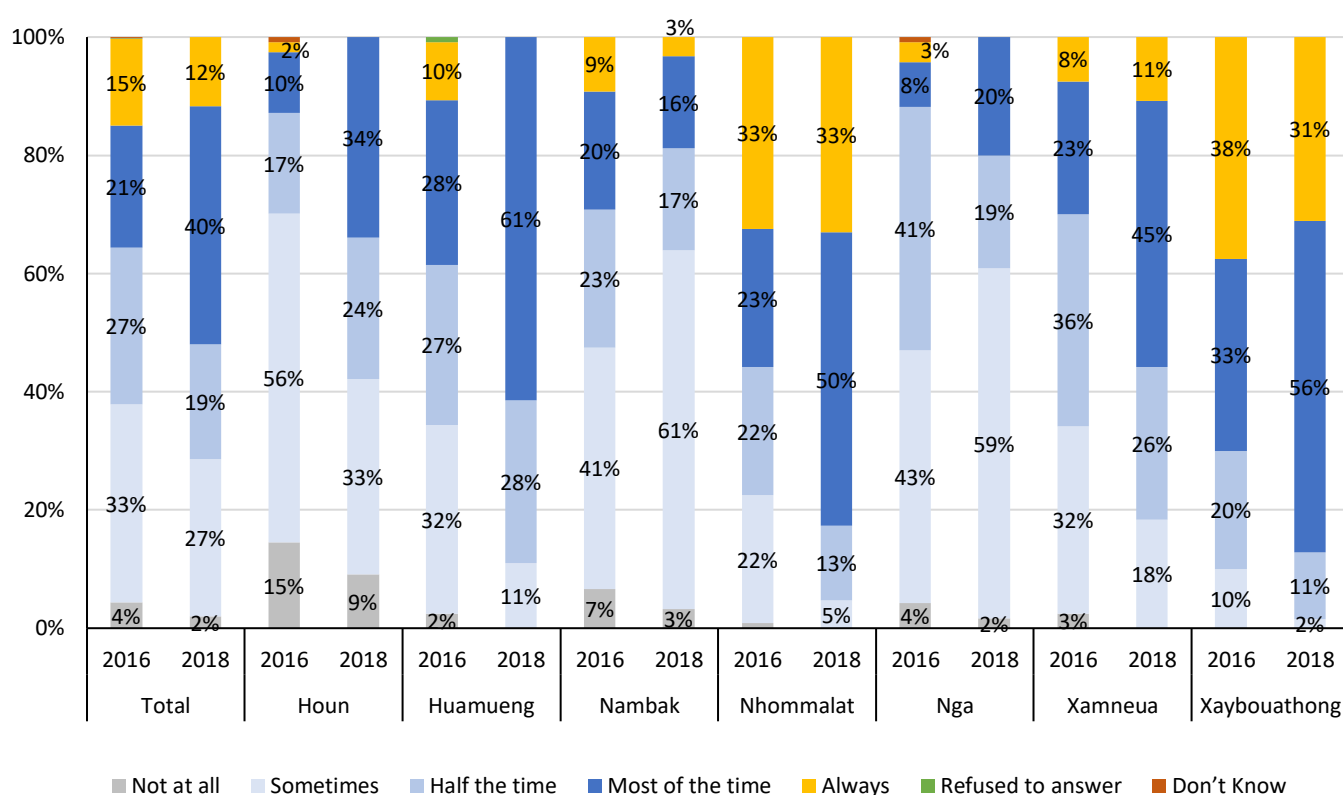
Source: BNC student survey baseline (n= 329) 2016, endline (n=851) 2018

Note: 2016 results include data that is complete and excludes grade 1 students.

3.2.2 Achievement of BNC objectives

The BNC achieved its objective for enabling participation of disadvantaged children. Student experience of learning Lao language has improved with better instructions and techniques used by teachers. The proportion of students who understand their teacher’s instructions in Lao language ‘most of the time’ increased from 21% (2016) to 40% (2018) (Figure 14). Except for Nambak district, students in all districts improved their understanding of the teacher’s instructions in Lao language since the baseline. Improvements in Nambak district is the increase of students understanding the teacher’s instructions ‘sometimes’ from 41% in 2016 to 61% in 2018.

FIGURE 14 PROPORTION OF STUDENTS WHO CAN UNDERSTAND THEIR TEACHER’S INSTRUCTIONS IN LAO LANGUAGE, 2016 AND 2018



Source: BNC student survey, 2016 baseline (n=838), 2018 endline (n= 851).

Results by ethnicity show that all non-Lao students have improved their understanding of the teacher’s instructions in Lao language ‘most of the time’ and ‘always’ (see Figure 15). Comparing 2016 and 2018 results, Lao students also reported an increased understanding of teacher’s instructions for ‘most of the time’ from 29% to 50%.

Comparing results between 2016 and 2018 student surveys, there is an increase among girls’ and boys’ understanding the teacher’s instructions. Male students who report understanding the teacher’s instructions in Lao language increased from 19% (2016) to 38% (2018). In 2016, 22% of female students reported they understood the teacher’s instructions and this response increased to 42% in 2018.

FIGURE 15 STUDENT UNDERSTANDING OF TEACHER INSTRUCTION IN LAO LANGUAGE BY ETHNIC GROUP, 2016 AND 2018

	Hmong		Kaleung		Khmu		Makong		Phong		Phouthai		Lao	
	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018
Not at all	13%	5%	0%	0%	4%	3%	0%	0%	6%	0%	10%	0%	1%	0%
Sometimes	56%	55%	0%	0%	39%	38%	40%	3%	31%	13%	30%	0%	15%	14%
Half the time	21%	22%	0%	0%	29%	24%	21%	23%	44%	17%	0%	3%	28%	15%
Most of the time	7%	17%	0%	50%	19%	34%	21%	56%	19%	67%	50%	49%	29%	50%
Always	3%	2%	0%	50%	8%	1%	17%	18%	0%	3%	10%	49%	27%	21%

Source: BNC student survey 2016 baseline (n=838) and 2018 endline (n=851)

More students can respond to their teacher in Lao language. For instance, 57% of students in the 2016 survey reported they could respond to the teacher’s question in Lao language, this increased to 69% of students in 2018. Most parents (95%, n=209) in this evaluation also made the observation that their children are using more Lao words as a result of attending school and participating in reading activities in the last two years. Of these parents, 78% (n=164) reported improvements in their children’s interest and motivation to speak Lao and engage with learning at school. Students in Houamueng and Xamneua districts received an additional activity of ‘One Lao Word a Day’. Feedback from VEDCs, teachers, parents and volunteers in these districts suggest that the activity has enhanced the L2NL course and Lao language curriculum.

Results from the student survey indicate that both female and male students are more willing to speak Lao in the classroom. In 2016, 60% of female students reported they could respond to the teacher’s questions in Lao and this increased to 69% in 2018.

Results by ethnicity also show a mostly positive change. Except for Hmong students, more ethnic minority and Lao students reported they could respond to a teacher’s in question in Lao language in 2018 than in 2016.²⁰ The proportion of Hmong students, mostly from Houn, Nga and Nambak districts, who reported they could respond to their teacher in Lao language decreased from 32% (2016) to 27% (2018). The evaluation team observed that Hmong communities in these districts tend to live in remote and mono-ethnic villages with limited contact with other ethnic groups which mean parents and children have less exposure to Lao language. Hmong communities in Xamneua and Houamueng districts, settle in villages with two or more other ethnic groups, are closer to markets, roads and trade which increase exposure to Lao language. See Annex 6 for summarised results by districts.

Reading promotion activities contributed to achievements of the BNC objective for increasing children’s participation in schools (objective 1) and strengthening supportive learning environments at home and community (objective 2). Multiple BNC activities promote reading, such as, the 616 (267 females) village volunteers conducting regular reading activities; carers workshop with 20 families in each target village to increase parent’s and carer’s knowledge and skills to support reading at home; access to books (books banks at school and community, mobile library,

²⁰ Students who can respond to the teacher’s question in Lao language by ethnicity: Hmong 32% (2016) and 27% (2018); Khmu 46% (2016) and 53% (2018); Phong 50% (2016) and 87% (2018); Makong 66% (2016) and 96% (2018); Kaleung 0% (2016) and 100% (2018); Phouthai 60% (2016) and 100% (2018); Lao 79% (2016) and 91% (2018).

book festivals); and grants and training for Village Education Development Committees (VEDC) to support learning and inclusion in and outside of the school.

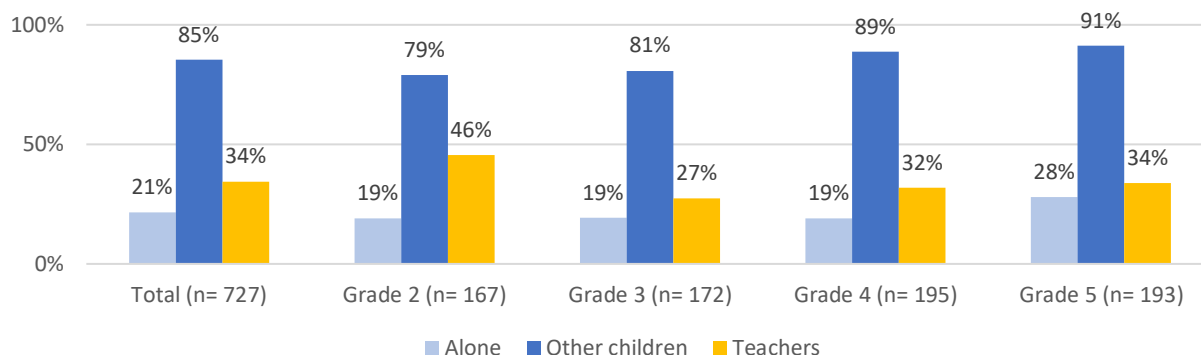
Schools are providing opportunities for reading. Most students are reading story books at school.²¹

Of all students surveyed in this evaluation, 86% (n=727) report that they read books at school (excluding textbooks). More girls (87%, n= 371) reported reading than boys (84%, n= 357) at school. These results indicate that teachers, parents, VEDC members and volunteers have actively encouraged equal opportunities for girls and boys to read. Students reported that they mostly read with other children (85%); followed by teachers (34%) and alone (22%). The proportion of grade 2 students who report that they read with their teacher (46%) is higher than in other grades (Figure 16). Based on grade 2 student self-report of reading with their teacher and feedback from teachers who received L2NL training and coaching, the high proportion of grade 2 reading with their teachers suggests that teachers have applied skills learned from the BNC training and coaching in story reading with children.



Weekly reading group organised by village volunteers in Kiewpha village, Houn district, Oudomxay province.

FIGURE 16 READING AT SCHOOL BY GRADE, 2018



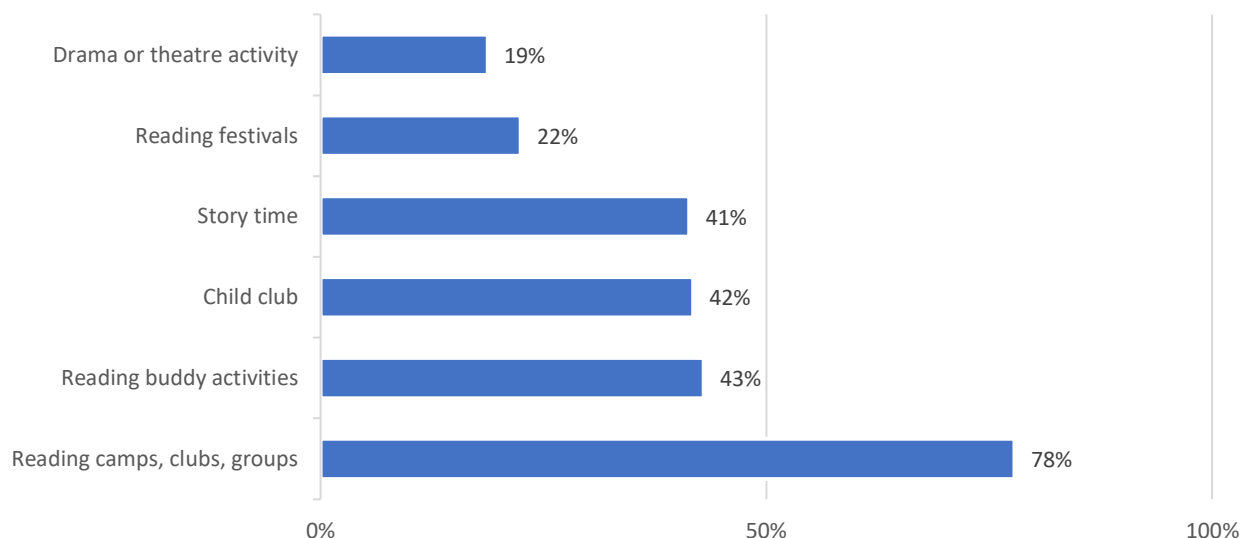
Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=727), 2018

The BNC has strengthened community- based mechanisms to support learning. Students have increased their access to a range of opportunities to read books in the community. Of the 851 students in this evaluation, 677 (80%) reported that they have attended reading activities in their

²¹ Schools in the six BNC districts and Nga district were provided with a package of story books, similar to those provided to volunteers to conduct reading activities. Schools were encouraged to establish reading corners and to incorporate story reading in lessons.

communities (Figure 17). Reading camps and groups were attended by 78% of students, followed by reading in Reading buddy activities (43%), Child Clubs (42%) and Story time (41%).²²

FIGURE 17 READING ACTIVITIES ATTENDED BY STUDENTS IN THE COMMUNITY, 2018



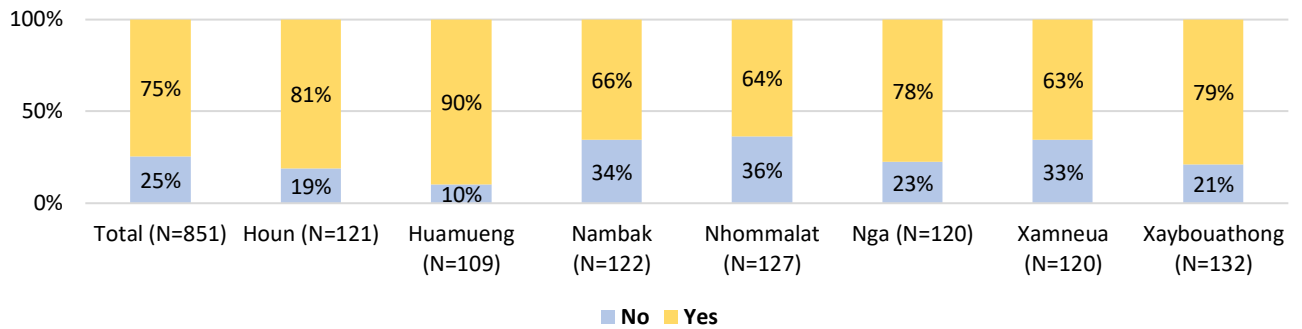
Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=677), 2018

At these events, most students reported that they read with other children (82%), followed by teachers (12%), alone (4%) and parents (2%). The distribution of these response did not vary significantly for boys and girls.

Students have increased their reading at home. Baseline data on proportion of children who have access to story books at home was 64% (2016) and this increased to 98% in 2018. In addition, students reporting that they study at home 3-4 days a week have also increased from 26% (2016) to 34% (2018). Students reporting studying 3-4 days per week have increased in all districts, except Xaybouathong district. The most significant increase in study time at home for students in Xaybouathong is 1-2 days per week, 33% in 2016 and this increased to 55% in 2018. Most students (75% or 634 children) in this evaluation (Figure 18) reported borrowing a story book to read from school book banks or libraries (63%) or reading activities organised by volunteers (37%). Access to story books and facilitated reading in school and the community has contributed to many students borrowing books.

FIGURE 18 CHILDREN WHO HAVE BORROWED BOOKS TO READ, 2018

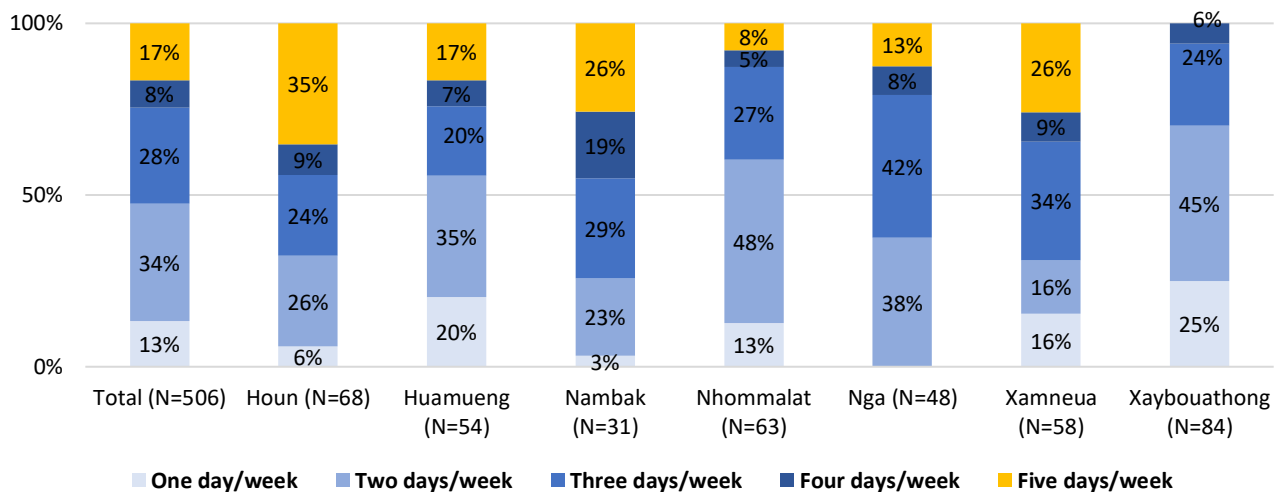
²² BNC partners conducted community-based reading activities that utilised their in-house expertise and resources. With exception of the weekly reading groups conducted by volunteers, the format of other community-based reading activities was determined by BNC partners.



Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=851), 2018

Of those students who reported borrowing books to read at home, 87% reported they read at home two days or more a week (Figure 19). More students in Houn (35%), Nambak (26%) and Xamneua (26%) districts read five days a week, more than other districts.

FIGURE 19 FREQUENCY OF READING AT HOME BY STUDENTS, 2018



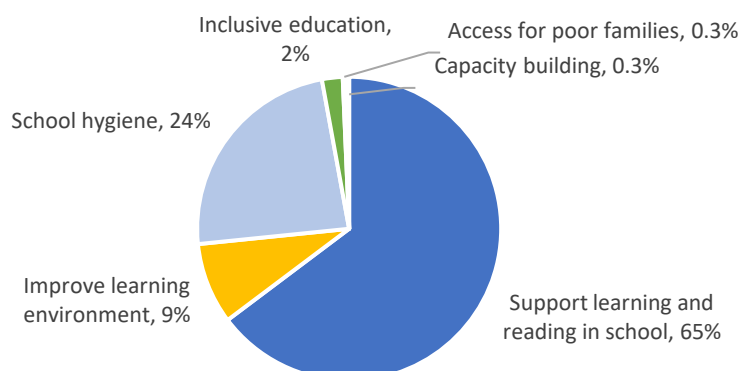
Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=506), 2018

COMMUNITY MECHANISMS TO SUPPORT LEARNING SHOW SIGNS OF STRENGTHENING. THERE IS A DIVERSE RANGE OF ACTIVITIES IMPLEMENTED BY THE VILLAGE EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE (VEDC) AND THE USE OF THE BNC SMALL GRANTS AIMED AT INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION (

Figure 20).²³ Across the 171 target villages, 1,521 (425 or 28% females) VEDC members contributed to improving learning in and outside of school.

²³ Small grants of 3 million LAK in Nambak district and 4 million LAK in other districts were provided in target villages.

FIGURE 20 DISTRIBUTION OF ACTIVITIES IMPLEMENTED USING THE VEDC SMALL GRANTS IN 171 VILLAGES, 2016-2018



Source: BNC Co-ordination Management Unit

Most VEDCs used the small grant to support learning and reading (65%) at school through a range of materials for music, sports, craft, writing and reading for boys, girls, ethnic children who are experiencing poverty and children with a disability. Direct support for children with a disability using this grant was carried out by 43 VEDCs.

The second most common use for the small grants was to improve school hygiene, this was mostly used to install hand washing stations and improve water access for cleaning and drinking.²⁴ Although villages in Houn and Nambak districts used most of their grants to install hand washing stations, villages in Xaybouathong, Nhommalath and Houamueng districts also use their grants to address hygiene issues, namely drinking water for students (see Annex 8 for more details). The focus on improving water access in these grants is indicative of the significant water issue in many villages in target districts.

The small grants enabled VEDCs to perform one of their traditional functions in school facility management. VEDC members in this evaluation all described mobilising the community to contribute labour and materials. VEDCs in Houamueng, Xamneua and Houn districts demonstrate initiative such as collecting funds from households to top the small grant; organising a donation of rice for village volunteers as an incentive to continue reading activities after the BNC is closed, encouraging parents to spend their income on soap and tooth paste and hold monthly community meeting at school to continue promoting learning and asking parents to contribute food for the meeting.²⁵

Another example includes:

We [VEDC] have notified parents to bring children/nieces/nephews or disabled children to register at school this year. There's one disabled student and we have encouraged her

²⁴ Houn and Nambak districts did not have a separate budget for the BNC WASH components, instead the VEDC small grants was used to implement the handwashing stations and teeth brushing activities.

²⁵ These villages include: Paja, Korhing, Phiengdee and Pakathai in Houamueng district. Mokprai-Moksouan village in Houn district.

parents to send to her to school by buying a bicycle for her older sister, who is in grade 8 to take her to school. -VEDC Focus Group, Nathong village, Xamneua district, Houaphan province.

The VEDC small grants have also facilitated local solutions and provide an opportunity to extend the Committee's role to support inclusion and learning and not just facilities maintenance and administration. The grant proposal process emphasised gender and disability inclusion, which required all VEDCs in the 171 target villages to account for the participation of girls, children with a disability and those who are disadvantaged in their village. As a result of mainstreaming gender and disability into the VEDC small grants process, all grants proposals identified the distinct needs of boys and girls in the community and 43 VEDC grants identified children with a disability in their proposals. In this way, VEDCs developed skills in identifying the differentiated needs of children by gender, disability and disadvantage. In addition, training provided by the BNC on school-based management, village mapping, School Development Plans and financial management have contributed to skilling VEDCs to perform their role as a conduit between the community and school.

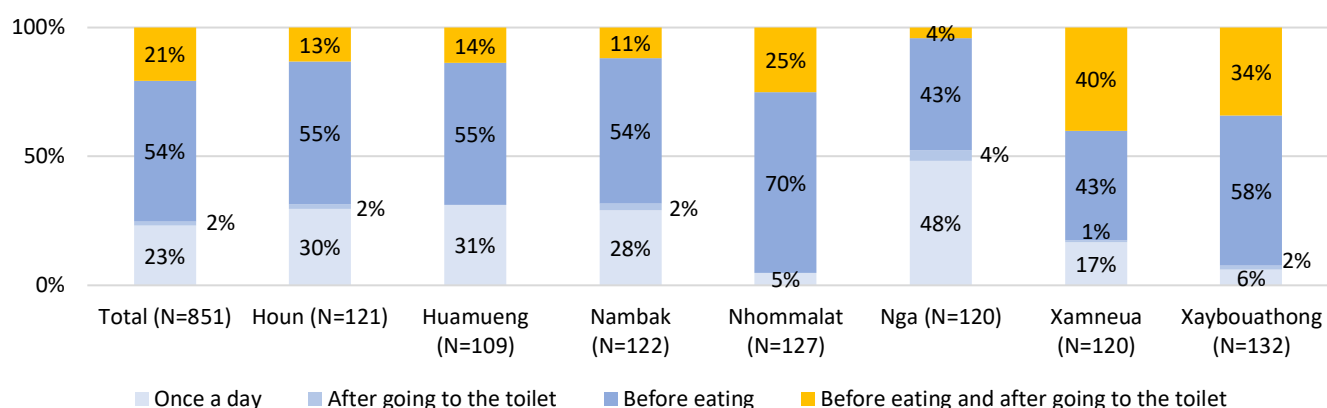
Of the 1,521 VEDC members who supported the BNC implementation, 890 (182 females) received training. Some VEDCs that are not functioning well, implemented the small grant as planned but with minimum effort despite training and coaching from the DESB and BNC team. That is, the committee participated in the training, conducted training and meetings as required but did not develop ideas for maximising the grant or sustaining the results beyond the BNC. The grant did not change the function of these VEDCs, instead a facilitated approach is needed to capacitate low performing VEDCs if they are to be a strong local mechanism. For instance, follow up post training and coaching by DESBs and program staff in the first year of implementation would support VEDC members become orientated in their responsibilities. A phased approach to capacity building could include, incentives in the subsequent year(s) for VEDCs to achieve agreed results and demonstrate behaviours, such as developing a proposal for action or a plan for sustaining results. Program staff would also need to be equipped to assess VEDC functions and provide approach coaching responses. This approach of encouraging and rewarding initiative will take time to develop among VEDCs as an entity, they currently serve to comply with DESB instructions and monitor for DESB and PESS.

Most of the target villages in the BNC have improved WASH facilities and are making progress towards behaviour change at school. Students are aware of hand washing and teeth brushing as a result of activities and materials being available at school. Teachers, with support from DESB and BNC district teams, have implemented some activities to promote handwashing and teeth brushing at school.

THE SCHOOL-BASED HYGIENE PROMOTION ACTIVITIES HAVE RAISED AWARENESS OF REGULAR HAND WASHING AND TEETH BRUSHING. MORE STUDENTS IN XAMNEUA, XAYBOUATHONG AND NHOMMALATH DISTRICTS COULD RECALL APPROPRIATE HAND WASHING BEFORE EATING AND AFTER GOING TO THE TOILET (

Figure 21). Most students in this evaluation recalled that they should use soap and water (92%) to wash their hands. 61% (n= 520) of students reported washing their hands the day before the evaluation team visited the school.

FIGURE 21 STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF WHEN TO WASH HANDS, 2018

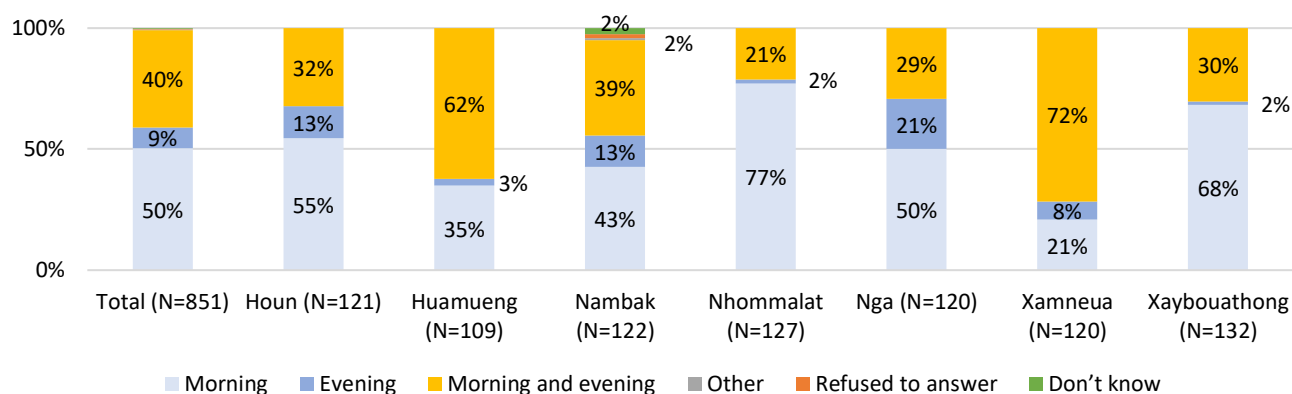


Source: BNC evaluation, student survey (n= 851), 2018

However, the message about regular hand washing has not been well understood by many students in the evaluation as indicated by the proportion of responses for hand washing ‘once a day’; ‘after going to the toilet’; and ‘before eating’.

Messages about regular teeth brushing are inconsistently received by students. Of all students in this evaluation, only 40% (n= 343) could recall appropriate teeth brushing at morning and evening times (Figure 22). However, more students in Houamueng (62%) and Xamneua (72%) districts could identify appropriate brushing twice a day. When asked if students brushed their teeth yesterday, only 44% (n= 377) reported they had. More students in Xamneua (67%); Nga (60%); Xaybouathong (55%) and Houn (54%) reported brushing their teeth the day before the evaluation team visited. Responses between boys and girls about hand washing and teeth brushing have minor differences of 1-2% which is not significant enough to suggest hygiene knowledge and practice have been adopted by one gender more than the other.

FIGURE 22 STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF WHEN TO BRUSH TEETH, 2018



Source: BNC evaluation, student survey (n=851) 2018

3.3 Efficiency

The assessment of efficiency in this evaluation is in relation to the cost-efficiency of the BNC implementation. In this section, the BNC cost efficiency is assessed on expenditure against budget and expenditure on beneficiaries. In the absence of a control group to compare cost-efficiencies, the assessment is therefore based on an assessment of the BNC against its budget and outputs achieved (beneficiaries reached).

The total budget for the BNC is approximately AUD6.5million for the period April 2016 to Dec 2018. The total expenditure, as at Sept 2018 is about AUD5.8million.²⁶ The BNC expenditure is expected to be underspent by approximately 1%.²⁷ Planned activities will be implemented and the budget slightly under spent. In this light the BNC is efficient.

Efficiency in terms of beneficiaries served is another way to understand cost efficiency. The number of beneficiaries at the community level are:

Beneficiary Groups	Females	Males	Total
Children ²⁸	7,403	7,717	15,120
Parents/ caregivers	2,026	1,300	3,326
Teachers, principals, school administrators	21	63	84
Volunteers	267	616	883
VEDC members	425	1,096	1,521
Total	10,142	10,792	20,934

A basic cost efficiency analysis of expenditure to date and benefits distributed to beneficiaries for the period from April 2016 to September 2018:

- **\$2,919AUD** was spent on support per child with a disability in Xaybouathong district. A total of 26 children with a disability, 18 females were supported.²⁹ Expenditure on support included disability sensitisation and identification training in schools and community; medical screening by health professionals; treatment and therapy at health facilities; purchase of assistive devices; transports costs for beneficiaries, technical advice and support to teachers by program and DESB staff for Inclusive Education Planning. Of this group, 19 are children attending school and 7 are children are not attending due to the severity of their disability.
- **\$283AUD** was spent per community beneficiary. A total of 20,757 beneficiaries were reached, (of 15,120 children, 178 teachers, 612 volunteers, 1,521 VEDC and 3,326 parents/ carers. Of this group, 49% are female beneficiaries and 91 are children with a disability).³⁰

²⁶ BNC financial report as at 30 Nov 2018.

²⁷ Activities are continuing until December 2018.

²⁸ The total number children are defined as students in primary schools in 171 BNC target schools. The WASH activity included all students from grade 1 to 5. The L2NL activity included children in grades 1 and 2, while the reading promotion activities mainly included students in grades 1 and 2, older children sometimes participated.

²⁹ BNC, 2018, *Summary report on lessons learned on Disability Inclusion in Primary Education: BEQUAL NGO Consortium and World Vision Laos*. Data provided by BNC CMU. Expenditure data is for the period April 2016 to September 2018.

³⁰ This figure includes expenditures on: Personnel (direct and apportioned); start-up activities; component 1 and 2; disability inclusion; M&E; technical support; assets and communication; and administration.

- **\$214AUD** was spent per community beneficiary if implementation costs are only included. Costs excluded are start-up activities, assets and communications, M&E and administration.

These cost figures are at best estimates, for an adequate cost analysis budget data for activities, by location and beneficiary type needs to be collected during implementation. For example the figure of \$283AUD includes expenditure on children with a disability through the VEDC grants and other budget items, however the expenditure on this group is not identified making it difficult to disaggregate spending on disability in all districts, except Xaybouathong district which had dedicated budget.

In community-based programs, where costs are heavily allocated towards personnel it is important that staff resources are matched to beneficiary needs and more local staff are engaged. The BNC expenditure also contributed to the employment of 54 national staff which represent 82% of the BNC personnel. The level of personnel allocated to implement activities are aligned with the intended effort to achieve behaviour change in disadvantaged communities.³¹

Sharing fixed costs within organisations and between BNC partner organisations reduces the proportion of the budget dedicated to technical and support functions. BNC partners drew on their own education advisors as well sharing education specialists for the L2NL course, reading promotion, WASH and disability inclusion. For instance, SCI provided education specialist advice to all BNC partners to refine the reading promotion activities to target bi-lingual village volunteers, increase the training focus on demonstrated interactive learning and adapt volunteer training and support to focus on reading techniques for non-Lao readers with low literacy.

A cost analysis is a valuable tool when considering investments in service improvements and behaviour change in challenging conditions. The cost per beneficiary \$283AUD to improve pre-literacy teaching skills, reading promotion and reading behaviour appears efficient for the level of investment per person for a period of 29 months (April 2016- Sept 2018). Another way to look at the cost per beneficiary is to see it as an opportunity cost. If the \$283AUD was not spent on beneficiaries, would teachers have had professional development on Lao language through the DESB system, or would the 171 schools have conducted hygiene promotion activities with 15,120 children without the BNC support? Furthermore, would early grade students in 171 target schools have borrowed books from an alternative source to the BNC? In this way, the BNC investment in these 171 communities has provided significant reach across multiple groups of beneficiaries.

Capacity building of PESS and DESB staff as a result of their role in the implementation of the BNC has not been factored into this analysis. However, this is another beneficiary group that has received support from the BNC. The dividends from the capacity building may not be easily calculated in the short term, but the expenditure at the sub-national level contributes to the long-term capacity of education administrators and teachers. For instance, Houn DESB have begun to appropriate the L2NL content for teacher training in their district as well expanding the training to Namor, Xay and Pakbeng districts in Oudomxay province.

³¹ BNC district teams usually had one staff allocated to support 10 villages/ schools. This allowed for approximately one visit per month in addition to phone support.

3.4 Impact

This section discusses the findings in relation to the difference the BNC intervention has made to the participation of teachers, children, parents and VEDCs. The impact of the BNC intervention will be discussed in terms of student's experience of improved teaching of Lao language, specifically teacher skills in teaching pre-literacy by using the L2NL materials. Impact will also be assessed in terms of changing children's demand for reading, reading behaviours, reading ability and hygiene practice. The contributions of VEDCs in mobilising support for reading, WASH and inclusion will also be discussed. Impact of the BNC intervention on disability inclusion and gender equality is examined in the last part of this section.

3.4.1 Teaching practice

BNC focus on early grade learning has provided teachers with practical tools and skills to teach pre-literacy in Lao language. Grades 1 and 2 teachers incorporated the Lao to non-Lao language (L2NL) content and activities into the Lao language and World Around Us curricula.³² These teachers implemented the L2NL 4-week course during the month of September in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Not all teachers taught L2NL during these years consecutively due to teacher rotation between schools and between grades. Of the 85 teachers who participated in this evaluation, 49 (58%) implemented the L2NL course with grade 1 and grade 2 students. The remaining teachers taught grades 3, 4, 5 or prep. At their own discretion, teachers used the L2NL materials during the school year. Although encouraged, teachers were not prescribed to use the L2NL materials throughout the year. Of the 85 teachers in this evaluation, 36 (42%) who received training on L2NL reported that they found the content and techniques useful to their teaching and used the course material as needed.³³

Feedback from students also suggest that teachers use the L2NL materials during the school year. Students were asked about their teachers' use of visual aids, songs, games, story books and activities in lessons. Student survey responses corroborate teachers' report of using the L2NL materials during the school year. For example, students reported their teachers:

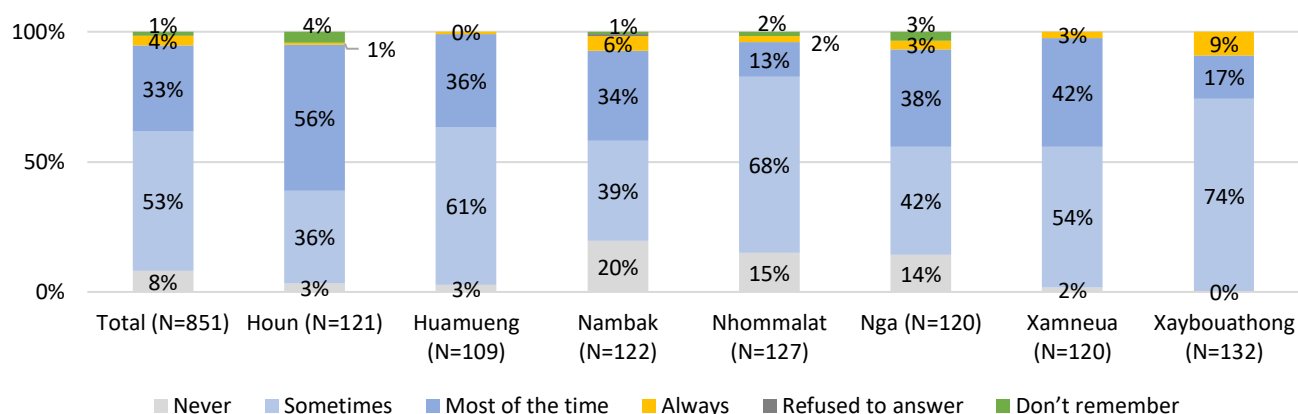
- Used visual aids 'sometimes' (53%) and 'most of the time' (33%) (Figure 23);
- Read a story book 'sometimes' (52%) and 'most of the time' (34%);
- Used songs or rhymes 'sometimes' (45%) and 'most of the time' (40%);
- Used games and activities 'sometimes' (58%) and 'most of the time' (32%) when teaching Lao language.

All 36 teachers in this evaluation who received L2NL training, reported that they found the 10 songs easiest to teach to students. All teachers observed that children engaged better with words and concepts when songs were used. For example, songs about animals and body parts.

³² The L2NL content includes visual aids (flash cards, posters) songs, rhymes, storytelling, activities (colouring-in, origami) and games. One teacher in Houamueng reported using 'My Family' pictures in the Moral curriculum.

³³ Four teachers in Xaybouathong and one in Nhommalath are new graduate teachers from the BEQUAL Ethnic Teacher Scholarship. They commenced teaching September 2018 and received their training from the DESB staff who was trained by the BNC partner World Vision in these districts.

FIGURE 23 TEACHERS USING VISUAL AIDS IN LESSONS, 2018



Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=851), 2018

All 36 teachers who received the training reported that they could incorporate L2NL into the Lao language curriculum easily because it is practical to teach and effective in teaching pre-literacy in a short time, as demonstrated by this feedback from a teacher:

[L2NL] activities help students understand more easily. For example, before some students did not understand “stand-up” and “sit-down”. But after teaching them the Stand-Up-Sit-Down song from the 4-week Lao course, they now know the meaning of the words in Lao and can follow the instruction – Teachers Focus Group, Pakathai village, Houamueng district, Houaphan province.

In Houn and Xamneua districts, teachers trained on the L2NL 4-week course used the materials ‘most of the time’. A key role of the L2NL course, along with reading promotion activities, is to improve student participation in learning. The emphasis on activities and visual aids in the L2NL content appears to have been implemented, more effectively by teachers in some districts than others, and received positively by students. Of the seven districts, students in Houn district reported that their teachers used visual aids ‘most of the time’ (56%) more than any other response. Similarly, students in Houn district reported that their teachers read story books ‘most of the time’ (61%); used songs or rhymes ‘most of the time’ (58%) and used games or activities ‘most of the time’ (49%). Students in Xamneua also reported that their teachers used songs and rhymes ‘most of the time’ (56%) more than any other response.

Positive results in Houn and Xamneua districts are influenced by different factors. In Houn district, the DESB (at the time of the evaluation) was receiving support for five projects targeting aspects of education. This included the BNC, the BEQUAL Innovation Fund, the LEARN project, adolescent health rights (Plan International) and school meals (WFP). The DESB is staffed by motivated officers and some staff members who have experience in education, the presence of multiple projects has enabled Houn DESB to support teachers and schools. In Xamneua district, the population has a high level of literacy among the working age of 15-64 (82.9%) and the district has benefited from the textiles trade and civil service employment.³⁴ This has allowed ethnic minority teachers and

³⁴ Lao Statistics Bureau, 2016, *Where are the poor? Lao PDR 2015 Census-based poverty map: province and district results*. Ministry of Investment and Planning.

communities to be exposed to Lao language, urbanisation and trade. These factors contribute to faster adoption of new ideas and techniques by the DESB and teachers.

Teachers would like more support with teaching Lao language, particularly in Nambak, Houn and Houamueng districts. Of 85 teachers in this evaluation, 36 teachers have been trained in L2NL, 25% would like the learning materials to be restocked more regularly in the second year; 33% reported they would like a refresher training or for training to be expanded to other teachers in the school³⁵; and 25% would like more coaching after the training from DESB and BNC staff. Teachers also identified that over the course of the school year materials (story books, games) and resources became repetitive as they were not replenished regularly, and this presented a challenge for teachers to find new ways to use the L2NL materials.³⁶

Of teachers who identified more support is need for teaching Lao language during the year, 75% of these teachers in Nambak and Houamueng districts would like more coaching on techniques after training, followed by 50% of teachers in Houn district who also identified this need (Figure 24).

Feedback from teachers include:

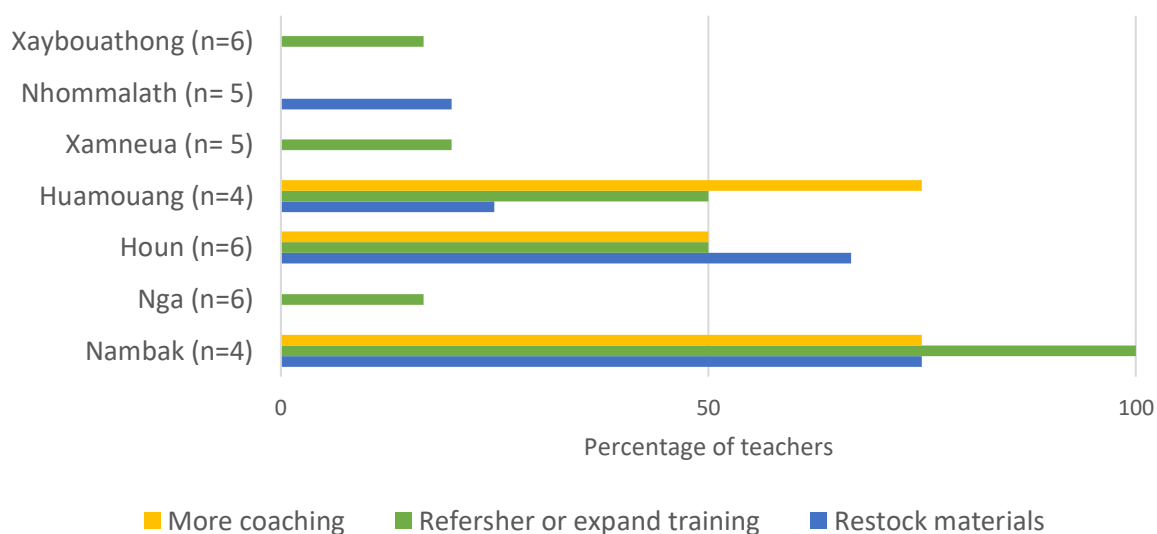
After that DESB gave suggestions such as: when teaching the Lao word, teacher should not speak local language much because students would not be able to understand Lao. I used to ask for more materials to teach Lao words but they said teacher should create it. The suggestions should have demonstration, not only telling in order for teacher to see and can follow when teaching. The follow up of DESB was 4 times in the month and they suggested that teacher should use less local language in teaching, but I think the suggestion was not adequate with actual situation because students were very young and never use Lao in daily life. If teacher use less local language, then students would only play and not pay attention to study. Teachers Focus Group, Houn district, Oudomxay province

The supports and follow up provided by DESB last year were adequate, but this year they visited only one time. It would be good, if they could come to monitor and support the teachers while the teachers are teaching the Lao language 4 weeks course at least 2 times to monitor and give advice to the teachers. Teacher's Focus Group, Phiengdee village, Houamueng district, Houaphan province.

³⁵ In Nga district, teachers in Mokloy and Phouhuat villages who received the L2NL training was transferred and there was little to no handover with the replacement teacher.

³⁶ Stationary for the L2NL course was restocked by BNC partners in each district during the 2016 to 2018, however new story books were not replenished as frequently due to limited availability of appropriated children's books published in Lao language in the country.

FIGURE 24 REQUEST FOR SUPPORT FOR LAO LANGUAGE TEACHING



Source: BNC evaluation, Teacher Focus Groups (n=85), 2018

100% of teachers in Nambak district and 50% of teachers in Houn and Houamueng districts reported that the number of training days or sessions was not adequate and recommended that refresher training should be provided to enhance teaching of activities and content. 75% of teachers in Nambak and 67% of teachers in Houn district identified that teaching resources need to be replenished more regularly after the first year.

The effectiveness of the L2NL course in changing the teaching of literacy in Lao language in the longer term could have been enhanced with better linkages with BEQUAL. Teachers in this evaluation identified other challenges with teaching Lao language in early grades and these include: in mono-ethnic villages without a pre-school class, teaching multi-grade classrooms and classroom and behaviour management of students of more than 35 students. While these challenges pose a real obstacle to teaching quality, the L2NL course and training was not responding to the need for in-service teacher development. Instead, the BNC intervention was designed to complement other components of BEQUAL (new curriculum and in-service development), which were planned attempts to improve teaching quality. Limited integration of BEQUAL components have been documented in the mid-term review and efforts are now underway to address this.³⁷

3.4.2 Children’s demand for reading

The BNC reading activity has generated children’s demand for reading and books. In this evaluation, 92% of students would join more reading activities in the future and 96% of students would continue to read if there more books were available in their community. Interest in future reading activities and access to more books were reported by most students (86% or above) in all ethnic groups, by gender and by grades. Teachers also made observations about the way reading

³⁷ BEQUAL, 2018, *Implementation Plan Phase1 (October 2018- August 2020) draft for discussion*, October. Crawford. P, Atkins. S, Urbano. M & Nanthanavone.T, 2017, *BEQUAL MTR report*, Dec 2017. LADLF, 2018, *Rapid Appraisal of BEQUAL Key Result Area 2*.

promotion activities in the community and in the classroom have improved children’s motivation to read, examples include:

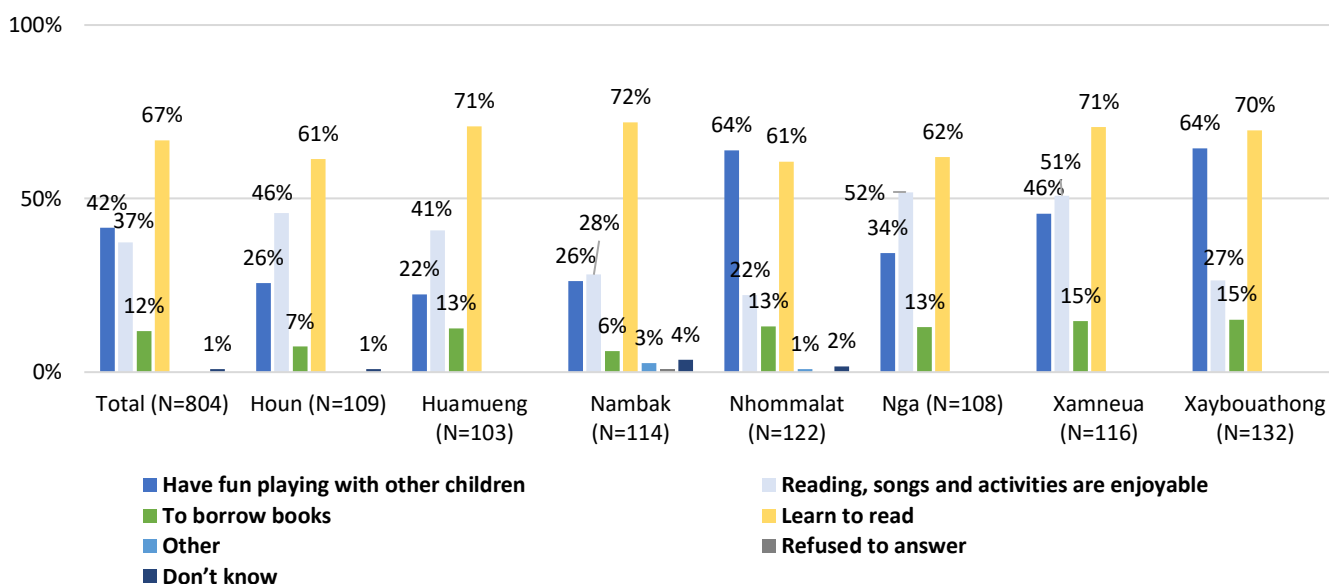
Reading in the classroom and reading camp [activities] are equally effective because these two activities are complementary. Children can borrow books from both places. - Teachers Focus Group, Mokprai-Moksouan village, Houn district, Oudomxay province

The reading camp organized by volunteers was effective because children can borrow books, parents can borrow books and teachers can borrow books for story-telling. It is convenient for students to participate in the reading camp because it is held in the village, so everyone can join in. -Teacher Focus Group, Nampak village, Houn district, Oudomxay district

Reading promotion activities have motivated most students to desire to learn to read. Of the total group, students were asked why they were interested in reading activities, frequent responses (in order) include (Figure 25):

- To learn to read (67%). In all seven districts, ‘learn to read’ is the most frequently reported response by students
- Have fun with other children (42%)
- Story reading, songs and activities are enjoyable (37%)
- To borrow books (12%)

FIGURE 25 REASONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN READING EVENTS, 2018



Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=804), 2018

More girls than boys are motivated to participate in reading activities for learning. Of this group (n=804), 71% female students identified their interest in reading activities is because they want to ‘learn to read’ compared with 63% of male students who identified this reason.

3.4.3 Reading behaviour at home

Village volunteers effectively raised awareness about reading among community members and increased children's participation in reading outside of school. This evaluation conducted focus groups with 82 volunteers from 28 villages. The volunteers conducted weekly reading activities using a package of materials, activities and story books provided BNC partners.³⁸ All volunteers made the observation that children enthusiastically joined the weekly reading activities and there was more demand than they could meet. Volunteers managed the demand by putting children in two groups and each group of children would alternate their participation in the reading activity. Some children, mostly girls, brought their younger siblings to the reading activity.

Across the six BNC districts, 48 children with a disability have joined a reading and learning activity. Volunteers identified that the reading activities support early grade children to become more familiar with Lao words, particularly ethnic minority children who have learnt Lao vocabulary through songs, rhymes and stories. Another benefit of the reading activity frequently identified by volunteers was that children learned techniques for holding story books. Volunteers in focus groups clearly understood their role was not to teach children literacy as it is the responsibility of the school. Through the training provided by the BNC, volunteers explained their role is to support literacy by encouraging children to participate in reading through a variety of fun activities.

Examples of observations of children's learning as a result of participating in the reading activities are:

Children can remember the picture of animals [in the story] and meaning of the words because they have opportunity to see the pictures from storybooks and cards, which is different from our old style-telling story to children. – Volunteers Focus Group, Makphouk village, Nambak district, Luang Prabang province.

Some parents who are part of 20 model parents [in the care giver's workshop] who see that their children have borrowed books [from the reading group] have joined in the reading group to read. Other parents who aren't part in the care-giver's workshop have asked about how they can get their children to read at home. There are still a lot of parents who don't have time to read with their children because they work in their field and return home quite late at night but these parents tell their children to study.- Volunteers Focus Group, Saleuy village, Xamneua district, Houaphan province.

The community-based reading activity organised by volunteers has its challenges but have made an important contribution to increasing disadvantage children's participation in reading and learning. The BNC monitoring data reveals that female volunteers who are literate are difficult to recruit, volunteers are community members who have livelihood demands which affects turnover of volunteers. Bi-lingual and literate volunteers are limited in many villages³⁹ BNC partners incentivised volunteers to provide regular reading activities through training, support and stipend. Stipend for volunteers ranged from 20,000-40,000 LAK per session. Usually, volunteers were allocated two hours of work per week to organise and conduct the reading activities.

³⁸ Most villages in this evaluation had three to four volunteers conducting weekly reading events of one to two hours outside of school hours. Volunteers received training on how to conduct reading activities including the ways to encourage children with a disability to participate. Post training, the BNC district team and DESB staff member provided monthly or bi-monthly support. Each reading group included 25 to 30 children mostly in grades 1 and 2.

³⁹ BNC Annual Reports, 2016, 2018 and 2018.

Of the 82 volunteers (32 or 39% females) in this evaluation, all concur with reports from students, parents and teachers that reading behaviour among children has increased. When asked how the community will continue this momentum in reading, most volunteers reported that the reading materials will be handed to the school for teachers to use. There were exceptions, with villages in Houamueng (Korhing village), Xamneua (Saleuy village), Houn (Mokprai-Moksouan) and Xaybouathong (Nakathing village) districts having identified strategies to continue the reading activity without the BNC support.

In these villages that are taking the initiative to continue reading activities, the VEDC are involved in negotiating and supporting volunteers. For example, in Nakathing village, Xaybouathong district the volunteers and VEDC have agreed to continue the reading activity once a month, in Mokprai-Moksouan village, Houn district volunteers will conduct the reading activities fortnightly after work and in Phiangdee village, Houamueng district the VEDC will collect rice from the community as in-kind support for the volunteers to continue the reading activity. Another example:

If we have no budget for volunteer, the VEDC will negotiate with the volunteer to keep running the reading activities and exempt them from the village cleaning group. – VEDC Focus Group, Korhing village, Houamueng district, Houaphan province.

These examples demonstrate local ownership for improving participation in reading that was initiated by the BNC intervention. Local ownership of solutions and results in this case relies on motivated VEDCs and volunteers. Recruiting and retaining volunteers is a significant challenge of this approach. To ensure impact beyond the BNC, a strategy for community to take over of reading promotion should be incorporated into the programming for capacity building of volunteers, VEDCs, teachers and parents. For example, at least six months prior to close out, program staff should facilitate planning among the VEDC, schools and volunteers to identify actions the community can take to sustain activities that are important to them. A participatory process, similar to that used in the VEDC small grants proposal development, would ensure impact is sustained beyond the program.

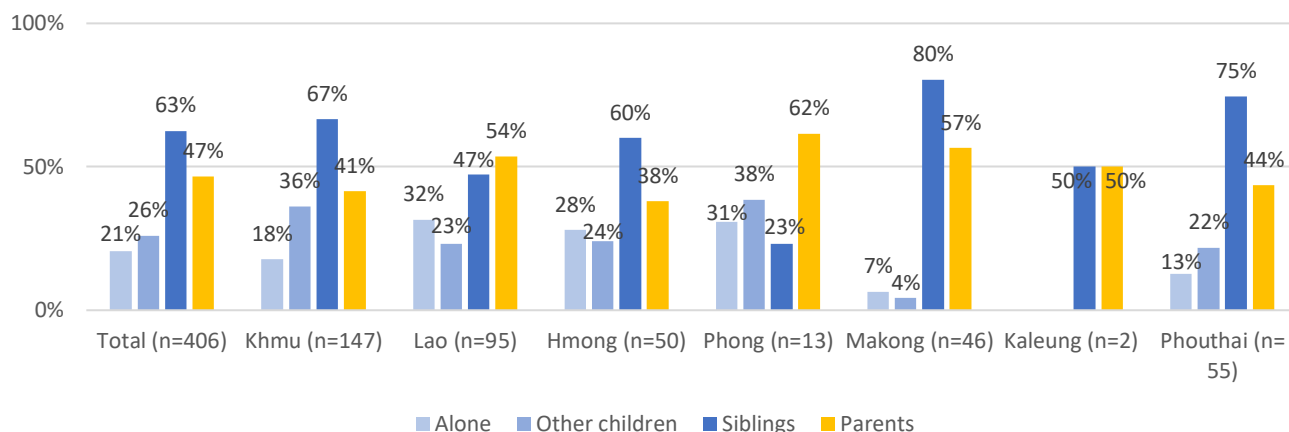
With more access to books and reading promotion in the community, reading behaviours at home are changing. Slightly more girls (99%) than boys (98%) read books at home. More girls than boys read ‘two days a week’ (37% for girls and 33% for boys) and ‘three days a week’ (29% for girls and 26% for boys). Students in this evaluation reported they read with their siblings (63%), parents (47%), other children (26%) and alone (21%) (see Annex 6 for full details of results). Both boys and girls report reading with these groups in this same order with minor differences in proportion between the genders.⁴⁰

Reading patterns by student ethnicity shows some variations (Figure 26). Of those students who report that they read at home (48%, n=406), Makong students (80%), Phouthai students (75%), Khmu students (67%) and Hmong students (60%) read with their siblings more than other groups. Lao students (54%) and Phong students (62%) identified that parents are the people they read with more than other groups as their parents tend to be more literate than other ethnic groups. Ethnic Phong students from Houamueng and Xamneua districts in this evaluation live in communities with Lao and other ethnic groups. In these multi-ethnic villages, Lao language is used by adults and children to communicate.

⁴⁰ Boys report reading with siblings (61%); parents (46%); other children (27%) and alone (22%). Girls report reading with siblings (64%); parents (47%); other children (25%) and alone (20%).

Feedback from parents corroborate this reading practice home. For example, parents who identified as being illiterate reported that they encouraged older children to read with younger siblings.

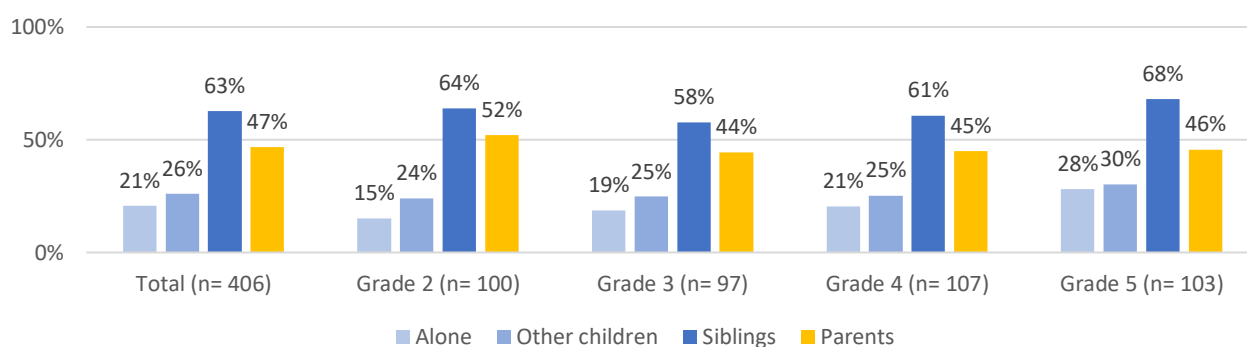
FIGURE 26 READING AT HOME, BY ETHNICITY, 2018



Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=406), 2018

Across grades 2 to 5, students identified reading with their siblings more often than any other group of people (Figure 27).⁴¹ In addition to the buddy or peer reading activities, reading promotion activities targeting siblings and older children may have enhanced children’s reading skills. Parents are the second group identified by students and grade 2 students identified reading with parents (52%) more than students in other grades. This suggests that messages from the carer’s workshop and reading activities about reading with early grade children appear to have been taken up by parents.

FIGURE 27 READING AT HOME BY GRADE, 2018



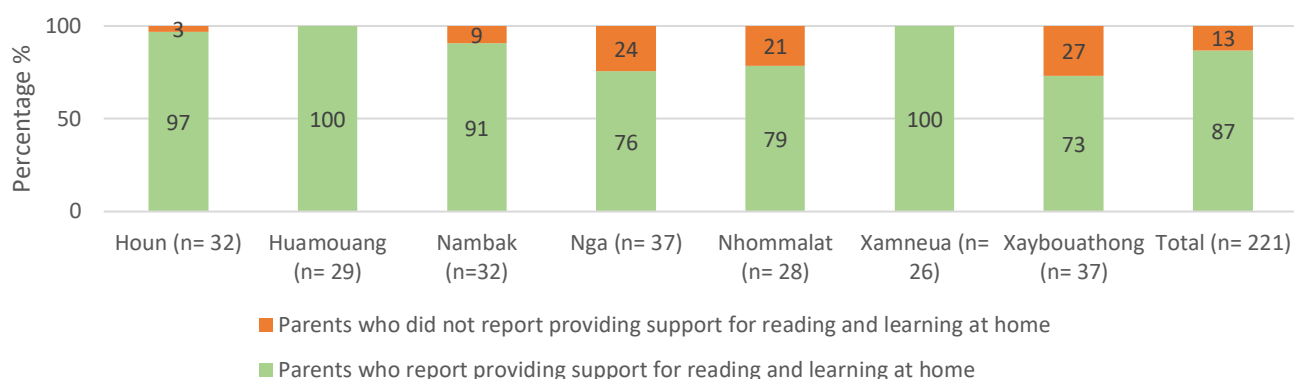
Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=406), 2018

Reading promotion among parents have demonstrated impact on parent’s ability to support learning and reading at home. Of the 221 parents who participated in this evaluation, 192 (87%)

⁴¹ The evaluation conducted student surveys with students from grades 2 to 5. The evaluation was conducted in Sept 2018 and students in grade 2 and 3 in this current school year (2018-19) have participated in the L2NL course and reading activities in the previous school years (2016-17 and 2017-18). Grade 1 students in this current school will not have participated in the L2NL course and reading activities at the time the evaluation teams were in the villages. For this reason, the current grade 1 students are excluded from the evaluation.

reported supporting children to learn at home (Figure 28). Supportive behaviours ranged widely to include: reading with children (by literate parents); describing/ talking about pictures in story books; drawing pictures; writing the alphabet and numbers; allocating a study corner at home; and delegating older siblings to read with younger children (by parents who don't have time or are illiterate). More parents in Houn, Houamueng, Nambak and Xamneua districts report supporting children's learning at home.

FIGURE 28 PARENTS WHO SUPPORT READING AND LEARNING AT HOME, 2018



Source: BNC evaluation, Parents Focus Groups (n= 221), 2018

Factors contributing parental support in Xamneua and Houamueng districts is that households in these districts have more resources and better adult Lao literacy than other BNC districts. In Houn and Nambak districts, households have fewer resources but appear to be more motivated to support their children to learn. Further examples of this support are, a small group of parents (22% or 42), who reported making a 'book shelf' for their children to store learning materials at home.⁴²

There are a lot of factors that make children learn and read better. Mostly, parents have been trained so they have techniques to teach their children. Also, there are books for children to read at home.- Saleuy village, Xamneua district, Huaphan province



Examples of parents who support children's learning at home by making space for learning materials at home. Top left: Mother from Thahae village, Xaybouathong district Khammouane province. Top right: Father from Namphak village, Houn district Oudomxay province.

⁴² Parents / caregiver training demonstrated models of bookshelves that can be made from local materials at minimum costs. Some parents made bookshelves out of spare wood, cardboard boxes and those with resources bought bookshelves.

There is limited evidence of community planning for ensuring change is sustained beyond the BNC.

The results from the student survey and feedback from parents that older siblings are the main people children read with, this group are potential reading buddies and another source of support in the community. In a context of economic disadvantage, to rely parents as the main support for reading at home, can limit the long-term impact once the BNC support is taken away. Although there is momentum for reading at home gained from the BNC support, there was little indication from parents, VEDCs and DESBs in this evaluation for a strategy to continue reading promotion. With the exception of a few volunteers who will continue the reading activities, most volunteers reported that they will give the responsibility for maintaining story books to teachers. Focus groups with teachers and principals in this evaluation did explore activities that the school can take forward, however a common response about continuing the reading activity was the school will store books for borrowing. None of the teachers or principals mentioned initiating activities or engaging parents to extend the use of story books and reading in the community. This lack of interest by the school may be due to teachers and principals needing more time to be comfortable with idea of using a participatory approach to teach literacy and reading. A common response about sustaining community support for reading and learning is to default to traditional monitoring by DESB staff and VEDCs whereby verbal encouragement and recommendations are given to parents to support their children at home.

3.4.4 Children's reading

The BNC intervention has contributed to minor changes in student reading. Students in the baseline and endline were tested on three areas of reading: Lao alphabet letter identification; identification of most used words; and identification of decoding words.⁴³ Some caution about the results -the test is not based on L2NL content, rather it is a simplified standard early grade literacy used by Save the Children. The results should be taken as indicative ability of students to read basic letters and words provided by the evaluation team.

Since 2016, the average number of correct letters identified by students across seven districts has slightly improved in Houn, Houamueng, Nambak, Nga and Nhommalath districts (Figure 29).

Grades 4 and 2 students appear to have made more improvements in being able to correctly identify letters out 33 alphabet characters. Results in Nhommalath district shows the most improved average score for all grades since the baseline, followed Houamueng district. Results by gender show two areas of difference from this test. Firstly, more girls than boys can correctly identify 27 out of the 33 characters of the alphabet.

- In 2016, 12% of girls correctly identified 27 alphabet letters and this increased to 20% in 2018, representing an eight-point increase.
- For boys, the increase was smaller by still important. In 2016, 12% of boys correctly identified 27 alphabet letters and this increased to 18% in 2018.

⁴³ Based on a simplified literacy test from Save the Children (SCI). SCI education advisors provided guidance on the literacy test and protocols for administering the test with children.

- The proportion of boys and girls who can correctly identify all 33 letters has dropped since 2016 (16% for boys and girls). The results from the 2018 test shows fewer girls (9%) than boys (11%) correctly identified all the alphabet letters.

FIGURE 29 AVERAGE NUMBER OF CORRECT LETTERS IDENTIFIED BY GRADE, 2016 AND 2018

Districts	Total district average		Grade 2 average		Grade 3 average		Grade 4 average		Grade 5 average	
	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018
Houn	20	22	18	14	23	22	19	24	29	29
Houamueng	24	27	19	24	22	26	22	30	31	30
Nambak	22	23	16	20	22	20	24	26	26	27
Nga	22	23	18	18	23	21	20	26	26	27
Nhommalath	25	26	18	21	23	25	28	29	28	30
Xamneua	28	27	17	25	26	27	29	28	29	28
Xaybouathong	28	27	25	20	29	27	28	30	31	31
Total average	24	25	19	20	24	24	25	27	28	29

Source: BNC student survey, baseline and endline.

Three of the seven districts have improved the average number of correct Most-Used-Word identified for all grades. Students in Houn, Houamueng and Nambak districts have improved their average number of correctly identified Most-Used-Words (out of 20 words) since 2016 (Figure 30). Most used words are: paternal aunt; good; a lot; go; come; I; nose; beautiful; chicken; flag; rain; older brother; friends; shirt; older sister; pants; wash hands; mother; chair; walk. These words are identified as words are often used in early grade Lao language curriculum and they should be familiar to grades 1 and 2.

Grade 5 students showed the more improvements than any other grades with five districts showing improved average correctly identified words. Students in Houamueng district have improved their average score since the baseline for grades 2 to 4. Nambak and Xamneua districts showed improved average numbers of correctly identified words in grades 2 since the baseline.

The proportion of girls who can correctly identify all 20 Most-Used-Words has increased from 20% (2016) to 22% (2018). The proportion of boys who can correctly identify all 20 words have decreased from 25% (2016) to 20% (2018). See Annex 6 for more detail.

FIGURE 30 AVERAGE NUMBER OF CORRECT MOST USED WORDS IDENTIFIED BY GRADE, 2016 AND 2018

Districts	Total district average		Grade 2 average		Grade 3 average		Grade 4 average		Grade 5 average	
	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018
Houn	8	9	5	1	10	6	8	12	15	18
Houamueng	9	12	2	6	8	11	8	13	18	18
Nambak	8	10	2	5	6	6	11	11	13	16
Nga	9	8	3	2	8	4	10	9	12	14
Nhommalath	11	10	2	2	7	6	15	13	15	19
Xamneua	14	12	4	7	12	10	15	15	16	17
Xaybouathong	13	10	8	2	13	4	14	14	18	18
Total average	10	10	4	3	10	7	12	13	15	17

Source: BNC student survey, baseline and endline.

Grade 5 students have on average improved their reading of Decoding Words more than any other grade (Figure 31). Students in grades 2, 3 and 4 struggled to read Decoding-Words provided by the evaluation. Only Houamueng district improved the average correctly identified words since the baseline for all grades 2 to 5.

Slightly more girls can correctly read all 20 decoding words than boys. In 2016, 9% of girls correctly read all 20 words and this increased to 10% in 2018. For boys, 8% could read 20 words correctly in 2016 and this reduce incrementally to 7% in 2018.

FIGURE 31 AVERAGE NUMBER OF CORRECT DECODING WORDS IDENTIFIED BY GRADE, 2016 AND 2018

District	Total		Grade 2 average		Grade 3 average		Grade 4 average		Grade 5 average	
	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018
Houn	5	6	2	0	7	4	6	8	12	15
Houamueng	6	10	0	5	7	9	5	11	13	15
Nambak	5	6	1	3	3	5	7	7	10	11
Nga	6	4	2	1	6	1	8	5	8	10
Nhommalath	8	7	1	2	6	3	9	9	11	14
Xamneua	10	8	1	5	8	6	11	10	11	11
Xaybouathong	10	8	5	1	9	3	10	12	14	17
Total average	7	7	2	2	7	5	8	9	11	13

Source: BNC student survey, baseline and endline.

Teachers in this evaluation reported that the L2NL content and activities focused teaching children to speak and use Lao vocabulary. Their observation of improvements has been in children’s verbal use of Lao language and recognition of the alphabet rather than impacting on children’s reading and writing literacy. This offers a partial explanation for the improvements in average scores for correct letter identification in Figure 28. The lower average scores for Most-Used-Words (Figure 29) and Decoding Words (Figure 31) in 2018 could be skewed by the larger proportion of ethnic minority students surveyed this year compared with in 2016.

Teachers in Houamueng and Xamneua districts, Houaphan province supplemented the L2NL material with ‘One-Lao-Word a Day’.⁴⁴ This additional activity may have contributed to the positive reading results in Houamueng district but cannot explain the lack of results in Xamneua district. Feedback from teachers implementing the One-Lao-Word a Day suggests the activity has provided teachers with another tool to draw on. Similar to teachers who used the L2NL material, it was observed that teachers managing classrooms with smaller numbers of students are more able to apply their skills to effectively teach the One-Lao-Word a Day.⁴⁵ Although, the activity and content is simplified and practical for teachers, the tendency for rote learning remains a challenge for teaching Lao language, as demonstrated by these comments from teachers:

The teaching of One Lao Word A Day was useful as it helped students to use consonants and vowels to form words and helped them to better memorize words. However, it depends on the students, if they are smart, they can memorize the words well. If they are weak students,

⁴⁴ The ChildFund team supported BNC target villages in these districts to implement One-Lao-Word-A-Day to enhance student reading, speaking and writing of Lao language.

⁴⁵ BNC, 2018, *Narrative Report*, November, p. 11.

they cannot memorize them. - Teacher's Focus Group, Phiengdee village, Houamueng district, Houaphan province.

Teaching One Lao Word Day can help students to remember words better particularly the words that teachers teach on that day. The challenge is that students can't remember the words, don't know how to explain the meaning of words, so they can understand only one word at a time. For example: in the first line of a text, students can read the word "people". When students reach the second line in the text, they can't recognize the word "people" if the teacher doesn't lead the reading. - Teacher's Focus Group, Korhing village, Houamueng district, Houaphan province.

3.4.5 Hygiene practice

Delays with implementing handwashing stations and distributing hygiene materials have occurred due to water access issues in the village or school; procurement and logistics issues. At the time of the evaluation, 134 (78%) out of 171 villages have a functioning hand washing station. Reasons for delays provided by VEDCs and DESB counterparts include: seasonality, natural disasters, road access, procurement and disbursement processes of different BNC partners, staff turn-over in BNC district teams and DESB offices, VEDC members available to provide labour and materials. In Nambak, Nhommalath and Xaybouathong many of the VEDC installation of handwashing stations and dental care materials were received at the beginning of this school year. Hygiene promotion activities in these districts have only recently commenced or are planned for late 2018.

Schools that have irregular or limited water access rely on students to carry water to refill the hand washing stations. The design of water tanks of some hand washing stations is placed at height that is difficult to reach by primary school students. The limited water access and rostering of students to refill water in hard to reach tanks has made hygiene practice inconvenient at school.

For example:

This week, WASH was not implemented because there is no water. But the first two weeks of school, the WASH activity was implemented because students went to fetch water from the river to wash hands and brush their teeth. Also, the WASH station was stolen, and school will use School Block Funding to buy materials and fix the wash station. Toilet at school is not usable because there is no water, so students defecate outside in the bush around school. Teachers Focus Group, Kiewpha village, Houn district, Oudomxay



Left: Hand washing station in Nakathing school, Xaybouathong district, Khammouane province.

Competing demands have affected the ability of teachers to consistently implement hygiene activities at school. For instance, teachers with large classes appear to struggle most with

conducting regular handwashing and teeth brushing activities. The pressure on teachers to conduct activities on top of their teaching load was often reported, for example:

I teach 75 grade 1 and 2 students and there is not enough time in a day to get all the children to take turns washing their hands. So, each teacher will get their class to wash their hands once a week. We haven't started teeth brushing yet, but the materials just arrived and the DESB staff explained how to do this activity using a poster. – Teachers Focus Group, Nambak district, Luang Prabang province.

Follow up support in the form of coaching (face to face or telephone) and fortnightly refresher sessions for teachers who are struggling to conduct regular handwashing and teeth brushing with students would strengthen this activity. The coaching and refresher should provide strategies teachers can use to integrate hygiene in lessons, at play time, how to develop a roster for using the wash facility by all students in the school and ways to look after the wash facility and keep equipment (tooth brush and drinking bottles) clean. Coaching and follow up support should be tailored to the needs of each school and in order of priority. For example, if water access or supply is a barrier, program staff should work with the school, VEDC and parents to address this first. Recognising that water access can be a significant issue for some villages and resources are needed to address it, however the rush to install wash facilities without adequate water supply can have a negative impact from the point of view of community and program resources spent that could otherwise be used elsewhere.

Parents and VEDC members are aware of the hygiene promotion activities at school and through their participation in BNC meetings and trainings, participants report encouraging children to practice regular hand washing and teeth brushing at home. Most parents in focus groups could give examples of their children explaining the importance handwashing and brushing teeth suggesting awareness raising at school and in the community is occurring. However, many community members associate hygiene practice with the school context and approximately half of the villages in this evaluation identified barriers to continue hygiene practice at home. Common barriers raised by parents and VEDC members was the lack of funds for soap, toothbrush and toothpaste at school and home and lack of time by parents to ensure daily practice. While these barriers were raised as genuine concerns by some community members, it suggests that attitudes and behaviours around hygiene require more support before change is adopted. Consistent promotion and messaging about hygiene at home and at school would strengthen behaviour change. Opportunities to promote hygiene can include the opening and closing of the school year, national teachers and children's day, where students could perform songs about and demonstrate hygiene activities. The VEDC should be encouraged and incentivised to lead such activities.

A lack of systematic monitoring of this component has affected the impact on changing hygiene behaviour at school.⁴⁶ Firstly, the BNC identified that teams in the district had little time to monitor the implementation and impact of hygiene promotion activities with students in schools during the project. Secondly, PESS and DESB Master Trainers need more regular refresher training from MoES and GIZ on effective delivery of the package at community level. PESS and DESB have indicated that they will monitor the WASH activities after the BNC as part of their normal monitoring visits to schools. Although the WASH component contributes to and aligns with the government's policy and

⁴⁶ BNC, *ibid.*

VEDC priorities for school development, the lack of systematic monitoring to ensure facilities function and hygiene practice are sustained is a concern.

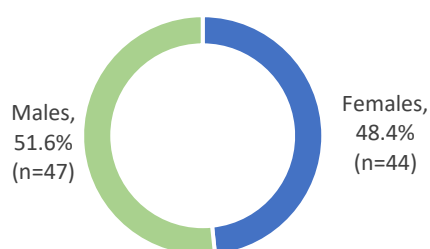
3.4.6 Disability and Gender

The BNC emphasis on disability inclusion and gender equality is central to its mandate and contributes to BEQUAL’s outcomes for disability and gender. The BNC has a two-pronged approach to disability and gender, firstly these cross-cutting themes are mainstreamed through all components across target districts. Secondly, a targeted approach in the disability inclusion pilot in Xaybouathong district with a dedicated budget. The impact of interventions for disability inclusion and gender equality are discussed separately below.

Disability Inclusion

The BNC has raised awareness among teachers, parents, VEDCs, children and DESBs about children with a disability and their right to access education and learning. This was achieved by mainstreaming the messages about disability inclusion in training content for reading promotion in class and community, WASH and VEDC small grants. This means that volunteers, parents/ carers, VEDCs and DESBs were sensitise to the idea of children with a disability in the community and their right to participate. The next step to mainstreaming was incentivising and ensuring children with a disability participate in BNC activities as appropriate. Good examples of this are the VEDC small grant and monitoring the participation of children with a disability. Although only Xaybouathong district had dedicated budget for disability inclusion, this did not preclude other districts from identifying and supporting children with a disability. A total of 91 children with a disability were identified and supported by the BNC in the six target districts, of this group 26 were supported through the disability inclusion pilot in Xaybouathong (Figure 32).⁴⁷

FIGURE 32 CHILDREN WITH A DISABILITY SUPPORTED BY THE VEDC SMALL GRANT



Source: BNC CMU

Children were supported for a range of disabilities from mild to severe in nature. Over 40 children received medical screening through mobile clinics in their village, which resulted in 14 children of primary school age or younger receiving an assistive device and six children received surgery.⁴⁸ Through the support of the BNC, eight children were previously not attending school, returned to school. It is not intended that all children with a disability attend school, however the BNC approach to working with children, parents, teachers and medical specialists allows for each child to be supported to return to school if appropriate. Where it was not appropriate for children to attend school, effort was made include them in reading activities and events.

⁴⁷ 44% (40) children were not in school and 56% (51) were attending school.

⁴⁸ BNC, 2018, *Narrative Report*, November. BNC Co-ordination Management Unit.

Children with more complex issues who require specialist treatment and care in the community, received more intensive and planned support. In this evaluation four children and their parents from Houn and Xaybouathong districts were interviewed for the perspectives on the support they received. The interviews revealed that parents valued the support in terms of being able to understand their child's needs better from the training and follow up support. For children with low or mild disabilities, such as hearing or slight visual impairment, the support at home and at school is more straightforward. Two examples are provided below to show the perspectives of beneficiaries with complex needs and the challenge they face in navigating the health system in the context of rural poverty.

Vue⁴⁹

Vue received a small backpack, clothes and a wheelchair to go to hospital in Luang Prabang for 12 days. At the hospital, she received physiotherapy and received two pairs of special shoes, however Vue hardly uses the shoes as they hurt her feet. I was told to bring Vue back to hospital every six months to change her special shoes, but it's been a year and we haven't gone back to the hospital. The project did not say anything about support for traveling cost to the hospital. A doctor came to our house once to check whether Vue was better and gave me a paper to get the village head's signature to allow her to get more therapy in Vientiane. Our family can't afford to go and don't know where to go. The doctor did not tell me whether the project will be responsible for all cost to go to Vientiane. - Parent of child with a disability, Houn district, Oudomxay

Yur Ha

I can move more than before I got support from the project. Now I don't have to rely on my father as much because I can crawl to school and participate in the reading camp. But I still need help when it rains when the road is very muddy, and it sticks to my wheelchair and I could not crawl as well. I feel confused sometimes because every time when this project comes to help, they never come to our house, never come to ask what we want and what is suitable, but they come to the school, like this wheelchair we had to come to pick it at school. Yur Ha, Houn district, Oudomxay province

Yur Ha looks better, smiles and likes to speak with people now. Before he was quiet and didn't want to come to school. He is also more active in helping himself- washing his face and wash his clothes. He will attend school until he finishes grade 5, even if his wheelchair is broken, I will help him come to school. After grade 5 the project said they will put him in a vocational school for children with disability. If possible, I would like to bring him to Vientiane to get more treatment. But I can't afford it by myself. Father, Houn district, Oudomxay province

For children like these, a case management approach to treatment, monitoring and exit from the project would facilitate meaningful participation of children and their carer in their support they receive from the project. A case management approach would allow the program to consult and respond to the individual needs of a child with a disability. This would also ensure children and parents have input into their support plan.

⁴⁹ Name's of children have been changed.

With relative efficiency, the BNC has drawn on key disability organisations in country to provide mainstream and specialist interventions. The BNC effectively partnered with a number of international and national organisations to bring support around identified children with a disability. These include: COPE, Humanity and Inclusion, Lao Disabled People’s Association, Lao Children’s Hospital Luang Prabang, Oudomxay Provincial Hospital. This was important as the BNC members themselves do not yet have staff with the technical skill needed for specialised support. Disability expertise in Lao PDR is low, compared with its neighbours in Cambodia and Vietnam.

More effort is needed to increase institutional capacity to respond to disability. Specifically, an understanding of disability, service linkages between government, INGO and private providers, information on the prevalence of disability and referral pathways. In addition to raising awareness among government partners at the sub-national level about the importance of integrating education and health services to support children with disabilities through the existing MoES and MOH frameworks. The implementation of BNC has contributed to building capacity of national staff in disability inclusion which will support the development of skills in this area in the long term.

Disability inclusion activities in Xaybouathong district increased teacher and community awareness and supportive actions but sustained impact is beyond the scope of the BNC. In a short period, workshops with parents have increased sensitivity about the differentiated needs of children with a disability as well as practical actions parents can take to help their children at home. In Xaybouathong district, training on Disability Rights and Equality before the community disability mapping resulted in a higher number of children with disabilities (in and out of school) to be identified than in Nhommalath district. Over 60 primary school teachers in Xaybouathong were trained and used an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to address the unique learning needs of children with disabilities or children with specific learning difficulties. In this evaluation 11 teachers from Xaybouathong district participated in focus group discussions. This group demonstrated they applied the Individual Planning process, identified differentiate learning needs of students. For example:

In the Individual Education Plan, for example, for one student when I give reading homework and it’s a long passage, I give the student shorter passages to read and add more over time. Another time I gave the student 10 Lao words to practice reading again and again. I also use pictures on board or songs with clapping to help him remember the words.-Teachers Focus Group, Nongpheu village, Xaybouathong district, Khammouane province

Feedback from teachers in Xaybouathong district in a workshop held in April 2018, identified some positive aspects of the IEP, such as: identifies the learning needs of students; provides a process for monitoring student progress, requires teacher action to set targets and develop learning materials and lessons specifically for the student.⁵⁰ All of the 11 teachers also reported that the IEP provided some practical steps for teaching children with learning difficulties or children with a disability. Some teachers identified positive results in student learning in their classroom, such as:

Students have improved their learning. Before the student who is academically weak didn’t want to study but now they want to because they can join in classroom discussions with

⁵⁰ BNC, 2018, *Narrative Report*, November, p.9.

friends. – Teachers Focus Group, Thahae village, Xaybouathong district, Khammouane province.

Students who are weak are improving and students with a disability also improve as they can copy the lesson faster. I can monitor their learning using the Individual Education Plan. The equipment from the project: eyes glasses, hearing device all helps too. Teachers Focus Group, Nanok village, Xaybouathong district, Khammouane province.

Changes in community and teacher attitudes about disability as a deficit will take much longer to achieve. In the absence of teaching practice that is child-centred, some teachers may see the IEP as a tool to make students with different learning needs the same as other students and if they do not improve it becomes easy to blame the student, as demonstrated by this comment from a teacher:

The child with a disability in our school is not serious case. The challenge is that he is slow to respond. I often repeat instructions, but he can't understand. The parents have accepted our advice about what to do at home, but the problem is the child himself.- Teachers Focus Group, Xaybouathong district, Khammouane province.

Teacher in-service to respond to diverse learning needs of students is a longer outcome. The BNC Disability Inclusion pilot has demonstrated practical techniques that teachers can apply in a short timeframe.⁵¹ Challenges faced by teachers implementing the IEP reported by the BNC include, strategies for communicating with students who have a learning issues or a disability; managing teaching load and lesson planning and the documentation of IEP can be take time or are difficult to understand. This has required regular coaching and support to teachers. Principals and pedagogical advisors play an important role and they need to have capacity and resources to support teachers. Also, peer learning groups increase support to teachers and generate practical actions for teachers to use in the classroom.

Gender

Gender equality in the BNC has emphasised equal participation of females and males as the initial step towards equality. Through mainstreaming this message about equal participation in BNC training, meetings, activities and disaggregated monitoring of beneficiaries the BNC has achieved raising awareness of the importance of equality representation for boys, girls, women and men.

The BNC ensured its activity processes are gender sensitive. For example, in meetings for the VEDC small grant, community members and the student representatives were separated into focus groups. Each group made up of the village authorities/VEDC; adult males, adult females community members and girls and boys. Each focus group presented their ideas and together they voted to decide how they wished to spend the small grant funds. A common theme emerging from these consultations was that males largely prioritised sporting equipment and females largely prioritised WASH infrastructure and water supply. Through a facilitated and participatory approach, the

⁵¹ BNC, 2018, *Narrative Report*, November. A consultation about disability data collection at the school level held with teachers in Xaybouathong also found significant gaps in understanding about disability among teachers and a fragmented information system to collect disability data. Thoresen, S, 2017, *Findings and recommendations from the focus groups with teachers in Khammouane, July 17-24 2017*.

community reached agreement that the WASH infrastructure was a more urgent need and more likely to improve the school environment for girls.

BNC activities are concentrated at the individual and group level, mostly around improvement of access and participation of girls and women. Capacity building activities with teachers, VEDC and DESB have also been implemented, raising the awareness, knowledge and skills of these stakeholders. In terms of achievements, participation at the individual and group levels are positive and noticeable. Such as results in girl's participation in reading activities and general awareness of differentiated gender needs.

Given the short timeframe of the BNC, it is difficult to respond to deep rooted issues such as cultural attitudes, the division of labour in the family, norms around gender roles and poverty whichacerbate girls and women's participation in education and decision-making. A clear gender and disability inclusion goal would clarify the short objectives and intervention for these cross-cutting themes. A strategy to identify how activities can incrementally improve gender equality and disability inclusion, for example, through building on and linking increased individual participation to shifts in behaviours, practices and norms at the collective and institutional levels. Without a defined purpose for gender equality and disability inclusion for participation at the community and school level, activities will only achieve output results and not behaviour change.

3.5 Sustainability

This section addresses the area of scalability; the effectiveness of the BNC Partnership Approach; and capacity building of PESS and DESB to sustain results after the BNC.

3.5.1 Scalable components

Approaching components that can be scaled up requires seeing the parts of a program in terms of sustainability. There is an opportunity to scale up ideas and activities vertically (systems and institutions) and horizontally (geographical coverage) and functionally (components of BNC). The BNC 'experiment' has demonstrated that a participatory approach to implementing its components is more suitable for working at the community level as it allows activity implementation to be responsive to local capacity, characteristics and demands. The BNC community-based literacy and reading promotion activities has demonstrated improved children's participation in reading and demand for materials. In a context where reading is low among teachers, parents and children, the literacy and reading promotion activities in the community provide a mechanism by which classroom learning can be extended outside of school hours.

Lao to non-Lao course materials, training and support demonstrate that a step-by-step and activity-based technique for teaching is readily adopted by teachers and DESB. Adoption of the L2NL material has been taken up by Houn DESB and Khammouane PESS. Houn DESB is particularly active in primary education and has demonstrated good capacity to expand teacher professional development in Lao language teaching to other districts in the province. Houn DESB staff reported the agency is taking a staggered approach to teacher training and will selectively use the L2NL course material in their teacher training. This is an example of local appropriation of content to meet the needs of teachers.

Khammouane PESS are also motivated to improve learning in their province has expanded the use of the L2NL material to teachers in all districts in the province. At the time of this evaluation, the PESS reported that the L2NL course material has demonstrated to meet the need for pre-literacy in Lao language in schools that do not have prep classes. The PESS has endorsed the use of the L2NL course in its entirety by conducting the training used in the BNC and following the course material. The Huaphan PESS Master Trainer has also commenced training new teachers this academic year using the BNC experience and materials. ChildFund has received another source of funding to continue and expand the L2NL and One-Lao-Word a Day activities in more villages Houamueng districts. These are examples of simple replication and expansion of an activity.

Another example of scale up under way, is the diffusion of ideas within an organisation. Houn DESB staff members who are participating in the Plan International LEARN project and BNC activities, leveraged the experience from these projects to obtain a BEQUAL Innovation Fund (BEIF) grant to increase teacher skills in lesson planning. A further example of the BNC diffusion into the BEIF, is the joint BEIF project between ChildFund, a BNC member and Xiengkhouang PESS to increase girls' transition from primary school to lower secondary school by adapting the BNC Lao to non-Lao language course for grades 4 and 5 students. These examples demonstrate vertical scale up where organisations and institutions adopt an activity or idea and apply it to another problem or context.

The **WASH activity** has political buy in as it aligns with PESS and DESB targets. This will enable geographical expansion to other targets in BEQUAL, however the WASH component needs to be more rigorous to have impact. Rigor in this instance, refers to a combination of the WASH infrastructure designed to suit local use by beneficiaries. For instance, if students are expected to refill the water in the tank, consideration should be given to the distance between the water source and the WASH station. Consideration should also be given to the height of stations and taps to ensure children can access them. A plan to address water access and supply issues should be

identified early and a plan for how behaviour change will occur will strengthen this component. In addition, PESS, DESB and community should be incentivised to monitor the effectiveness of the WASH hardware and behaviour change at the local level. As WASH in schools is a priority commitment of MoES and PESS, scale up of the WASH facility could be achieved by leveraging community support to contribute cash and in-kind for construction and the program could match this contribution by bringing technical support to assess water supply, training for hygiene practice and facilitate community planning for on-going maintenance and good practice.

The **VEDC is a mechanism for local participation**. The VEDC is a conduit between school and community and has traditionally functioned to manage, administer and monitor school development and planning. Functioning VEDCs in the BNC have demonstrated there is scope in their role to influence reading promotion, learning and hygiene practice in the community. While VEDC capacity issues need to be addressed, support for VEDC in future programs should be linked to desired results such as mobilising the community to support reading through in-kind support for volunteers and galvanising the community to take ownership of hygiene. Scale up of the VEDC role in supporting learning and reading is possible in a number of ways. Assessment and monitoring of VEDC performance in carrying out this role should be part of the program implementation. For instance, a baseline assessment of VEDC could include, composition and background of members, gender and ethnic profiles, education and literacy of members, experience in planning, managing funds, co-ordination and reporting. A profile of VEDCs in target areas could be developed from this information and a 'basket of activities' could be developed to both address capacity and incentives for performance. For instance, start-up workshops or training with VEDCs could be provided in all target areas but VEDCs with limited capacity could be provided with refresher sessions and follow up coaching. Monitoring by program staff should review progress of VEDC activities and adapt support provided. Capacity building should be made explicit to beneficiaries and the desired behaviour which the program expects to see should be explained. Also, VEDC members should be made aware of the types of support at the beginning and the gradual tapering off of this support as VEDCs demonstrate increased initiative and ownership.

3.5.2 BNC Partnership Approach

The BNC Agreement (2016) between INGO partners provides an effective mechanism for planning, co-ordination and facilitating responsibility between BNC partners at the country level. The Agreement was developed in a consultative process in Laos with country offices and had input from the Australian Office of INGOs. The document defines roles and responsibilities and terms for interaction between members on issues such as funding, programming, management, grievance handling and governance. Although this high-level document was mainly referenced by the BNC Board and BNC CMU, it provided principles for co-operation between INGOs who are traditional competitors for funding.

The Partnership Agreement enhanced results and mostly efficient implementation through shared resources. The efficient access to technical in-house expertise by BNC partners was possible because the relationships between Consortium member organisations. Cross learning and sharing of resources within the BNC occurred efficiently. The various strengths and experience with delivering education programs and cross cutting activities are evident in the BNC implementation.

Examples of sharing of resources are co-funding development of materials used in the BNC Lao to non-Lao language course with the LEARN consortium project and drawing on Save the Children's experience with delivering literacy boost activities in communities. The BNC members also drew on

resources from their networks, such as the Catholic Relief Service disability inclusion 'Right to Learn' modules which was adopted in the BNC pilot in Xaybouathong district, Khammouane province.

The BNC has maximised formal and informal partnerships to leverage resources and technical advice without additional budget. Partnerships and collaborations to enhance BNC activities have include: Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Humanity and Inclusion (HI), Cooperative Orthotic & Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) and Lao Disabled People's Association (LDPA) for disability interventions; Gender Development Association (GDA) for a review of story books review from gender and inclusion lens; and German Cooperation with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ), technical advice from PESS and DESBs, in addition to BNC organisations using resources from their other programs.

The Partnership Agreement which governed the Consortium also enable the BNC and other components of BEQUAL to test and trial new ideas. With four BNC partners in six target districts, new approaches to gender and disability were tested and learnings were shared with other parts of BEQUAL. Examples include:

- The disability inclusion support project in Xaybouathong district;
- The disability data collection consultation with teachers in Xaybouathong district;
- A gender assessment of story books for primary school children and a tool for gender analysis which MoES has adopted to assess gender bias in its reading materials;⁵² and
- A school attendance monitoring pilot using SMS text with teachers in Houn district.

In this way, the Consortium provided space in BEQUAL to test and trial new ideas and ways of working. The learnings from these activities have fed back into BEQUAL, including to MoES in planning future activities.

3.5.3 Capacity Building of PESS and DESB

Capacity building of PESS and DESB staff was intended in the implementation of all BNC components. In all districts, DESB staff and BNC partner teams provided, on average, monthly support visits to teachers and volunteers after training. During training and early implementation, there was more intensive support from BNC partner teams. Over time, the support has tapered off to allow DESB staff to lead more of the activities. Interviews with DESB staff in this evaluation found that DESB partners feel confident to lead activities but lacked resources to continue regular visits to schools and villages. However, Houn DESB and Khammouane PESS are determined to expand support to teachers for Lao language teaching and will absorb this cost as there are no alternative funding sources at this time.

BNC partners used their experience operating at the sub-national level to achieve effective collaboration with government counterparts. The BNC target areas are mostly in rural (47%) and remote (41%) villages. Each BNC organisation worked closely with provincial and district line agencies to implement activities and share learnings. Challenges with implementing activities in Khammouane province confirms the importance of effective government relations when operating at the sub-national level. Learning events were held for BNC teams and for PESS and DESB staff, this way capacity building opportunities are maximised.

⁵² BEQUAL, 2018, *Gender assessment tool*.

4 Conclusion

The BEQUAL NGO Consortium has operated since 2016 to achieve three objectives: 1) increased participation of children through improved Lao language skills and reading; 2) strengthen community support for learning; and 3) target schools adopt good hygiene practices.

The first objective is achieved in terms of targeting the participation of girls, ethnic minority children and children with a disability. The participation of girls in the handwashing activities, reading activities and support through the VEDC grants have been appropriately sensitive to the needs and interests of girls. The student survey results show that with support, girls have been more active in reading at home and more motivated to participate in future reading activities than boys. The BNC focus on mostly ethnic minority villages shows adequate targeting, and the L2NL teaching material is accessible by teachers who are teaching in this context. About a third of teachers in this evaluation, would like more support with teaching Lao language to ethnic students. Teachers and community members have increased their awareness of disability inclusion. The Disability Inclusion Pilot has demonstrated that practical teaching techniques for inclusion are adopted by teachers.

Mainstreaming of disability inclusion in other components has resulted in the participation of children with a disability beyond Xaybouathong district. The BNC recognises that disability inclusion is challenging and requires community and institutional support which is lacking in Laos, however a longer-term lens of change is needed to increase the participation of children with a disability.

Objective two has been successfully achieved, particularly the reading promotion implemented by volunteers and support for reading at home by parents. Evidence of this is the reported reading behaviours of children reading at home with siblings and parents. 87% of parents in the evaluation also report a range of supportive behaviours that promote reading and learning at home. The combination of reading in the classroom, accessible reading materials and support at home has increased opportunities to develop children's literacy and motivation to learn. The VEDC role in supporting learning has largely been achieved through the VEDC small grant and implementation of the handwashing stations. The sustainability of the volunteer reading activities and small grants is a limitation as communities have not developed strategies for sustaining positive results after the BNC.

Objective three has been partly achieved in terms of distribution of materials to all schools within the project timeframe. However, delays, water supply issues and some teacher's struggling to manage the hygiene activity at school as resulted in inconsistent understanding and practice of hand washing and brushing teeth among students. Although there is good support from PESS and DESB for this component, adoption of hygiene behaviours needs the infrastructure, training, practice, water and messaging to be available at the same time.

5 Learnings and recommendations

5.1 Participation

Learning: BNC community-based literacy and reading promotion component or activity has generated positive participation and has demonstrated improved children's participation in reading and demand for learning. In a context where reading is low among teachers, parents and children, these activities are effective in supporting classroom learning outside of school hours. Generating household demand for education services takes a longer timeframe as it requires inequality (poverty and gender) to be addressed. The BNC has shown that through repeated exposure to relevant reading materials and activities, demand or appetite for reading can be stimulated among children and the community.

Recommendation: The positive response from beneficiaries was an opportunity for sustainability. The BNC should have supported target villages to develop strategies for reading promotion in the community after the program.

Learning: The community-based approach to improve learning and reading requires intensive engagement of key community stakeholders- parents, children, VEDC, DESB and teachers and principals.

Recommendation: Participation by these stakeholders needs to be staged. For example, the program plan should articulate or explain how stakeholders will be engaged in stages of sensitisation, knowledge, skills development and practice. With a clear timeframe and targets for behaviour change, participation is an effective mechanism for achieving change rather than being an outcome in itself.

5.2 Community based reading promotion

Learning: Recruiting and retaining village volunteers to conduct reading promotion has proved to be a challenge for community - based reading promotion. The risk of ineffectiveness due to high turnover of volunteers and low literacy among volunteers needs to be addressed as part of the activity plan. Alternatively, if teachers are to conduct reading promotion outside of lessons, appropriate support to manage workload, capacity building and incentives (monetary and in-kind) would also be required to ensure effectiveness.

Recommendation: The use of stipends for volunteers or teachers to conduct reading promotion is an effective incentive, however program planning for the phase out of such incentives should be included in the program close out plan. For example, at least six months prior to close out, program staff should facilitate planning among the VEDC, schools and volunteers to identify actions the community can take to sustain activities that are important to them. A participatory approach to planning for sustainability, similar processes to that used in the VEDC small grants proposal development would ensure impact beyond the program.

Learning: Reading behaviour of students, particularly those in early grades, reveal that reading outside of the classroom often takes place with older siblings. This makes sense in a context where children have responsibilities for caring and domestic work.

Recommendation: Future reading promotion activities should consider including older siblings in group reading, buddy reading activities and workshops to develop and tap into this community resource.

5.3 VEDC Mechanism

Learning: BNC activities have mostly been implemented with a nuanced understanding of the district and village context, in rural and remote areas where education and social disadvantage are prevalent.⁵³ Examples of this nuanced understanding from the BNC include: 1) applying good government relations and engagement at the province and district levels; 2) applying organisational knowledge of sub-district characteristics to reach beneficiaries in rural and remote villages; and 3) deploying sound technical support to boost capacity and adapt activities to community needs, particularly through VEDC training and small grants. VEDCs traditionally function to monitor education and promote compliance with regulation through school planning and management. The BNC has demonstrated the potential for VEDCs to orient their function to support learning and reading and promote gender equality and disability inclusion.

Recommendation: A facilitated approach is needed to capacitate VEDCs if they are to be a strong local mechanism. For instance, follow up post training and coaching by DESBs and program staff in the first year of implementation would support VEDC members become orientated in their responsibilities. A phased approach to capacity building could include, incentives in the subsequent year(s) for VEDCs to achieve agreed results and demonstrate behaviours, such as developing a proposal for action or a plan for sustaining results. Program staff would also need to be equipped to assess VEDC functions and provide appropriate coaching responses. This approach of encouragement and rewarding initiative will take time to develop among VEDCs as an entity, they currently serve to comply and monitor.

5.4 WASH

Learning: Health and nutrition of children affects their ability to participate in school and learning. The BNC partly addressed this through school hygiene activities, however more opportunities to strengthen children's health and hygiene is needed. For example, The World Food Programme (WFP) school feeding was implemented in Houn district, Oudomxay province, however the school meals program provided by WFP and the BNC school hygiene activity appears to have been implemented in silos.

Recommendation: Future programming should seek collaboration with health/ nutrition organisations and approach behaviour change through a phased approach where changes are identified in the short, medium and long term. In the planning stage, a stocktake of all projects in the target area should be conducted to identify areas of synergy. Where possible, partner organisations in the same target area should be involved in discussions about strategies for co-ordinating activities to enhance opportunities for behaviour change. For instance, school meals workshops could incorporate cooking demonstrations and messages about handwashing before cooking and eating and after meals.

Learning: Regular handwashing and teeth brushing practices are yet to be adopted. Some teachers identified issues with co-ordinating these activities with a large number of students and managing time for teaching and hygiene activities.

⁵³ See LADLF, 2017, *Decision making in primary education*. LADLF, 2016, *Teacher employment and deployment in Lao PDR: reasons behind current challenges*. LADLF, 2016, *The readiness and motivation of teachers and principals to change basic education teaching practices in Lao PDR*. Palme, M and Hojlund, G, 2013, *Learning outcomes and classroom practices: a study in grade 4 in Pha Oudom and Pak Tha districts in Bokeo province Lao PDR*, Plan International, Laos.

Recommendation: In the short and medium term, follow up support in the form of coaching (face to face or telephone) and fortnightly refresher sessions for teachers should be provided for those who struggle to conduct regular handwashing and teeth brushing with students. The coaching and refresher sessions should provide strategies for teachers to use to integrate hygiene in lessons, at play time, support to develop a roster for using the wash facility by all students in the school and ways to look after the wash facility and keep equipment (tooth brush and drinking bottles) clean.

Learning: Water access and supply is important for adopting good hygiene practice. The lack of accessible water supply coupled with procurement delays has limited the effectiveness of the WASH component in at least 22% (37) of schools.

Recommendation: Close collaboration with VEDC, DESB and PESS to address water access should be a priority before WASH facilities are installed. For example, a thorough assessment of water sources and quality in the village and school should be conducted and establishing a WASH plan for the use, monitoring and maintenance of the facilities and hygiene activities would strengthen this component.

5.5 Monitoring and Evaluation

Learning: The baseline was conducted before the BNC action plan was finalised. As a result, the baseline focused on general areas of reading, literacy and WASH. Some aspects of the baseline were not assessed in the evaluation, such as access and use of latrines at school as it was determined that latrine use is not included the BNC WASH component.

Recommendation: If time permits, the baseline should be conducted once the intervention or activities are confirmed and before implementation of activities.

Learning: The indicators (gross enrolment, net enrolment and drop-out rates) for BNC outcome (*All children, particularly non-Lao speakers, girls and children with disabilities, in 171 disadvantaged schools and villages, enrol in and complete a quality primary education, supported by their parents and communities*) could be better aligned. The outcome, objectives and indicators were developed in late 2016 and reviewed in 2017. The indicator- gross enrolment rate as a proxy for change in the proportion of children entering primary school is superfluous as the net enrolment rate is adequate.

Recommendation: The addition of the cohort survival or completion rate is a better indicator to show access to grade 1 and continued participation in primary education to grade 5.

Learning: If cost efficiency is of interest to donors and programmers, budget data for a cost efficiency analysis should be built into the M&E plan and systematically collected by program staff.

Recommendation: Financial data for reporting by activities, gender and disability status should be identified during the program planning and as part of the M&E framework. Procedures for monitoring and data collection should use simple and clear tools and instructions for program staff and DESB officers to use. Appropriate training and follow up of staff in district teams should be provided to ensure consistent and accurate data collection.

5.6 Equality and Inclusion

Learning: The BNC demonstrated that a dedicated budget for disability and flexibility in the program budget to facilitate girls and women's participation has resulted in good participation of these

groups. The BNC also focused on developing the capacity of program staff, procuring technical specialists in disability and disability tools to use with teachers.

Recommendation: A commitment to address gender and disability should also be reflected in the program resourcing. To strengthen gender equality and disability inclusion, the program should consider additional investment in a contextual analysis of gender and disability in target areas, a baseline to ensure change is measurable, technical input for gender. As disability inclusion and gender equality are important commitments, this needs to be reflected in the program budget and financial reporting. Program staff should be supported to collect and report on disability and gender expenditure data. These inputs will take time to implement and to produce results, which is not always compatible with program efficiency, however this will enhance program impact.

5.6.1 Disability

Learning: Understanding about the prevalence and nature of disability among teachers and the community is still emerging. BNC partners have systematically collected disability data from the reading promotion activities and VEDC grants proposals and implementation. Data on the results of support provided for health check-ups, Inclusive Education Plans (IEP) and assistive devices are limited.

Recommendation: Accurate data on the prevalence of children with a disability (CWD) and the quality of their participation is needed to enhance activities for this group. To ensure accurate and detailed data on CWD, a number of stakeholders need to be involved in the data collection process. 1) program staff should be adequately trained on disability inclusion and data collection procedures; 2) community members who will collect monitoring data on behalf of the program should be adequately trained and supported throughout the program to increase their understanding of disability and data collection; and 3) implementing partners have a shared understanding of objectives for disability inclusion, the term disability, ways to identify disability, and methods for systematic data collection.

Learning: Disability inclusion activities in the BNC have addressed awareness among stakeholders, individual needs of CWD and forged a network of support for CWD by bringing INGO and government service providers together. Disability inclusion in Laos is emergent area and the BNC has demonstrated what can be achieved in approximately two years with dedicated resources.

Recommendation: Disability inclusion interventions need a medium to long term view of change at different levels- individual, family, school and community. Interventions should include a range of participatory approaches and stakeholders to address the understanding of disability, cultural bias about disability, provide non-technical knowledge and techniques that are accessible by teachers.

Learning: Human resource and expertise in the disability field is limited in Laos. Existing health support is fragmented and expertise in the development sector is low.

Recommendation: Systems solutions for referrals, service linkages, institutional capacity building of education and health agencies and DPOs, partnership between INGOs are needed to maximise in country expertise. The BNC has contributed to this in the pilot in Xaybouathong district. Using the BNC experience, documentation of the disability service landscape could be mapped to support the implementation of the BEQUAL strategy for Gender, Disability and Social Inclusion.

Learning: Children with complicated disability issues and disadvantage have received targeted support from the BNC. Feedback from children and parents in this situation revealed that a more sensitive approach is needed to ensure the experience of support is not transactional and is meaningful for beneficiaries.

Recommendation: A consultative and participatory approach should be used when working with CWD and their family. Support for CWD should include support at home and at school. For example, children and parents should be consulted at all stages of treatment and activities to ensure the intervention is relevant and enhances the quality of participation. Feedback mechanisms should be included in activities to allow beneficiaries to have input into activities and their support. For instance, consultations could document suggestions from CWD and their carers; follow up with CWD could review agreed actions by the family, the school and program staff and group activities could include a feedback activity.

5.6.2 Gender

Learning: Issues associated with inequality and discrimination are not easily addressed in the short and medium term. Complex factors such as poverty, remoteness, social norms are beyond the scope of the BNC. Instead, inputs such as grants, training and materials have been used as rewards for communities to promote gender equality, specifically equal participation and access. Other equality objectives such as improved girls and women's participation in the decision-making process, agency and leadership will require medium to long term planning.

Recommendation: Methods to increase access and quality of participation in the short and medium term can include gender quotas for committees and training workshops, and improved efforts to conduct in-village activities that are participatory and appropriate for low-literate environments rather than formal workshops.

Learning: Gender mainstreaming efforts in BNC activities have emphasised individual and group (parents, VEDC, students, teachers) support to increase access and participation. Increased access and participation have been largely effective in terms of raising gender equality awareness, participation in activities and activity monitoring that supports gender mainstreaming.

Recommendation: Gender, along with disability, is a commitment in the BNC objectives, the program would be strengthened by articulating its approach in the program plan and M&E framework for achieving gender equality (and disability inclusion) in the short, medium and long term. Additionally, clarifying the scope of the program's gender equality (and disability inclusion) for the life of the program. For instance, the program plan and M&E framework should recognise how the activities will or will not affect gender and disability at the individual, community and institutional levels.

5.7 Sustainability

Learning: Sustainability and scale up thinking about BNC activities have been ad hoc. If the components were intended to be sustainable and scaled up, how this was going to occur is not articulated in the program plan or M&E framework. The L2NL component has organically resulted in various forms of scale up. Examples in section 3.5.1 demonstrate that there is appetite at the sub-national level for practical, supported and participatory approaches to teaching Lao language.

Horizontal or expansion of activities is possible when government stakeholders (such as DESB and PESS) are convinced the activity responds to local needs, such as pre-literacy in Lao language and practical teacher training accompanied by materials. Vertical scale up of ideas or activities within and between organisations is also possible when there is organisation capacity within DESB and PESS, good partnership between the INGO and sub-national line agency and collective experience from multiple projects (e.g. Houn DESB).

A weakness in the WASH activity in improving good hygiene practice is the emphasis on installing hardware and limited planning for embedding good practice during implementation and beyond the BNC. The VEDC participation in the BNC has demonstrated there is potential for the committee to play a central in supporting learning and reading in the community. A limitation is the lack of community planning for continuing results after the BNC.

Recommendation: Planning for sustainability should occur at the program planning stage and reviewed annually with the activity plan. This planning process should include inputs from key stakeholders (donors, implementing agency, government partners and community) about their understanding of sustainability and how best to achieve this. For example, DFAT may understand sustainability in terms of government ownership of the activity and resources, while the PESS may view sustainability as an activity that has leadership support despite the lack of resources to implement it. It is important to gauge the range of views to understand and manage stakeholder expectations of what should be left behind after a program. In addition, the process is an opportunity to engage and influence stakeholders who may be important implementing partners.

Annex

Annex 1 TOR



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Evaluation_long versic

Annex 2 Evaluation Questions



BNC final evaluation
KEQ.docx

Annex 3 Analytical procedures

Analytical procedures for integrating the qualitative and quantitative data are described in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Steps in data analysis

Quantitative (survey) analytical procedures	Analytical Procedural Steps	Qualitative (FGDs, KII, secondary data) analytical procedures
Data collection firm to carry out: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Code data. • Input data for analysis into Excel. • Clean the data. 	Preparation of data for analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise documents and visual data. • Transcribe text. • Input data into Word files.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a descriptive analysis. • Check for distributions (range and mean). 	Explore the data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read through the data. • Develop qualitative codes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpret the data to describe the characteristics of units. • Cross check data and relationship between units of analysis. 	Analyse the data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group codes into themes for FGDs and KIIs. • Interrelate themes between FGDs and KIIs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represent results in statements and provide results in tables and figures. 	Represent the data analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represent findings in discussions of themes and/ or data visualisation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain and compare the results with survey datasets. 	Interpret results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain and compare the results within qualitative datasets.
Merge two sets of results:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify areas of comparison, consistency, contrast and synthesise results from surveys and qualitative datasets. • Identify differences and investigate explanation. • Summarise and interpret the separate results. • Produce a conclusion of the synthesised findings. 		

Annex 4 Participant selection criteria



Sample groups and selection criteria.docx

Annex 5 Sample Locations

Province	District	Village/ School	BNC member
Huaphan	Houamueng	Phiengdy Pakathai Paja Korhing	ChildFund
	Xamneua	Sanan Phoxay Nathong Saleuy	
Oudomxai	Houn ⁵⁴	Mokprai-Moksuan Namphak Tadtalae Kiewpha	Plan International
	Nga	Saenchord Phouhuad Mokloy Huaysarn	
Luang Prabang	Nambak ⁵⁵	Huaykong 50Km Phonmany Markphouk	Save the Children
Khammouane	Nhommalath	Khoksavang Kuanphane Kaengmuang Hadxorn	World Vision International
	Xaybouathong ⁵⁶	Norngpheu Thahae Nakathing Nanok	

Annex 6 Student survey tables



Annex 6 Student survey results tables

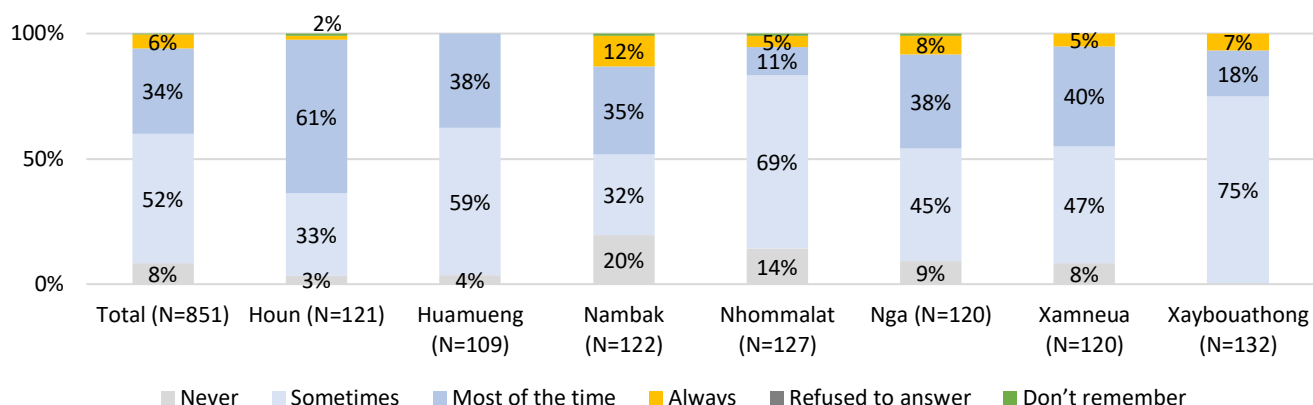
⁵⁴ Kiewpha and Mokprai-Moksuan villages were not in the baseline.

⁵⁵ Huaykong was not in the baseline. It has replaced Moklak due to accessibility issues.

⁵⁶ Nanok village was not in the baseline.

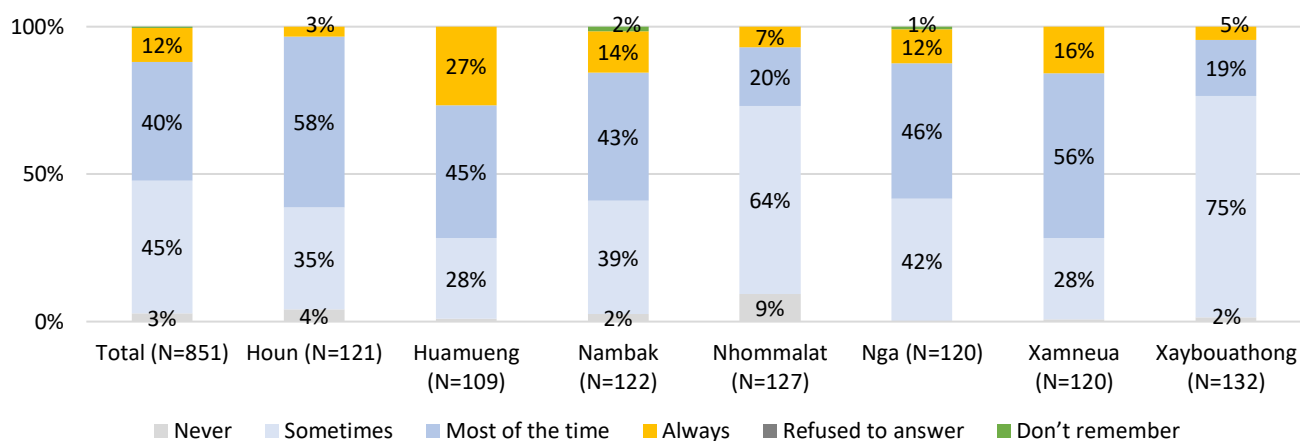
Annex 7

Annex 7.1 Teacher read a story book in lesson



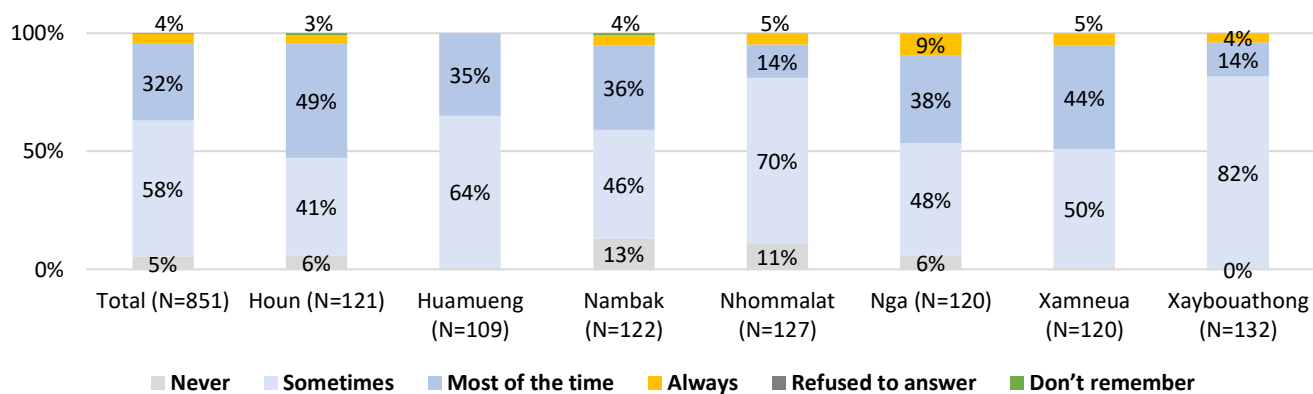
Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=851), 2018

Annex 7.2 Teacher used songs or rhymes in lesson



Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=851), 2018

Annex 7.3 Teacher used games or activities in lessons



Source: BNC evaluation student survey (n=851), 2018

Annex 8 List of activities funded by the VEDC small grants

Purpose	Use of grant	World Vision Laos		ChildFund Laos		Plan International	Save the Children	Total (n= 171 villages)
		Xaybouathong (n= 22)	Nhommalath (n= 32)	Huameuang (n=32)	Xamneua (n= 25)	Houn (n= 30)	Nambak (n= 30)	
Support learning and reading in school	Learning and teaching aids	19	28	3	13	23	28	114
	Music instruments	13	4	12	8	0	0	37
	Sport equipment	22	32	19	13	18	2	106
	Reading materials	5	2	33	25	0	35	100
	Reading huts	0	0	0	9	0	0	9
	Drawing competition	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
	Stationary	8	4	0	0	0	0	12
	Subtotal							382
Improve learning environment	Blackboard	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Bookshelf	0	4	0	1	0	0	5
	Baskets	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
	Renovate toilets	0	1	8	6	1	0	16
	Chairs and tables	0	1	2	0	4	0	7
	Fix school roof	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
	Path access to school	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	Electric fan in classrooms	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
	Electricity access	0	0	5	0	0	0	5
	Renovate school facility	0	0	0	1	7	0	8
Subtotal							51	
School hygiene	Hand washing station	0	0	11	2	4	33	50
	Water tank setting	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
	Drinking water filters	16	30	13	4	0	0	63
	Water supply or access	0	0	1	1	1	6	9
	Pot for boiling drinking water	0	0	15	0	0	0	15
	Repair tap/ faucet	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	Subtotal							140
Inclusive education	Providing bicycle for CWD	0	4	0	0	0	0	4
	Providing facilitator for CWD	0	2	4	3	0	0	9
	Subtotal							13
Access for poor families	Support poor families	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
	Subtotal							2
Capacity building	Refreshment for additional training for teachers	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
	Subtotal							2

