

REFORMING TEACHER EDUCATION IN LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

by

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ABSTRACT

Western educators have emphasized the teacher's command of subject matter in the context of interactive, learner-centered teaching that rests on student activities such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, and use of hands-on activities. In this approach, teachers need not only to be familiar with the principles underlying a topic, but also to be prepared for the variety of ways in which learners can explore these principles. Teaching and learning are conducted in a manner that encourages students' in-depth understanding of subject knowledge. To foster students' ability to gain such understanding, teachers need to reinforce learning and development not only by using an interactive approach but also through adapting curricular material and applying alternative assessment techniques. However, in Laos, covering the syllabus for the exams is the mainstay of traditional classroom instruction; in-depth understanding of the syllabus content receives little attention. Teachers who have tried to adapt or apply learner-centered teaching are faced with different challenges and tensions that influence their choices about instruction, curriculum, and assessment practices.

This research was conducted in Champasak University and Phonxay Secondary School in Pakse, Champasak Province of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. This study used a qualitative approach to explore a small group of teachers' experiences, ideas, insights, and perspectives to draw a detailed sketch of how teachers address challenges to improving their work in classroom and school community. The study took place over an 8-month period from May to December 2008. The participants were two teacher educators from the Faculty of Education, Champasak University, and two teachers from Phonxay Secondary School.

This research fills a gap concerning how Lao schools can be improved by reforming teacher education. The results show that to improve teachers' practice inside and outside classrooms, teachers need to continuously improve their professionalism. To promote students' in-depth learning, teachers have used a variety of strategies and techniques. They adapt their traditional ways of teaching with approaches designed to meet the needs of specific situations. They also focus on collaboration and reflection to help each other professionally improve and grow.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated with love to:

My husband, Phetvilaphonh Sounakeovongsa

My daughter, Vilaphone Sounakeovongsa, and

My son, Vilaphanh Sounakeovongsa

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CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

I set out in this study to document the subjective experiences of four teachers in the contexts of one secondary school and one university in Champasak Province, the southwestern province of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). I explored the participants' experiences in dealing with ongoing improvement in their practice in the classrooms and the school community. I began with the assumption that teachers' efforts to improve their practice would help improve or reform teacher education in several ways.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study. I discuss its background in detail in two main sections. The first provides an image of the geographic and socio-political conditions of the context within which the participants' experiences take place. It also provides basic information on key educational indicators and significant features of secondary education and teacher education in Lao PDR, especially in Champasak Province. It briefly surveys recent educational reform and associated challenges. The second section explains the emergence of the study, explaining its rationale and providing support from contemporary literature on the centrality of the teachers' role in their professional improvement efforts. The section moves on to introduce the main research questions, subsidiary questions, and organizational framework that guided the study. Finally, it elaborates on the study's significance and describes the organization of the thesis.

1.2. The Setting

1.2.1. Overview: Geographical Situation, Governance, and Administrations

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is located in Southeast Asia, sharing borders with 5 countries: Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. It is a small, land-locked country with an area of 136,800 square kilometers. Administratively, Laos consists of 17 provinces from north to south, including the

capital, Vientiane Municipality. The major cities are Vientiane Municipality, Vientiane, Savannakhet, Pakse (Champasak Province), and LuangPrabang. Below this level are 141 districts and 11,795 villages. The Central administration consists of 14 Ministries and Ministry-equivalent Committees that are solely responsible for defense and foreign affairs and that oversee the Provincial administration, which is responsible for services such as health, tourism, and education. The District administration has a similar structure. The entire administration of Lao PDR was centralized in 1975, decentralized in 1986, and recentralized in 1991. Realizing the difficulty of establishing a fully centralized system and the possible drawbacks, in 1999 the government moved back towards a more decentralized approach to general administration.¹

The population of Laos is distinguished by its ethnic diversity. According to the National census in 2007, Laos has a population of approximately 6.8 million people with 85 percent of the population living in mountainous areas. The country is characterized by pronounced ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Laos has 49 different ethnic subgroups, which are categorized according to topographic location into three broader groups: the Lao Loum (67 percent); Lao Theung (23 percent); and Lao Soung (10 percent). Each group has its own differing social, cultural, and religious practices and traditions. The majority of these ethnic groups live, traditionally, in remote, mountainous regions, which are often accessible in the dry season only on foot; these groups have far less access to education than the lowland people.

As this research study was conducted in the Champasak Province, I will briefly describe it. Champasak Province is in southwestern Laos, sharing borders with Thailand and Cambodia and the Lao provinces of Attapeu and Salavanh. It has an area of about 15,415 square kilometers and a population of around 600,000 people including the Lao Loum and Lao Theung who live in the Bolaven region. The capital city is Pakse, which is the educational center of the southern provinces in Laos. There are 121 crèches and kindergartens, 876 public schools (758 primary schools and 118 secondary schools), 15 vocational schools, one Teachers' Training College, and one university – Champasak University.

¹ Government Report to the Seventh Round Table Meeting, 2000 and The Ministry of Education, 2000

1.2.2. Politics

From 1893 to 1955, Laos was a French colony. Then from 1956 to 1975, Laos was divided into two administrative systems, the Lao Liberal zone and the Royal Government. The Royal Government was supported by the United States. The liberal side, under the leadership of the Lao Revolutionary Party, struggled for the independence of Laos, which it attained in 1975.

Today, Laos is moving towards being a socialist country led by the Lao Peoples' Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and directed by a Party Congress. The president of Laos is the Head of State and is elected by a two-thirds majority of the National Assembly. The Prime Minister's Office, the Bank of Lao PDR, the Committee for Planning and Cooperation, and the Nationalities Committee are the main administrative organizations of the Lao PDR. The National Assembly is the legislative body with about 40 to 45 members. The Central administration consists of 14 Ministries and Ministry-equivalent Committees.

Internationally, Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, and it is a member of the World Bank (WB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It is in the process of applying for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). In order for Laos to catch up with other countries, both socially and economically, and to rise in position from the least developed country in the world, the government considers education as the most important factor for Laos to help meet its social-economic development targets in the future.

For more than a decade, Lao PDR did not have a constitution (1975-1990). Then, in June 1990, the National Assembly of Laos officially approved the Lao Constitution. The Constitution (Article 19) clearly states that the State implements a compulsory education system at the primary level, authorizes the operation of private schools, which utilize the curricula of the State, and together with the people, builds schools at all levels

in order to assure a comprehensive system of education and to pay attention to developing education in the areas where the ethnic minority people reside.²

Also, the educational law officially approved in April 2000 and Article 3 states that all Lao citizens (nondiscrimination of ethnic group, race, religion, sex, and social conditions), have the right to education.³

1.2.3. Economy

In 1986, the Lao government adopted a program of structural reform called the New Economic Mechanism (NEM). Its main objective was to accelerate the transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented economy. Since the structural reforms are now in place, market forces are at work in most segments of the economy. The economy has performed quite positively since NEM was first introduced, growing annually at 5 to 6 percent. However, in 1997 economic conditions began to deteriorate because of the economic crisis in the region. In 1998-99, the economic growth rate dropped to 4 percent. The average per capita GDP was about US\$440 in 1999 compared to US\$350 in 1995. The dominant sector of the Lao economy is still agriculture.

Over the past 10 years, the macroeconomic environment in the Lao PDR has stabilized after an uncertain period in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian economic crisis. The Lao PDR is now witnessing a period of robust economic growth with gross domestic product (GDP) growing 7.3% in 2006 and annual GDP growth rates projected to remain at 8.2% through 2010. The Lao PDR, being strategically located in the economic corridors of the Great Mekong Sub-region (GMS), plays a key role in strengthening connectivity and facilitating cross-border movement and tourism in the GMS. The government seeks to achieve economic growth with reduced poverty to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and emerge from its least-developed country status by 2020.

1.2.4. Education

Historically, formal education for Lao male children and youth was carried out in a wat (village pagoda) by Buddhist monks, who were regarded not only as religious

² Constitution of Lao PDR (1991), article 19.

³ Educational Law, April 2000, article, 3.

teachers but also as being responsible for generally educating people. In this case, only the male Lao Lume ethnic group, who were Buddhists and lived in urban areas, had the opportunity to access education. For other ethnic minority groups and girls,⁴ no formal education was provided. During the fifty years of French occupation, colonial administrators “benignly neglected”⁵ Lao educational needs. In this period, from 1893 to 1953, the French established a secular education system patterned after schools in France, and French was the language of instruction after the second or third grade. This system was largely irrelevant to the needs and life-styles of the vast majority of the rural population, despite its extension to some district centers and a few villages.

During the period of 1917 to 1939, the entire Indo-Chinese area had a single educational system. The central direction was from Hanoi (Vietnam). From 1939 onwards, decentralization of the educational system was introduced, and education began to be controlled more by the local people. Following the independence of Laos, the operation of the public school system was gradually transferred to the Lao Ministry of National Education (on the Royal Government side). From 1953 to 1975, the Royal Lao Government developed a new education system with a Lao curriculum, but even so it catered to only about one-third of the school-age population owing to the limited number of schools and teachers. Lao language instruction in the schools was provided in the late 1950s, and a Laotian curriculum began to be developed in the late 1960s. Since the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party came to power in 1975, the educational system as well as other sectors has been gradually changing. Education has been one of the central concerns of the Lao government for the country’s social and economic development. The government has put high priority on improving education, targeting basic primary school education for every child (including girls and minority groups) and intensive literacy for adults. The number of schools, teachers, and the enrollment rate at each formal education level has increased gradually since 1990s.

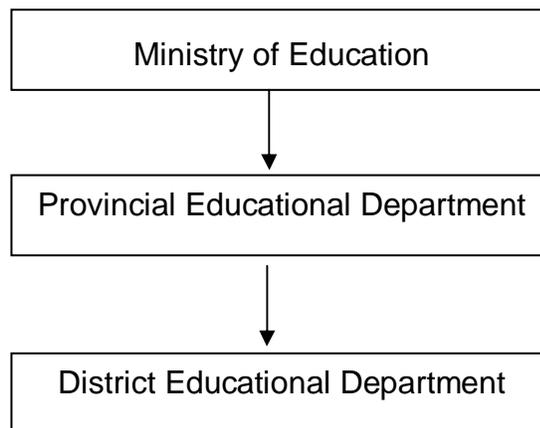
⁴ Women and girls were prohibited from attending lessons provided by monks at wats, and culturally and traditionally girls were expected to do domestic chores and take care of their younger siblings. In rural areas especially ethnic minority girls marry and bear children at a very young age. Parents worry about the safety of young daughters when they have to walk long distances to attend school.

⁵ Jacqui Chagno and Roger Rumpf, “Education: The Prerequisite to Change in Laos,” in M. Stuart-Fox, *Contemporary Laos* (1982, p. 164).

Today, Lao society and its educational system are a product of the heritage of colonialism, socialist revolution, and the movement towards a market economy and privatization. In the last decade, Laos has made advances in several areas, including economic and educational growth. Many communities are significantly involved in school affairs, contributing funds and labor for the construction of schools. The educational bureaucracy is considered to be composed of hardworking staff and a number of highly talented civil servants can be found there.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) administers the educational system through 11 departments. Management of financing educational responsibilities is distributed to Provincial Educational Services (PESs), District Educational Bureaus (DEBs), and schools. The educational system is centralized, examination-oriented, individualistic, competitive, and largely theoretical. It prepares students for examinations by helping them to obtain high grades for limited higher education places rather than working for the whole development of the students. Figure 1 below shows the educational management structure in Lao PDR.

Figure 1: Educational Management Structure



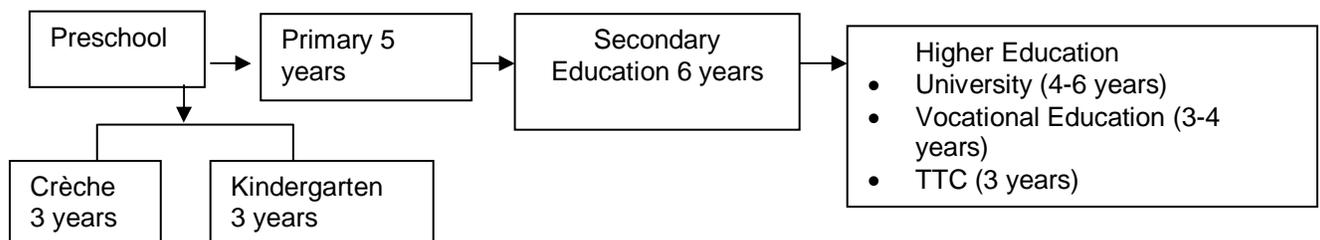
As stated in the revised Education Law, the government is responsible for the overall central and unified management of education, and the Ministry of Education is assigned the direct responsibility for educational management, including teacher education. The Educational Administration and Management Body include the Ministry of Education, Provincial Educational Service, and the Director of the

Educational Service. Teacher educational institutions (TTC and University) have the right to confer the academic degrees and award certificates as accredited or approved by the Ministry of Education.

The Lao educational system is comprised of two main streams: general education and higher education, with different levels (see Figure 2): Primary education (five years), Secondary Education including three-year Lower Secondary education (it will be a four-year period starting in 2009) and three-year Upper Secondary, Post Secondary education (one to two years), and Tertiary education (three to seven years). There are also crèches and kindergartens operating in cities and districts. Secondary education will be discussed further below.

The higher education institutions are the universities, colleges (including teacher colleges), schools, and institutes that provide the teaching and deliver training at higher education levels. The university's main functions are to provide higher education for socioeconomic development, promote and undertake research activities in the natural scientific and social sectors, preserve and enhance the fine arts, culture, and traditional customs of the nation and different ethnic groups, and provide service to the community. There are now four universities in three main parts of Laos, three of which are under the Ministry of Education; the fourth is the University of Medical Science, which is the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Health. There are 5 Teacher Training Colleges that are organized in four main cities of Laos under the Ministry of Education and 81 private colleges. Technical education is available in higher technical institutions. Vocational education is mostly provided in non-formal education modalities and in a few job-training situations. The educational system in Laos is summarized in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Educational System in Lao PDR



TTC: Teachers' Training College

Of the four universities, Champasak University is the main institution in Southern Laos PDR. It follows the policy of the party and government, focusing on training personnel with patriotism, socialist ideology, and self-sufficiency. Its main responsibility is to produce manpower covering all levels of labor forces with high academic knowledge and the ability to serve to the public and private sector in several areas, e.g., industry, agriculture, commercial, art and culture, home economics, and tourism. The teaching and learning programs and short courses of vocational training are also offered widely, covering basic vocational levels up to higher educational degree programs. The university also promotes scientific research, conservative arts, and national and traditional culture; provides professional services; and consults and trains academic and practical professionals. (Chapter Four will provide more information on this university since it is one of the research sites selected for this study).

1.2.4.1. Secondary Education

Secondary education in Lao PDR includes lower and upper secondary education (Grade 6-8 and Grade 9-11, respectively). However, not all secondary schools are divided into these two levels. Some lower secondary and upper secondary education are in separate places. In Champasak Province, there are 118 secondary schools including 3 private ones. Within these 118 secondary educational institutions, only 34 schools offer the complete course of secondary level, while there are 80 lower secondary schools and 4 upper secondary level.

The curricula for secondary schools are academic and lack the practical orientation that is required to produce a literate, better educated, and more responsive workforce for the country. The curriculum is based on theoretical knowledge and relies on teacher explanation and rote learning on the part of students. Moreover, the curriculum has been based on the document *Guidelines for General Education* (1994), which prescribes an education experience composed of separate subject entities. At each level, the curricula are overcrowded. The subjects of study in secondary school follow the National curriculum, which is shown in Table 1 below:

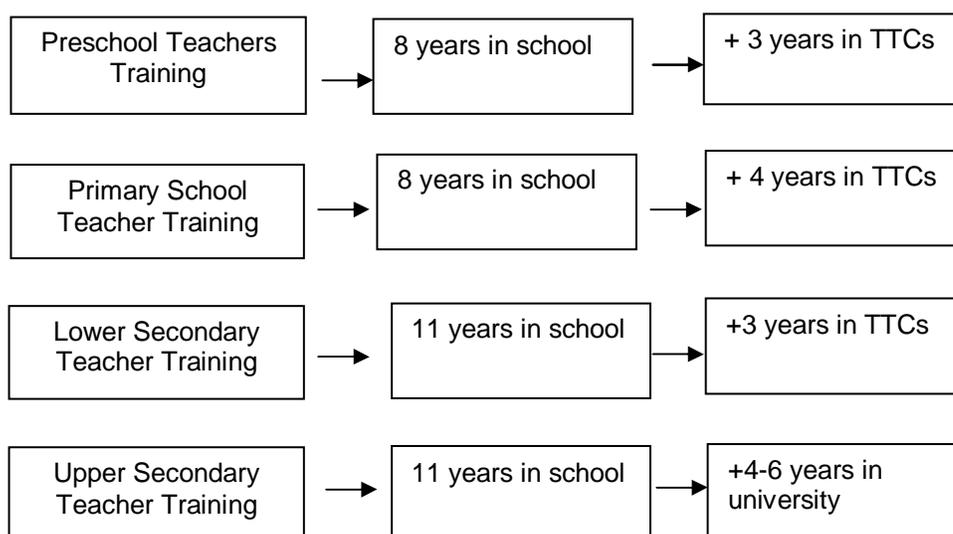
Table 1: Subjects to be taken at Secondary Education					
Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Lao Language	Lao Language	Lao Language	Lao Language and Literature	Lao Language and Literature	Lao Language and Literature
Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics
Natural Science	Natural Science	Natural Science	Physics	Physics	Physics
Techno	Techno	Techno	Chemistry	Chemistry	Chemistry
Geography	Geography	Geography	Geography	Geography	Geography
History	History	History	History	History	History
Demography	Demography	Demography	Demography	Demography	Demography
Physical Education	Physical Education	Physical Education	Physical Education	Physical Education	Physical Education
Arts	Arts	Arts	Biology	Biology	Biology
Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Foreign Language

Students are assessed through coursework and examinations on a monthly, quarterly, semester, and annual basis. The semester examination is conducted internally (within school themselves), while the final examination for Grade 11 is held under supervision of the National Examination Board, which is controlled by the Ministry of Education

1.2.4.2. Teacher Education in Laos

The Ministry of Education and the Provincial Education Authority share responsibilities in managing teacher education for the general education schools. Whereas the Ministry has the sole responsibility for national policy guidelines for teacher education, all aspects of upper and secondary teacher education, and curriculum and instructional material for all levels of teacher education, the Provincial Education Authority has the prime responsibility for managing primary and preschool teacher education. The teachers' colleges for each level of general education offer alternate teacher education programs of different lengths, requiring a certain number of prerequisite years of schooling as shown in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3: Teacher Training System in Lao PDR.



The curriculum of the education programs, including teacher education, consists of a large number of subjects and topics with a major emphasis on theory and very little opportunity for classroom interaction or the development of the essential capabilities of problem solving, learning to learn, practical research skills, or work orientation for teachers. In the absence of laboratories (e.g., for natural science subjects) and workshops, teacher trainees attend lectures except for a period of six to eight weeks at the end of their training that is devoted to teaching practice. There is thus an imbalance between theory and practical instruction. In addition, teacher education provides as much codified knowledge as possible for teachers so that they will have the conceptual, methodological, and curricular instructional knowledge that is thought to be the foundation of good teaching. Lao teacher education, however, fails to recognize that “enhancing independent thought and analysis, based on the assumption that best strategies have not yet been discovered or that they are too situation-specific to be prescribed, [and] thus [that] practitioners must learn to create solutions for themselves” (Grimmett, 1995, p. 69).

1.2.4.3. Educational Policy

The Sixth Lao People’s Revolutionary Party Congress in 1996 identified a longer-term national development goal to enable Lao PDR to graduate from the ranks of the least developed countries by the year 2020. To contribute to achieving this national goal

the Ministry of Education (MOE) has prepared a strategic vision up to 2020 linked to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the 2003 National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPS). MOE is implementing its own core tasks to achieve the targets of the National Plan of Action for Education for All (NPA) by 2015. The Seventh Lao People's Revolutionary Party Congress in 2001 and the Eighth Lao People's Revolutionary Party Congress in 2006 also emphasized that human resource development depended on education reform leading to a better quality of basic education, one that was equivalent to that in other countries.

To achieve the government's goal of graduating from LDC status by 2020 and to prepare for the country's regional and international integration, the Sixth Socioeconomic Development Plan 2006-2010 provides a coherent and cohesive development framework identifying education as one of the four pillars of its poverty reduction strategy. The Socioeconomic Development Plan recognizes that education is fundamental to socioeconomic development since it equips citizens with the required skills and attitudes in a rapidly changing society.⁶ There is pressure for the Lao PDR to provide education, especially at the higher levels, because it needs to utilize more immediate and advanced knowledge and technology in all sectors. The Ministry of Education has developed an Education Sector Development Framework in order to meet the needs and the requirements to undertake a national educational system reform. The government is committed to developing human resources to meet the development strategy and the economic structure. The four Educational Development Priorities include:

- Quality and Equity Project
- Educational System Reform
- Teacher and Administrators Improvement
- Vocational and Technical Improvement

The decree on education reform was put forward to reform education in the Lao PDR between 2006 and 2020. The reform will take place in two phases. The first phase, from 2006 to 2010, was to be undertaken in two steps. The first step concentrated on the elaboration of decrees, nomination of sub-committees in

⁶ Lao PDR Committee for Planning and Investment, 2005. Sixth National Socio Economic Development Plan (2006-2010), Vientiane.

administrative bodies of education, discussion about the details of education reform, curriculum review for the lower secondary school, and strengthening staff and teachers from 2006-2008. The second step will concentrate on the project and priorities decided by the government on education reform from 2008-2010.

The second phase will continue to implement the education reform emerging from planned activities. The main points are to continue to resolve the issue of teachers and improve the quality and the promotion of equitable access to education. From 2011 to 2012, higher education curriculum reform will be undertaken. There will be one more year added to the secondary education program, which will then be 7 years starting from 2009. Since the education system will be reformed by adding one year at the lower secondary school by 2009, there will be no foundation study (1 or 2 years at School of Foundation Study before entering a specialized field) for the higher education system after the year 2009. Teaching and learning practice will continue to promote a learning environment focusing on new teaching and learning techniques: that is, more participation from the students, a cooperative learning environment, and less emphasis on rote techniques.

The Department of Teacher Education (DTE) has also set up the 10-year Teacher Education Strategy (2006-2015) and a 5-year Action Plan (2006-2010).⁷ The 10-year Teacher Education Strategy (2006-2015) consists of strategic areas improvement, policy analysis, improved management of the teacher education institutions, provision of an effective system for continuing professional development, and enhanced status and incentives for teachers and teacher educators. The 5-year Action Plan (2006-2010) is the first phase of implementation of the strategy to be followed by a further five-year action plan (2011-2015).

The Teacher Education Strategy focuses on strengthening the institutional capacity of the National Teacher Education Advisory Board, enhancing teacher education institutions' roles in developing further education curricula, and providing in-service training and upgrading to teachers in order to ensure professional

⁷ Ministry of Education: Teacher Education Strategy 2006-2015 and Action Plan 2006-2010, August 2006.

standards. The teacher education institutions, in consultation with the Vientiane Capital Education Service, provincial education services, and district educational bureau, will have more responsibility for selecting trainees entering teacher education institutions. Teacher education institutions will revise teacher education curricula regularly for relevance and compatibility with the general education curriculum. At the same time, a quality assurance mechanism will be introduced into teacher education institutions.

The Teacher Education Strategy will also provide opportunities for school-based teachers with a number of years of teaching experience to upgrade their knowledge through continuing education programs in the teacher education institutions. These programs will be designed to allow experienced teachers to spend shorter periods studying than those in regular pre-service teacher education programs. All training organized and certified by the teacher education institutions will be awarded credit points.⁸

1.2.5. Teachers' Lives and Work in Schools and School Community

Numerous variables inside schools – such as physical environment, material resources, leadership and management, teacher culture, professional development, routine practices, procedures, and politics, and teachers' workload – constitute the environment in which teachers work. In order to provide a succinct picture of teachers' workplace conditions and the physical and social environment in secondary schools in Champasak Province and Champasak University, I will briefly describe these variables.

Most secondary schools in the region as well as Champasak University have a building that largely fulfills the needs of the school. However, even some newly established or upgraded government and private schools face challenges, such as lack of classrooms, lack of space inside classrooms, lack of washrooms or toilets, and lack of laboratories and libraries.

⁸ Ministry of Education: Teacher Education Strategy 2006-2015 and Action Plan 2006-2010, August 2006.

Chamapasak Province can be called the center of education of the southern provinces of Laos. Some students studying in high schools in Champasak Province are also from other provinces. Compared to other provinces in the south, Champasak secondary schools are larger in terms of student population and the number of teaching staff.

Schools are in session 8 hours each day from Monday to Friday, but teachers are required to teach between 12 and 20 periods per week. Usually, each instructional period is 45 minutes long. The teachers are expected to organize the periods in accordance with the syllabus provided by the Academic Board and the Examination Board. Completion of the prescribed syllabus within a stipulated time is compulsory since the examination questions cover the syllabus content.

Teachers' non-teaching activities or responsibilities in and outside school include working on different committees (e.g., cleanliness committee, discipline committee, admission committee, mass organization committee); attending staff meetings and associational meetings with administrators; attending in-service training programs; marking examination papers; supervising students; supervising and invigilating examinations; leading sport and other extracurricular activities (including organizing special events: e.g., celebrating national day); liaising with parents; and carrying out special duties assigned by the local or regional civil administration.

By and large, teachers' culture in most educational institutions is predominantly individualistic. Teachers have limited opportunities to engage in social interaction during breaks or free periods. Academic interactions (e.g., sharing, discussing professional ideas, planning together, co-teaching, peer observation, etc.) among teachers are also limited. In addition, school-based formal or informal professional development is not usual in the teachers' culture. Often teachers are pulled out of school individually to participate in center-based in-service training (workshops, refresher courses on general pedagogy, and subject-specific course for content knowledge enhancement) in centrally organized programs.

Teachers' lives inside and outside schools are inseparable. Teaching is considered a noble profession; a teacher is believed to know more than those whom he or she

teaches. As models of good character, teachers are expected to preach and practice all the noble virtues, such as honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, justice, fidelity, and fairness. Teachers are active and influential members of their communities; in remote areas, they assume leadership responsibilities and have a great deal of influence on the socio-political landscape.

Despite this positive image of teaching and these expectations about teachers, schoolteachers do not enjoy the kind of status or public respect attached to other professionals or authorities such as doctors, engineers, police, army officers, and so on. Factors such as low salaries, minimal power or authority, and lack of recognition for teaching as a fully-fledged profession contribute to teaching's low status. No strict policies and procedures govern teachers' recruitment. Under these circumstances, becoming a schoolteacher is not always the first, second, or even third choice for the majority of educated youths.

1.3. Emergence of the Study

This study was motivated by four main factors: challenges in education and teacher education, previous educational reform by reforming pedagogy in teaching and learning, the challenges of recent work on the teacher's role in education reform, and my own experiences and interest.

1.3.1. Challenges in Education and Teacher Education

The Ministry of Education and other Ministries are responsible for policy and strategy formation, planning, managing, controlling, and enhancing the quality of education. They have limited trained staff with a broad understanding of the principles and practices of the various education sub-sectors from both the theoretical and the applied perspective. They lack the necessary qualifications, experience, and capabilities to perform the tasks listed above effectively. The situation is no different at provincial and district education authority levels, which also have limited trained staff for needs assessment, planning and allocation of resources, information management, and monitoring progress and quality control.

Although the expansion in primary and teacher training sectors has been impressive, the output in terms of quality and efficiency leaves much room for improvement. In its present state, the education sector has limited capacity and capability to respond to modern socioeconomic and skilled manpower needs. This shortfall is expected to become acute with the change from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. The transition will have a direct effect on education planning.

At the institute level, there are few administrators who have received training in planning and management, information management, effective utilization, or generation and management of resources. A large percentage of school teachers are unqualified. Things are no different in vocational and post-secondary institutes except for the university level institutes, where more teachers are qualified. There are a large number of teachers' colleges for primary school and general education teacher training. However, the quality of teacher training is poor and suffers from many weaknesses and inadequacies in the curriculum, techniques of training, institutional facilities, and the quality of teacher educators.⁹

The curricula of education and training programs for the several levels and sub-sectors of education are highly subject-centered, overcrowded with many subjects of study. In addition, these curricula fail to emphasize the integration and application of knowledge, emphasize instruction in theory, and discourage applied skills. There are, in most cases, no instructional materials or laboratory and library facilities available to support the implementation of curricula.

Moreover, over the last 10 years there has been curriculum and material development and rapid progress internationally in education, science, and technology, meaning the teacher education curriculum requires continual revision. Recently, the curriculum has been substantially revised to make it more relevant to the current situation. These changes will require further revision to make the teacher education curriculum more holistic and flexible enough to reinforce the integration of new and

⁹ Asian Development Bank (1993). *Educational and Development in Asia and the Pacific Series: Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Volume 1. Manila, Philippines Press, 1993
Grant, E. (1998). *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance Laos since 1975*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

important world issues and appropriate educational topics, such as multi-grade class teaching, inclusive education, gender issues, reproductive health, life skills, information technology, and morality.

At present, there are still many permanent primary teachers (excluding contracted teachers and village-employed teachers) who were not trained in teacher education institutions and therefore did not obtain the 5+3 teacher training certificate. In addition, some teachers trained as primary teachers on 8+3 and 11+1 programs are teaching in lower and upper secondary schools. These teachers face difficulties in performing their duties. There is therefore a need for upgrading programs in order to help the teachers gain knowledge and skills relevant to their work. Primary and secondary school teachers have not had the opportunity to upgrade their professional competencies continuously and systematically. As a result, it is difficult for them to assimilate and perform new techniques and methods in teaching and to develop beyond basic academic knowledge in their subject areas.

Most teachers do not have opportunities for in-service training. When they do have the chance to attend a course, there is no mechanism for keeping and certifying their training records. In particular, there is no credit points system used in in-service training programs that allows for the accumulation of credit points for additional award bearing programs.

1.3.2. Educational Reform in Laos (Teaching and Learning Practice)

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) has an education system very much influenced by its colonial heritage. The country is now in transition from an agricultural economy to an industrialized economy, moving toward a market economy and privatization. Education and training are very important for preparing citizens for this transition. In 1986, the government introduced a program of socioeconomic reforms and began to implement an "Open Door" policy to the outside world (Western countries). The Lao government thus began the process of transforming the economy from a centrally planned one to a market economy through a measure called the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) and extended the relationship of the country to the Western world.

The immediate educational policy in Lao PDR is to develop quality human resources to meet the needs of the socioeconomic development of the nation. The government has begun to reform the education system, with the goals of linking educational development more closely to the socioeconomic situation in each locality, improving science training, expanding networks to remote mountainous regions, and recruiting minority teachers. The plan includes making education more relevant to daily realities and building increased cooperation in educational activities among the various ministries, mass organizations, and the community. Not only has human resource development been recognized as a way to equip personnel with knowledge and skills, but also it helps to develop their capability to adapt themselves to the fast-changing world for existence, survival, and development.

The need for alternative teaching and assessment approaches and methods highlights the importance of teachers reforming their instructional methods in order to improve students' achievement in school. Educational reform also includes revising the curriculum and training teachers and teacher educators through professional development programs focusing on both pedagogy and curriculum. Many study tours have been conducted for staff, educators, and key personnel in the Ministry of Education, Teacher Training Department, and higher education institutions to observe and study educational systems in other countries. Many teachers have also been offered short- and long-term training scholarships provided by other countries, notably Australia, Japan, and Canada. Training has also been organized by international organizations in these countries. From these professional developments, teachers or teacher educators have been trained to bring a new approach – learner-centered interactive – to teaching and learning.

The idea of a learner-centered interactive approach to teaching typically involves problem-solving, inquiry-oriented activities, finding information, seeking reasons, constructing arguments – tasks that are interdisciplinary and related to their lives outside school, students' working with other students, whether cooperatively as a whole class, small groups and jigsaw groups, or in pairs (Beattie, 2004; Perkins, 1993). The focus of the classroom becomes the students' construction of knowledge; teachers shift away from a teacher-centered classroom to a more student-centered environment. The student-centered classroom involves opportunities for social interaction, independent

investigations and study, and the expression of creativity, as well as making provision for different learning styles. The role of the teacher then should become much more of a coordinator of learning resources than that of a source of knowledge and preferences; (s)he should become a facilitator of knowledge, helping to engender the knowledge and preferences that her or his students gain (Usher & Edward, 1994). Therefore, teaching should not be the transmission of ready-made knowledge.

Such training in how students learn has engendered teachers' new interpretations of what it means to prepare competent and generative teaching professionals for challenging futures. The teachers who have been provided the training are enthusiastic in adopting and applying the more interactive approach to teaching and learning in schools, including teacher education programs. This pedagogy has, however, been introduced and applied mostly in schools in the main cities of Laos. Moreover, while it is effective in many countries especially in the Western educational context, there are some challenges and tensions Lao teachers face and these will be discussed in the following section.

1.3.3. Teachers' Challenges and Tensions

Western educators have emphasized that the teacher's command of subject matter in the context of interactive, learner-centered teaching rests on students' activities such as problem-solving, inquiry, experiment, and hands-on activities. In these kinds of activities, teachers need both to be familiar with the principles underlying a topic and to be prepared for the variety of ways in which learners can explore these principles. Teaching and learning are conducted in a way that encourages students' in-depth understanding of subject knowledge. To foster students in gaining such in-depth understanding, teachers need to reinforce learning and development not only by using an interactive approach but also through adapting curricular material and applying alternative assessment techniques. However, in Laos, covering the syllabus for the exams is the mainstay of traditional classroom instruction; in-depth understanding of the syllabus content receives little attention. As a result, students have little understanding of primary concepts and are unable to grasp advanced information in the given subject.

As mentioned, this pedagogy has been introduced and applied by some teachers in schools in urban areas. Even so, teachers who have tried to shift from teacher-dominated

instruction to learner-centered teaching are faced by different challenges and tensions. These include isolation, lack of collaboration, and limited support from administrators; the constraints of the official syllabus or curriculum and examinations that test memory instead of understanding; lack of time and resources, among others. These challenges and factors influence teachers' choices about instruction, curriculum, and assessment practices. Teachers trying to implement change have always faced competing demands from organizations, students, parents, and their own personal values. As teachers face these challenges and tensions, they find they cannot concentrate on professional development both in content and pedagogical knowledge; and so some of them turn back to their traditional styles of teaching. Therefore, in most educational institutions, including primary and secondary levels, teaching is still conducted largely through the lecture method with limited classroom interaction.

Moreover, teachers are isolated. Not only do senior teachers and administrators not support them, but also their culture of work is mostly individualized. Teachers hardly ever work in collaborative teams in order to support one another, to learn from each other, to share their experience, beliefs, interests, or problems, to reflect on their teaching, and to find solutions to any problems they have faced. If teachers work together, they are less isolated (Erb, 1995), and they are also able to converse knowledgeably about theories, methods, and processes of teaching and learning. In this way they can improve their instruction (Hausman & Goldring, 2001).

In addition, apart from not being supported, the provision of feedback or evaluation to improve teachers' instructional practice is very limited. Some schools have gathered students' feedback at the end of the semester aimed at evaluating teachers' punctuality, habits, and characteristics and to check whether teachers have covered the assigned syllabus, but such evaluation fails to foster or encourage instructional improvements. Teachers themselves also do not have a regular self-reflection or self-assessment mechanism for facilitating professional growth. In other words, they are not reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983). Fullan (1999) argues that it is only through reflection at the personal, group, and organizational level that teachers will begin to question their practice and think differently about their classroom practice. With little reflection, it is difficult for teachers to be aware of professional developments and

instructional improvements. If they fail in some activities they practice, teachers often talk of their students' low abilities and blame the students for not caring about their learning.

1.3.4. My Own Experience and Interests

During my 19-year teaching career, I have worked as a teacher, teacher-trainer, teacher educator, head teacher, and external agent in private schools. As a teacher, I have taught English both at the university level and in private colleges. I also functioned as a head teacher while still teaching full-time. As a trainer, I was assigned to facilitate and be involved in in-service teacher professional development programs of English teachers from different provinces of Laos. The training focused both on subject knowledge and pedagogical improvement for degree (Graduate Certificate in TESOL) and non-degree programs for teachers. In the head teacher role, I have had multiple duties and responsibilities: dealing with day-to-day administration and emerging situations in the school as well as interacting and communicating with senior management. Recently, I was assigned to be responsible for the Faculty of Education at Champhasak University. At this time, I have had the opportunity to work closely with the pre-service teacher program not only in English language but also other subjects (e.g., Mathematics, and Lao Language and Literature). Being a teacher of English, teacher trainer, and teacher educator, I have tried to apply and demonstrate more communicative or interactive approaches in my teaching activities. As head teacher, a teacher trainer, and a teacher educator, I have observed both pre-service and in-service teachers in different institutions in order to improve the teaching and learning and reflect on teacher education programming.

The various experiences I have gained through my involvement in teaching, observing, and implementing teacher education led to my conclusion that there are many associated factors that limit the success of teachers' efforts to apply interactive approaches to teaching and learning. One of these is being isolated. In some schools, the environment seems non-supportive of change as senior teachers who have experienced learning and teaching by traditional methods do not believe in the new ways of teaching and learning. Many believe that quiet classrooms are good teaching environments.

Therefore, many teachers are hesitant, suspicious, and resistant to changing their pedagogical practices, and others seem uncertain and confused or have a lack of confidence in the proposed changes.

1.3.5. Research Question

The core purpose of my study is to present a comprehensive description of the experiences, contributions, and concerns related to improvement for teachers in Champasak Province. The significance of the study lies in the paucity of such cultural-specific data and insights into contextual opportunities and challenges. Consequently, I set myself the following principal research question: *How might descriptions of teachers' experiences and challenges in their attempts to reform or improve their work and practices affect teacher education?*

1.3.6. Subsidiary Questions

Schools are embedded in their social context, and these contexts influence teachers' classroom practices and schools functioning. The dilemmas, issues, tensions, and challenges that confront teachers in their attempts to improve their practice and the strategies they use to handle those challenges likewise cannot be judged in isolation. The interconnectedness of the classroom and school community – and the particular challenges Laotian teachers face – necessitates understanding how teachers' improvement efforts in one area relate to their actions in the others. Therefore, I posed four sub-questions to elicit teachers' responses about their experiences.

1. *What experiences and initiative activities do the teachers make to improve their work inside and outside the classroom, and why?*
2. *How do the teachers make these efforts?*
3. *What might their efforts tell us about the education of teachers specifically and school improvement in general?*
4. *What challenges do the teachers face and how do they address those challenges?*

The study does not *necessarily* seek specific answers to this set of sub-questions; rather, I used these questions to elicit responses about the participants' involvement in improvement activities inside and outside the classroom. The participants' responses and

information from other sources (observation and document analysis) contribute to the main body of data that I have analyzed in order to draw a detailed sketch of teachers' experiences in the classroom and school community as well as their continuing professional development.

1.3.7. Significance of the Study

Numerous studies worldwide have investigated school teachers on various dimensions, but most of them have investigated approaches used in Western and developed countries. Very little research has documented the education and the experience of teachers in Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR/Laos), especially the Champasak Province context, in terms of the issues, problems, and challenges that people face on a day-to-day basis and how they respond to them. Therefore, in the international context, this study offers a modest yet significant contribution to the existing knowledge on teachers' experiences as frontline actors in improvement efforts. I hope this research will generate qualitative insights into teachers' experiences and help explain how these teachers improve their practice, what strategies they adopt, what innovations they attempt, what activities they lead, what challenges they meet, and how they address these challenges. Knowledge of the challenges these teachers face, how they act and react differently under these circumstances, what meaning(s) of improvement they believe, what underlies their choice of responses of practices and response to particular situations, and how they sustain their own professional development in the context of improvement efforts is crucial for improving school practices and teacher development in Champasak Province. This study will provide some insights into ways in which teachers link their improvement efforts inside and outside the classroom as they try to improve their own practices. Thus, the study is a pioneering attempt to provide teachers' perspectives and voices to improve teacher education in Laos.

The study will include a conceptual review and synthesis of current literature on teacher development accompanied by a case study with teachers in one of the Laos' southern provinces that will help to determine the feasibility of the recommendations for supporting and developing educational reform in Laos. It is expected that this study will help facilitate and contribute to the provision of effective teaching to improve education

quality in Lao PDR. The ideas and insights will also facilitate decisions and actions in the field of teacher development and school improvement in the southern part of Laos and elsewhere.

The study also takes into account the numerous calls for research approaches suitable for developing countries, involving intensive fieldwork, data from a variety of sources, qualitative data analysis, triangulation, and cross-case analysis. The study will combine multi-leveled analysis of teachers' biographies, classroom situations, school's institutional lives and social dynamics.

1.4. Organization of the Thesis

This thesis comprises eight chapters, followed by a bibliography and appendices. The first three chapters present an overview of the study, examine the related literature, and describe the methodological procedures and perspectives. Chapters 4 to 7 deal with the data, while presenting and discussing the research findings. Chapter 8 summarizes the major findings, discusses the study's significance, implementations, and directions for further research, and draws conclusions.

Chapter 1 has been presented in two main sections. The first describes the geographic, political, and socioeconomic context and the provision for education in Lao PDR as well as the educational contexts within which teachers' live and work. It also supplies information on education and teacher education reform affecting teachers' day-to-day practice and their professional development and the major challenges and issues that have hampered their improvement efforts. The second section describes the emergence of the study and development of the research framework. It situates the teachers' experiences and classroom practice and in the school community and introduces the main research question, subsidiary questions, and the organizational framework of the study. Finally, it addresses the study's significance.

Chapter 2 examines literature that supports the rationale for the research and provides its theoretical foundation. In particular, this review focuses on empirical research on school improvement and educational change, teacher education, teachers' initiatives to improve their practice, and case studies from developed and developing

countries that examine teachers' development experiences, the challenges they face, and what strategies they use to cope with those challenges.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological procedures and perspectives utilized in this study. Included are discussions of the qualitative case-study design, the selection of participants, and the procedures of data collection, management, and analysis. The chapter also considers the ethical issues and methodological challenges of qualitative case-study research and the limitations of the study.

Chapter 4 profiles the schools and the participants. The school profiles cover organizational structure, demographic information, resources/facilities, change stories, and achievements and problems. The participants' profiles include brief biographies, teaching experiences, and workplace experiences.

Chapter 5 explores the teachers' experiences with improvement efforts and challenges in the classroom. First, it briefly presents the existing difficult conditions within which the teachers seek to improve. It then presents teachers' strategies or activities to improve their practice in the classroom.

Chapter 6 deals with the teachers' experiences in the work of improvement in the school community. First, it sheds light on the teachers' conceptions of improvement and interests in becoming involved in change outside their classrooms. Next, it presents a detailed discussion on the activities the teachers carry out to alter the school work, especially the strategies they adopt to create opportunities for themselves and their colleagues to interact with each other and with the head teachers in order to promote a culture of sharing and teamwork.

Chapter 7 discusses the participants' professional development. It looks into the specific activities or initiatives they attempt in order to improve themselves and the challenges and the strategies they employ to tackle challenges.

Chapter 8 discusses the study's findings, significance, and implications.

CHAPTER TWO: OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature related to the research questions of this study, which seek to understand what improvement the teachers pursue in the classroom and school community, why and how they pursue those improvements, what challenges their improvement efforts, and how they address those challenges. This overview explains how much the existing literature helps to resolve these questions and enables us to recognize gaps in our understanding and knowledge on these topics that my study contributes to filling.

The overview of the literature is used to tease out experiences, ideas, insights, and perspectives from different genres of research studies about school improvement and change, including teacher and educational reform, the lives and work of teachers, and professional development for teachers. Doing so necessitates a detailed examination of the literature in relation to the research questions (with the specific references to teachers' efforts to improve the classroom, school community, and professionalism – how teachers experience improvement and change, how this experience is expressed in their practices, what factors affect individual teachers' responses to improvement and change, and how they improve their practice). I look at the general trends in the literature in each area, focusing on the extent, nature, and understanding of the changes teachers are implementing, the constraints they perceive to these changes, and personal, social, and professional influences shaping their current perspective and practices.

The review concentrates on the literature on secondary schools and teacher education, and I also review other references where relevant. I report on teachers engaged in improvement and change using descriptions such as 'effective teachers' (e.g. Carman, 2005; Stronge, 2002); 'accomplished teachers' (Fernandez, 2000; Kilbourn, 1992); 'outstanding teachers' (Sato et al., 2005); 'progressive teachers' (Drake & Miller, 2001); 'successful teachers' (Connell, 1985); 'productive teachers' (Glatthorn & Fox, 2002); 'expert teachers' (Ming, 1999); 'experienced teachers' (Reynolds, 1998); 'lead teacher or

teacher leader' (Bascia, 1996); 'ethical teacher' (Campbell, 2003); 'caring teacher' (Nodding, 2001).

I have organized the literature in four parts. The first part consists of literature examining the teachers' role in the school improvement and educational reform and their experiences with the reform process. The second and the third parts explore the literature on teachers' improvement efforts in the classroom and school community, examining the relationship between these accounts and general trends emerging from the wider literature. The last part discusses teachers' professional development in terms of content, challenges, and trends. Most of the systematic studies of general experiences with change have been conducted in Western contexts. However, a few studies have investigated teachers' work in the context of school improvement and teachers' change efforts in Asian and developing countries. I review comparative evidence on cross-cultural perspectives from studies where available or relevant.

2.2. Teacher and School Improvement

School improvement has attracted much attention from researchers and educators around the world, particularly from the developed countries. The emerging school improvement models and educational change theories tend to emphasize the centrality of teachers in initiating, managing, and sustaining school improvement (e.g., Fullan, 1991, 1993, 2001, 2007; Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman & Miller, 1994; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Stoll, 1999; Thiessen, 1993; Wikeley & Morillo, 2005). The emphasis on teachers' leading role gives high credibility to the knowledge, expertise, experiences, and values that teachers bring to bear upon school improvement. Flecknoe (2005, p. 440) argues:

Those who wish to manage improving schools should concentrate perhaps less on organizational changes that affect structures and more on building capacity that exposes teachers to such forces of change. The sort of change must arise from the desire of teachers to improve.

Similarly, for school improvement to occur teachers need to be committed to the process of change, which will involve them in examining and reforming their own practice. Creemers and Reezigt (2005, p. 365) argue, "Schools do not change if the people within the schools, particularly the teaching staff, do not change." Calderhead

(2001, p. 797) adds that “If educational reform is to be systematically effectively managed, the roles of teachers need to be fully recognized and incorporated into the reform process.” This argument is well captured by Thiessen (1993, p. 296), who writes that “As mentors of students and implementers of policy, teachers will be required to be the first line and the front line of responsibilities for excellence in our schools.”

Another important finding from research on teachers’ educational reform or school improvement points to the relationship between teachers’ professional development and school improvement – that is, that educational reform and school improvement depends on teachers’ professional development and that successful professional development is situated in the school and classroom contexts of teachers’ day-to-day work and is linked to the teacher as a change or improvement agent (e.g., Fullan, 1993, 2001; Guskey, 1995; Smylie, 1995). Smylie (1995, p. 92) says that “the importance of schools is not only as place for teachers to work but also as places for teachers to learn.” Thiessen (1993) argues that teacher development is coupled with school improvement and that individual teacher development is embedded in organizational development. All these views indicate that teachers’ professional development underlies school reform and that teachers’ development is crucially linked to improving student learning and pervades and alters the culture and organization of teachers’ work (Elmore & Burney, 1999; Little, 1995). The notion of a professional learning community exemplifies all the aspects of successful professional development (e.g., Barth, 1990; Fullan, 1999; Little, 1993; Louise & Kruse, 1995) as teachers work together and assume responsibility for continuous learning and involvement for all members (Anderson et al., 1998). Teacher development involves the teachers’ ever-increasing involvement in continuous innovation by “adding, subtracting, integrating and refining their practices and reflection” (Fullan, 1992, p. 23). Fullan argues:

...what is important is the capacity of teachers – individually and with others – to manage change continuously...and to become adept at knowing when to seek change aggressively, and when to back off. To do this, teachers must understand the implementation perspective and change process, or they will be at the mercy of external forces of changes. (Fullan, 1992, p. 23)

However, despite the growing realization about teachers’ fundamental role in school improvement, educational research has not paid enough attention to the degree

and ways in which teachers influence school improvement by getting involved in the improvement efforts inside and outside the classroom (Honing et al., 2001). Moreover, researchers have also pointed to the gaps in our knowledge about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that teachers bring to their school reform and their actions to support change inside and outside the classroom (Skyes, 1996; Richard & Placier, 2001); teachers' knowledge of conditions and context of change, which enables them to use their experiences from their own classroom and school community (Honing et al., 2001); teacher-community partnership and the related dynamism (Talber & McLaughlin, 1993); and teachers' knowledge of change in schools (Louis & Miles, 1990).

2.3. Teacher and Educational Reform

Educational reform involves directing, negotiating, and responding to multiple forces in order to improve the learning and the learning conditions of children. It needs to address fundamental questions of purpose and meaning, such as what kind of society do we want for our children and what conditions need to be provided for students and teachers in order to educate students for that kind of society? These questions link educational reform issues to social justice and democratic responsibility. During the past twenty-five years, a broad spectrum of strategies to bring about planned change has surfaced. The three most pervasive differ primarily in their focus: the first focuses on the academic performance of students; the second focuses on the occupational situation of teachers; and the third focuses on the governance structure of schools (Elmore & Burney, 1999). More recently there have been attempts to combine elements of all three: teachers are situated at the heart of reform efforts, and students and parents are included in planning for change. The rhetoric surrounding these three approaches to reform is based on notions of economic competitiveness, teacher competence, and social equity.

Astuto (1991) argues that the reasons for the failure of educational reform efforts that occurred in the eighties “are the narrow limits of imagination that have governed the reform proposals” (Astuto, Clark, McGree & Fernandez, 1994, p. 1). She claims that the reform proposals are constrained because they are rooted in assumptions about teaching and learning that have gone unchallenged by those proposing the reforms and that reflect “conservative interpretations of the knowledge bases and practices of organizational

studies, schooling, and education policy” (Astuto, et al., 1994, p. 5). Sarason (1990, pp. 4-5) attributes failure of reform effort to “a conception of how complicated settings are organized: their structure, their dynamics, their power relationships, and their underlying values and axioms.”

New approaches to reform are needed. Fullan (1999) argues for a combination of bottom-up and top-down initiatives, merging a vision for learning with team development and leadership opportunities. Stoll and Fink (1996, p. 188) argue that an approach merging findings from school effectiveness research with findings from school improvement research into a “school development planning process” of assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation might lead to effective reform. Leadership, climate setting, vision, a collegial and collaborative culture, lifelong learning, empowerment, and a focus on teaching and learning are integrated into the planning cycle.

What the field does not yet have is a description of educational change that encompasses both the individual agency of practitioners and the embedded social systems of schools with their historical and political contexts. We lack multiple descriptions of reform efforts that portray how teachers learn from change initiatives with their corresponding professional development. We do not yet understand how these efforts help teachers, individually, as members of school culture, and collectively, as members of a larger professional community, become involved as active participants in determining what teaching entails and what the purposes of public schools are.

Knowledge of the change process is vital for teachers assuming responsibility and commitment to make improvements in practice and to assure continual learning for themselves, their colleagues, and their students (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2003). Fullan (2001, p. 6) argues that “Promoters of change need to be committed and skilled in the change process as well as the change itself.” This implies that professional development for teachers needs to address content, pedagogy and change agent skills as well as the change process. Researchers and educators involved in change research have identified or emphasized three stages within the change process: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization (Fullan, 2001; Miles, 1983). These stages are interrelated non-

linearly, with factors connecting at each phase, confirming change as a process, not an event and teachers can facilitate change in all three stages and influence many of the key variables in the change process (Fullan, 1991; Hall, 1992).

The initiation stage “consists of the process that leads up to and includes a decision to adopt or proceed with a change” (Fullan, 2001, p. 50). Success in initiation depends on all people involved perceiving a genuine need for the innovation. People respond to needs that they consider personally meaningful and necessary (Duke, 2000). Their commitment cannot be mandated (Fullan, 1999), although change must be linked to policy at the school level (Louise & Miles, 1990). Teachers are expected to serve as strong advocates for an innovation, expressing enthusiasm involving others who are excited about what they attempt (Hall, 1992).

The implementation stage involves “the first experiences of attempting to put an idea or reform into practice” (Fullan, 2001, p.50). Successful implementation depends on a variety of factors, including the orchestration of events by school improvement teams often led by teachers and concerned with local needs and issues (Smylie, 1995). Attempting any complex innovation is stressful and requires local support (Sikes, 1992) or pressure and support (Fullan, 1992). “Pressure without support leads to resistance and alienation; support without pressure leads to drift or waste of resources” (Fullan 1992, p.25). Fullan goes on to explain that change involves innovations – in ideas, in policy, in structure – and that dealing effectively with innovation requires alteration in behaviors and beliefs. Change in behavior involves new skills, activities, and practices, while change in beliefs includes new understanding and commitment, which are at the core of implementation. Fullan says “the key issue from an implementation perspective is how the process of change unfolds vis-à-vis what people do (behavior) and think (beliefs) in relation to a particular innovation” (p.22). Moreover, according to Fullan, the chances of working through an implementation process are much greater if there is strong collegiality and commitment to continuous change that are supported by policies and structures. He writes “implementation occurs when teachers interact with and support each other as they try out new practices, cope with difficulties, and develop new skills and so on” (p. 24).

The institutionalization stage refers to “whether the change gets built in as an ongoing part of the system” (Fullan, 2001, p.50). It involves how alternatives, new ideas, or innovative practices take root and grow over a period of time and depends on many factors, including structural supports, teacher mastery and commitment, continued assistance, and staff stability. The innovations must be embedded into the timetable, budget, and roles of schools; administrative action is critical (Rosenthotz, 1989). Institutionalization depends on clear links between the innovation, classroom instruction, and student achievement (Guskey & Spark, 1996; Little, 1993; Sykes, 1999). To promote widespread use of an initiative, it must have meaning for participants (Duke, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Hopkins & West, 1994). In becoming an integral part of the school, the change must address a moral purpose – having an improving effect on students’ achievement (Fullan, 2001). Teachers must work together to adapt initiative and classroom instruction according to the needs and ideas of all involved.

In sum, educational change is perceived as a complex process, and it is important for teachers to understand fully how to apply this process for school improvement and the opportunities and difficulties involved in initiating, implementing, and sustaining change in different contexts. These recurring themes in contemporary discourse on educational change make particular references to teachers’ frontline role in the process and the combination of support and pressure needed to facilitate improvement in each of the three key stages of the change process. Effective teachers’ professional development can take place inside and outside the classroom as contexts for teachers’ decisions, actions, reflections, and interactions.

2.4. Teachers’ Work in the Classroom

Knowing the complexities of work teachers do in the classroom is important for understanding the complexities of activities or practices teachers attempt to improve. Classroom work includes all the opportunities and experiences that both teacher and student have under the teacher’s guidance. The various literatures have described and categorized the collection of factors that play important roles in shaping the culture of teaching and the teachers’ realities, and researchers have discerned patterns in the kind of improvement or changes teachers’ engage in the classroom (e.g., Calderhead, 1988;

Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman & Miller, 1994; Tay-Koay, 1999). Teachers exhibit critical differences at the individual level (Lieberman & Miller, 1994; Webb & Vullian, 1996). Even different teachers at the same school may have quite different reactions to the demands for change. In addition to the unnoticeable changes teachers make in their day-to-day teaching and their responses to the naturally occurring, ongoing changes, teachers deliberately attempt change; they deconstruct and reconstruct their practice, striving to create new situations or alter existing ones (McIntyre, 2002; Randi & Corno, 1997).

Any activities initiated by teachers in the classroom to improve their practice reveal a set of dominant themes that explain what strategic change teachers attempt in the classroom and why and how they pursue those activities. These themes fall into two broader categories: improving teaching practices to promote students' academic learning and improving the classroom psychosocial environment. I will discuss each category in the following sections.

2.4.1. Improving Teaching and Learning Practice

In teaching and learning practice new and more progressive approaches to teaching have been replacing old ones, for example, from teacher-centered teaching to student-centered learning, from transmissive to interactive learning, and from dependent to independent learners. Studies from both Western and non-Western contexts that have explored how 'good teachers' or 'good schools' have dealt with change have established that in order to enhance students' academic learning, 'good' or 'effective' teachers generally try to structure their core learning activities around three components of pedagogy – teaching methods, curriculum, and assessment practices. According to Beattie (2004) and Kilbourn (1992), teachers believe that efforts to combine interactive teaching methods, active cognitive engagement, culturally and developmentally appropriate curricular material, and formative evaluation techniques can improve student learning and development.

Studies have also showed that teachers who have successfully implemented instructional improvement in the classroom shift away from traditional transmission-oriented teaching towards learner-centered pedagogies that emphasize the learner's central role in the educational process (Beattie, 2004; Kilbourn, 1992). In a learner-

centered environment, learners meaningfully interact with the subject matter by trying to construct their own meanings of it (Bredo, 2000).

Another important component of instructional improvement is correlated to curriculum. While curriculum has been defined by many educators as comprising all experiences in school that are planned by teachers or administrator, others like Dewey (1959), Pinar (1975), and Marsh & Willis (2003) have argued that curriculum includes all experiences that students have in school, planned or unplanned. As elaborated by these theorists, curriculum may consist of a pattern of courses, guidance, specific instruction, physical activities, opportunities for experiences, testing and evaluating modes of interaction, or any or all of these. Therefore, curriculum adaptation is an integral part of instructional improvement and can take different forms, including the use of multiple sources of information, the use of tasks other than those suggested in the curriculum to teach a particular concept, or the use of technology such as calculators, computers, and video technologies to assist learning (Drake & Sherin, 2006). Teachers also pursue curriculum adaptation –evaluating, adapting, and altering existing curriculum practices by including or excluding subject material, by adding outside information, or by relating the material to local experiences. Importantly, teachers’ use of curriculum adaptation rests on the teachers’ authority or agency to decide what to teach and how to teach (Hawthorne, 1992; Paris, 1993). These adaptations are stimulated largely by the teachers’ conception that externally developed curricular materials can serve only as raw materials for teachers and students in the construction of knowledge.

Pedagogical improvement also involves assessment reform. Teachers’ assessment reform aims at the development of students who have both content knowledge and also the abilities to think, analyze, solve problems, communicate, and collaborate (Perkins, 1993). Teachers engaging in instructional improvements use innovative assessment methods to track students’ progress, gather evidence of learning, relate this evidence to agreed-upon standards, and share it publicly (Fostnot, 2005). Assessing students’ learning in non-traditional ways takes different forms in different teachers’ classrooms. This involves formal and non-formal assessments. Both formal and informal strategies aim at reducing the emphasis on content-based examinations and increasing the emphasis on formative evaluations (Perkins, 1993; Fostnot, 2005; Sato, et al., 2005). Teachers can use

formal assessment strategies for portfolios, students' journals, peer reviews, clinical interviews, and research reports. A variety of informal assessment methods are embedded in teachers' everyday instruction, such as listening to students' ideas during class discussion, using peer assessment and self-assessment strategies, checking students' work, conducting cooperative tests, building physical models, and encouraging and observing plays, debates, dances, or artistic renderings (Sato, et al., 2005).

Studies from Western contexts indicate that 'good teachers' or 'effective teachers' have dealt with change in order to enhance students' academic learning by trying to combine interactive teaching methods, active cognitive engagement, culturally and developmentally appropriate curricular material, and formative evaluation techniques to improve student learning and development (Beattie, 2004; Kilbourn, 1992). Studies have also examined the change experiences of high school teachers who either have tried to be effective and efficient or have successfully implemented instructional improvement in the classroom. These instructional improvement studies invariably suggest a shift away from traditional transmission-oriented teaching towards learner-centered interactive pedagogies that emphasize the learner's central role in the educational process. In a learner-centered environment, learners interact meaningfully with the subject matter by trying to construct their own meanings of it (Bredo, 2000). The learner-centered or learning-centered interactive teaching methods typically involve problem-solving, inquiry-oriented activities, finding information, seeking reasons, constructing arguments, tasks that are interdisciplinary and related to learners' lives outside school, students' working with other students, whether cooperatively as a whole class, small groups and jigsaw groups, or in pairs (Beattie, 2004; Kilbourn, 1992). Teachers need to learn to practice using ways that are both learner-centered (ways that are responsive to individual students' academic needs, intelligence, talents, cultural and linguistic background) and learning-centered (ways that support in-depth learning that results in keen thinking and proficient performance (Darling-Hammond, 1999). These shifts require teachers to learn new skills, which can be developed through different professional development programs.

A study in some developing countries also offers similar accounts of teachers' experiences in changing their classroom practice (Yun-peng, et al., 2006)). While

teachers' choices of improvement strategies and instructional techniques may differ from teacher to teacher or from culture to culture, the focus of the classroom improvements teachers seek in both developed and developing countries is the implementation of learner-centered interactive teaching aiming to promote in-depth students' learning. Gaining in-depth understanding of the subject matter stands out as an important goal of teachers' attempts to improve learning in the classroom. To achieve this goal, teachers use a variety of pedagogical approaches premised on the principles of interactive learner-centered teaching and learning.

Many reformers have tried to sort out the best strategy to reform or improve teacher education. They believe that in traditional approaches to teaching, knowledge is transmitted and delivered through lecture or direct instruction, which promotes neither the interaction between prior knowledge and new knowledge nor the conversations that are necessary for intense involvement in ideas, connection between and among ideas, and development of deep and broad understanding. However, according to constructivism, knowledge is constructed within the minds of individuals and within social communities; and the bodies of knowledge that inform individuals as well as their means of acquisition are themselves human constructions (Dennis, 1995). Individuals create their own new understandings based upon the interactions between what they already know and believe and the phenomena or ideas with which they come into contact. Since constructivist learning theory has been taught in teacher education, there has been a movement toward constructivist teaching that represents differences in the way in-service and pre-service teachers have experienced education. However, this approach to teaching may not be suitable to gain deep engagement with all topics. The concern is how knowledge is introduced into the constructivist classroom. MacKinnon and Scarff-Seatter (1997) indicate the difficulty of using this constructivist approach to teaching in science teacher education.

Mok (2006) conducted a study of the phenomenon based on the perspective of a Chinese teacher from Shanghai, and his group of students. This teacher in his study had a strong pedagogical belief and was awarded the role of a lecturer in Secondary School by the Shanghai Academic Title Appraisal Committee in 1992. He had been teaching for more than 20 years and highly valued his students' thinking and participation. From his

observation, the teaching process includes whole-class instruction, individual work, and small group work discussion – the teacher-led whole class interaction and short periods of individual or group work followed by the same whole class interaction. According to Mok (2006), what seems to be a teacher-dominated lesson may actually be interpreted as an alternative form of student-centeredness, which is accepted in the teachers' culture. Research findings seem to suggest that:

...a teacher-dominated lesson may not be necessarily bad for learning, just as a student-centered may not always be positive. It is obvious that simple social interpretation labels such as 'teacher-dominated' or 'student-centered' have not explained the heart of the matter. (Mok, 2006, p. 132)

The above literature shows that in the Western context, the changes teachers implement, the improvements they pursue, the decisions they make, and the approaches and strategies they use to reform instructional practices aim to improve their practice by engaging students in inquiry, problem-solving, discussion, and reasoning. The aim is to a shift from transmissive to interactive student-centered forms of teaching to transcend the mere transference of knowledge in order to promote deeper understanding of the subject matter and enhance students' capabilities to think creatively, critically, and adaptively. This shift results in a change in teachers' conceptions of education goals, of subject matter, and of the learners' role in the process of learning. Teachers' efforts to promote interactive and relevant learning help learners make meaning from the concepts instead of memorizing content. They enable the learner to construct personal knowledge through engaging in cognitive process and in interactions and experiences with their socio-cultural and physical environments. This shift also aims to help students to gain in-depth understanding of subject knowledge beyond the bounds of textbooks. Teachers also need to reinforce learning and development through adapting curricular material and applying alternative assessment techniques.

However, despite the growing emphasis on interactive teaching, information on how various changes in pedagogical practices (instruction, curriculum, and assessment) interact to increase students' in-depth learning is still inadequate. Most studies have focused on externally mandated curriculum innovations with little discussion of how teachers engage in enriching or adapting the mandated curriculum in their day-to-day

lessons. Few studies have examined curriculum adaptation or enactment exclusively as part of routine instructional practices or investigated how teachers in different educational contexts and different subject areas interpret, enact, and adapt curriculum.

2.4.2. Improving the Classroom's Environment

Many studies examining the environment in the classroom have recognized the importance of a positive psychosocial climate in the classroom. A positive social climate in the classroom helps enhance students' capacity and beliefs about their capacity to accomplish a task, which affects their ability to change their conceptual framework when necessary (Fraser, 1986).

In attempts to improve teaching and learning by employing interactive instructional strategies, teachers also engage in reforming the psychosocial climate of their classroom in order to foster an academically rich and socially stimulating learning environment (Beattie, 2004; Carman, 2005; Drake & Miller, 2001). An academically rich classroom environment helps students to engage deeply in learning academic knowledge, while a socially stimulating learning environment encourages sharing and interaction and nurtures positive social skills, values, and attitudes. The psychosocial climate is loosely defined by classroom rules, norms, roles, expectations, interaction, and relationships. Using this concept, teachers attempt planned and spontaneous decision and actions to re-orient classroom rules and regulations, redefine teachers' and students' roles, and reconstruct relationships between teacher and students and among students. Environmental changes have the goal of creating the conditions that facilitate deeper understanding of subject knowledge (Fraser, 1994, Martin, 2006).

In traditional classrooms, learners are passive, and most of the time they work individually. However, studies from both developed and developing countries report teachers' attempts to build classroom community by using cooperative learning methods and associated techniques, including student's working in small cooperative groups, peer groups, and jigsaw groups (Fostnot, 2005; DeVries & Zan, 2005; Yun-peng, et al., 2006). Teachers generally employ cooperative learning techniques such as group work or whole-class discussion to enable students to exchange ideas and perspectives and construct understanding cooperatively. In cooperative learning strategies, students have an

opportunity to learn with and from each other in a dynamic atmosphere with companionship, enjoyment, and interaction. Teachers support this condition through shared control and student negotiation (Kilbourn, 1992). Such conditions and atmosphere facilitate the development of self-confidence, socialization, motivation, and enjoyment in the activity. The classrooms become communities of learners, in which shared goals and standards, an atmosphere of trust and respect, and norms for behavior support students' engaging in learning, taking risks, and making the sustained efforts necessary in learning (Beattie, 2004; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993). Teachers emphasize all kinds of understanding and abilities related to the smooth conduct of classroom life, including students motivation, cohesiveness, cooperation, and involvement in investigation.

Studies of teachers who have successfully improved their classroom's psychosocial environment reported that these teachers' create a classroom climate in which students work together to establish norms, value and respect one another's ideas, assist each other, and feel encouraged to take intellectual risks. The teachers provide various types of instructional scaffolding so that students can move from what they know to what they need to know (Bascia, 1996; Ireson et al., 2002, Phillips, 2000). Studies have also recognized the role of the social climate and teacher-student relationship in fostering positive ethical behavior in students, developing such characteristics of the classroom interactions as the teacher's sense of equality, justice, and fairness (Kilbourn, 1992).

The literature shows that the academic goal, in-depth student learning through deep mental engagement with the subject matter, is intricately connected to the classroom, and social environment (Fraser, 1986; Beattie, 2004; Carman, 2005; Drake & Miller, 2001). Reforming or re-culturing the classroom requires teacher educators/teachers to change their traditional beliefs and practices. They must create new patterns of values, norms, beliefs, processes, procedures, rules, and practices that conform to instructions to promote in-depth student learning. To pursue the goal of improving the classroom psychological environment, teachers generally use strategies such as adopting a democratic, inclusive approach to students' involvement in classroom life, exhibiting caring, encouraging, respectful behavior, and establishing non-authoritative, non-hierarchical relationships with students. Problems may emerge when

teachers attempt to move away from traditional classroom teaching (Fostnot, 2005; DeVries & Zan, 2005; Yun-peng, et al., 2006). Thus, improving teaching requires not merely addressing content but also transforming the social norms within which teachers and students develop mutually respectful relationships and come to a shared understanding of what a lesson is about and how to participate in it.

However, the relationships between academic and social goals and processes are complex and largely remain underexplored. We need more information, ideas, and research insights in order to better understand the relationships between students' academic learning and the various elements of the psychosocial climate in the classroom.

2.4.3. General Challenges to Teachers' Improvement Efforts

Teachers face many other complexities, tensions, and challenges, apart from the general features of the classroom environment, in their efforts to improve their practice, especially in implementation of interactive learner-centered pedagogy. In most cases, classroom changes occur because teachers attempt to move away from traditional practices. To change these routines and learn something new and complex often involves risks, resistance, and stumbles. Studies have recognized that both personal and organizational factors influence teachers' choices about instruction, curriculum, and assessment practices. Teachers trying to implement change have always faced competing demands from organizations, students, community, and their own personal values (Kilbourn, 1992). Teachers who want their students to become more actively involved in learning, especially by participating in discussion and group interaction, often face the students' unwillingness to take a risk. Students may avoid asking questions, offering responses, or becoming involved in other activities that require effort and deep cognitive engagement with the learning material (Newton, 2000).

Other challenges that confront teachers in their efforts to improve or adapt mandated curricular material arise from the basic tension between covering a set curriculum and preparing students for external exams, on the one hand, and trying to teach for understanding or develop students as independent learners on the other (Harris, 2005; Newton, 2000, Yun-pen, et al., 2006). These challenges include the need for fidelity to mandated curriculum, a curricular-driven examination system, lack of support

from administrators, authorities' failure to decentralize curricular decisions, lack of resources, and students' negative attitudes toward the subject.

Similarly, the politics of assessment reform in both developed and developing nations is complex. Particularly at the secondary level, centralized examinations tend to limit teachers' authority or their option to adopt innovative assessment strategies on their own. Researchers (e.g., Harris, 2005; Newton, 2000, Yun-pen, et al., 2006) have noted that the externally controlled final examination caused a lot of anxiety among teachers who attempt the change process since new teaching and learning methods take longer, leaving them with insufficient time to cover the whole syllabus. Also, the new teaching and learning processes and strategies do not match the mandated assessment practices, which emphasize students' recalling memorized correct answers.

Moreover, challenges to the implementation of cooperative learning include factors such as lack of time, resources, and space and students' unwillingness to cooperate with peers and contribute to group learning. In the context of cooperative learning, challenges arise for the teacher when social processes take precedence over subject matter (e.g. Fostnot, 2005; Tay-Koay, 1999). However, we still have very little information on how teachers in high school, within their individual circumstances (e.g., students' characteristics, physical environment), try to negotiate these difficulties or on what adaptations, modification, or adjustments they make to fit cooperative learning activities to their particular classroom environments.

The literature reports that teachers who have tried to improve their practices, especially to shift from teacher-dominated instruction to learner-centered teaching, are faced with different challenges and tensions, including the institution's structures and policies; the environment of the classroom or the "culture of teaching"; and students' characteristics and beliefs. These challenges and factors influence teachers' choices about instruction, curriculum, and assessment practices. Teachers also face competing demands from organizations, students, parents and their own personal values. However, little literature has studied the challenges and tensions faced by teachers attempting to create interactive learner-centered classrooms.

2.4.4. Teachers' General Response to Challenges

Research on successful teachers' classroom experiences suggests that teachers demonstrate different approaches or strategies that help them to deal with various complexities, challenges, and problems they faced in changing their instruction and practice (Brown & Campion, 1996). They are highly responsive to new events and immediacies and creative in finding solutions to the problems they come across in their day-to-day teaching lives (Hawthorn, 1992). Their strategies are well tuned to the realities of classroom teaching (Hammerman, 1999). They recognize that their students need time, support, and encouragement to adjust to new demands and play more active roles in learning so they encourage students by valuing their ideas and engaging them in conversation to build their confidence (Kilbourne, 1992).

The research studies also show that teachers negotiate various tensions and try to address them in their own ways (e.g., Beattie, 2004; Harris, 2005; Brown & Campion, 1996; Hawthorn, 1992; Drake & Sherin, 2006; Hammerman, 1999; Campbell, 2006). One major strategy involves frequent intra-department interactions and reliance on teamwork or administrative support. In schools engaged in changing relationships among the teachers, collective reflection and problem solving are common (Beattie, 2004; Harris, 2005). They strive to overcome the challenges to their effort and usually succeed in overcoming those not directly related to organizational policies. They draw on their own professional authority and understanding; as Campbell (2006) points out:

...professional authority is located not within the parameters of those curricular expectations, usually defined by forces external to the teacher, but rather with the teacher's own capacity to exercise curricular and pedagogical knowledge with direction, judgment, and proficiency. (Campbell, 2006, p.111)

Campbell reasoned that teachers' professional authority is generated through teachers' preparation, experience, and dedication; teachers need to honor curricular authority but they are also answerable to their own professional authority (Campbell, 2006). Similarly, Smith and Lovat (1990) underscore the need for teachers to create curricular decision-making space for themselves so they feel that they have autonomy and can actively make decisions relevant to their practices. Thus, for individual teachers, decision making requires a perceptually defined sense of freedom and authority.

The literature shows that despite numerous difficulties, teachers struggle very hard to implement learner-centered teaching and solve the problems facing their work in the classroom. They adopt different strategies, including devoting extra time to work and establishing and expanding relationships with supporters (teachers, principals, and administrators). To keep implementing and sustaining changes and to cope with general and context-specific challenges, they must work hard, and have patience, perseverance, a willingness to take risks and experiment, flexibility, and the ability to adapt and exercise diplomacy. However, we have little knowledge of what lies underneath such teachers' volunteer work, interest in change, diligence, commitment, industry, and resilience.

2.5. Teachers' Work in School

In school, teachers engage in a variety of activities intended to improve practices inside and outside the classroom. By and large, these improvement activities fall into two broad categories: promoting teacher collaboration and teachers' reflection. These encompass a wide range of activities intended to promote staff development and school improvement.

2.5.1. Teacher Collaboration

Many studies worldwide have reported how the norms of effective working relationships among teachers variously benefit schools, teachers, and students (e.g., Astuto et al., 1994; Beattie, 2004; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994; Little, 1993; Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1989; Talber & McLaughlin, 1993; Hammerman, 1999; Sato et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 1994; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). The reports show that in schools that create and nurture norms of collaboration, teachers discuss teaching practices, observe each other at work, work together on plans and materials, and learn collectively. They develop curriculum and improve assessment practices to improve the quality of student learning; they communicate, support, and help each other to further the implementation of innovation; and they construct and pursue visions of improvement. They also share instructional resources, reflections, and practices essential to persistence and success in classroom innovation.

Teacher collaboration is a multidimensional concept. Collaboration inside school is not an end itself but rather a means to create conditions conducive to continued improvement and changes in teacher's learning and practices. Mainly, it aims to achieve two broader goals: teachers' professional development and building institutional capacity (Anderson & Nderitu, 2002; Luis & Kruse, 1995), which are mutually reinforcing and are linked with school improvement and change (Fullan, 1992; Little, 1993). My focus, however, is to understand how teachers engage in the effort to create a collaborative culture in the school. In particular, I examine the concept of teacher collaboration in school in relation to its underlying assumptions and importance, its different focuses, its link to classroom improvement (how it helps teachers develop to improve their practice in the classroom) and school improvement and its challenges, and how teachers address these.

Traditionally, teachers have been isolated and separated from each other. The pressure of busy schedules, course loads, and additional duties makes it difficult for teachers to make time to work together. More often than not, they are not given formal opportunity to collaborate. While teachers might meet informally to collaborate, the underpinnings of such interactions are often seen as being important or not recognized by administrators (Hargreaves, 1994). However, teachers need opportunities to talk and collaborate with each other to serve their students best, to make their work more meaningful, and to transform schooling in a way that makes it vibrant and relevant. Moreover, as school systems in many countries have restructured their organizational features and activities, the need to develop a more collaborative approach has been a part of the direction. In fact, some authors have asserted that current reform of teacher education initiatives have relied on collaborative principles (e.g., Cook & Friend, 1992; Fullan, 1993). These new contexts have resulted in changing associations and patterns of interaction among all participants in schools.

Collaboration takes different forms depending upon the situation in the individual schools and how teachers are carrying out a specific task or activity. In some schools, teachers engage in more structured or systematic collaborative activities, for example, reflection on teaching practice and professional dialogue in day-to-day work. According to Fullan (1999), however, teacher collaboration refers to teachers working and learning

together in the social world of the school. The core purpose underlying collaboration is to create a climate inside and outside the classroom that is conducive to students' and teachers' learning and development. It rests on the premise that teachers, as social change agents, learn and grow socially and intellectually in reciprocal relationships. The social processes of interaction, participation in joint deliberation, collaborative problem solving, and group or team work enhance teachers' capacity to engage in change at both the classroom and school level. However, collaboration cannot exist by itself. It can only occur when it is associated with some program or activity that is based on the shared specific goal of the individuals involved.

In a Canadian study, Drake and Miller (2001) explored how teachers in elementary and high schools work together to implement curricular change in areas designed by the 'common curriculum' policy, which emphasize outcomes or integrated curriculum alternative processes related to these changes. A study from Australia reports how collaborative practice is used in a fourth year tutor program for pre-service teacher education (Latham, 1996). The study concludes that in building and maintaining a community of thoughtful practitioners, both experienced and novice teachers support one another's growth and development. Another study in a developing country (China) also reports how in-service training programs, particularly within schools, use experienced teachers to provide opportunities for teachers' collaboration and in inquiry and action research projects (Ming 1999). Teacher development incorporates classroom observations, demonstration lessons, and collaborative action research. Ming promotes a culture of sharing in schools and encourages teachers to reflect on their work and relate it to their professional development and school improvement.

'Collaborative inquiry' and 'action research' – major intervention strategies that teachers often apply to create norms of cooperation and collaboration – pervade the current discussion of building professional learning communities in schools for teachers' development and school improvement. The aim is to create or foster a context for effective working relationship among teachers to enable them to share their expertise with other teachers or between teachers and students; promote norms of sharing and mutual support; provide learning communities for professional development (Beattie, 2002; Hammerman, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1994; Westman, 1998); encourage

reflective learning; and solve problems with innovation and improved practices inside and outside the classroom in a structured or systematic way (Beattie, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992). Teachers use collaborative inquiry to learn together, investigate issues, circumstances, and practices in schools and classrooms, determine the need for change, or reflect on their previous actions and use the result to deepen understanding and improve practice (Kemmis, 1985; Lieberman & Miller, 1994). For action research, teachers observe, monitor, and analyze their plans, actions, and the impact on the students they teach. They solve their own problems, link prior knowledge to new information, and accept failures as learning experiences.

Both ‘collaborative inquiry’ and ‘action research’ involve teachers working together (in pairs, small groups, large groups, or subject groups) to create a culture of inquiry and form discourse communities in order to promote ongoing professional development and school change. The inquiry groups or action research teams meet regularly to examine their own and each other’s pedagogical knowledge and beliefs (e.g., how students learn curriculum subjects and how to help them with in-depth learning of subject matter). They challenge one another to clarify and elaborate on the ideas; these interactions lead them to develop a learning community in the school. These create vital conditions for initiating, supporting, and promoting school change and improvement, fostering professionalism among teachers, and providing teachers with the opportunity for continued professional growth (Hargreaves, 1994). Hargreaves argues that:

...teacher culture, the relationship between teachers and their colleagues, are among the most educationally significant aspects of teachers’ lives and work. They provide a vital context for teachers’ development and the ways that teachers teach. (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 165)

These views emphasize the need for creating professional learning communities or communities of practice, a group of people “who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interaction on an ongoing basis” and should be a practical way to manage knowledge as an asset (Wegner et al., 2002, p. 4). A *community of practice* is a term that has become prominent in the literature on learning. Drawing on the social psychology of learning, particularly on research about situated cognition and activity theory, the notion of

communities of practice is developed in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and suggests that learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people engaged in activities that arise from the socially and culturally structured world. This concept means that learning is a process that occurs when new and experienced teachers as social groups can come together over time for the purpose of gaining new information, reconsidering previous knowledge and beliefs, and building on their own and others' ideas and experiences in order to work on a specific agenda intended to improve practice and enhance students' learning. These intellectual, social, and organizational configurations will support teachers' ongoing professional growth by providing opportunities for teachers to think, talk, read, and write about their daily work, including its larger social, cultural, and political contexts in planned and intentional ways. Communities of practice organized around a common goal are the site for participants' learning new roles that are connected to new knowledge and skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Indeed, collaboration is often advocated, yet its effects are less frequently investigated. Many studies have reported positive outcomes of collaboration for teachers, including efficacy, more positive attitudes toward teaching, and higher levels of trust. Little has been done to test the idea that teacher collaboration is associated with increased student achievement. Researchers have argued the possibility that collaboration may improve teaching and learning. Hausman and Goldring (2001) state that the more teachers collaborate, the more they are able to converse knowledgably about theories, methods, and processes of teaching and learning and thus improve their instruction. Evans-Stout (1998), however, asserts that there is not enough evidence to claim that collaborative instructional practices lead to improved student learning. There is no clearly established link between teacher empowerment and student performance.

A culture of teaching characterized by forming and sustaining effective working relationships in school has been found to be easier to talk about than to do. The factors in schools that make effective professional interaction among teachers difficult are somewhat similar in both developed and developing countries. In Western studies, Hargreaves (1994), for example, recognized challenges to teacher collaboration arising mainly from teachers' unwillingness to break the culture of isolation; teachers' resistance to externally imposed collaboration; lack of support from heads or top-down decision

making, lack of encouragement and recognition of efforts by the system; and workload, time constraints, school architecture, and division between subject departments.

I would agree that factors such as lack of time for collaborative efforts such as joint planning, group reflection, team teaching or peer coaching and lack of support or encouragement from administrators do make teacher collaboration difficult. However, social-cultural and economic constraints are considered additional factors in developing countries. Studies point to certain social-cultural factors that further complicate the situation, for example, a teacher culture that emphasizes individual work (Thornton, 2006). Thornton's study of teacher collaboration in secondary schools in Bangladesh sheds light on some these challenges, including the culture of blame, teachers' own experiences, economic and contextual constraints, and curriculum. Teachers talk of their students' low abilities and blame the students or the parents for not caring about students' learning. The teachers' own educational experiences also inhibit their having professional interactions. In their schooling, they were exposed to didactic, teacher-centered instruction from kindergarten through teacher training college. Consequently, they fail to appreciate the need for learning through collegial interaction. The poor economic position in which teachers find themselves also leads them to take on additional employment (especially private tuition). Thus constrained by work pressure and lack of time, they cannot concentrate on collaborative work and their professional learning activities in school. The pressure exerted by a centralized curriculum leaves teachers with little room to collaborate and learn from each other, to share their experiences, beliefs, interests, or problems, or to reflect on their teaching as their ongoing professional development.

Among the various approaches to school improvement, the literature emphasizes forging effective working relationships among teachers and between teachers and students because they inspire and support the intertwined goals of teachers' having an ongoing environment of cooperation, communication, sharing, risk-taking, experimentation, shared decision making, reflection, and critical discussion. Collaboration among teachers with the proper attitudes, motivation, and professional abilities, combining their talents, efforts, and energies builds the school's abilities to consistently engage in innovations, develop and implement plans, and sustain improvements. These findings suggest that effective school improvement occurs when

the school has the capacity to initiate changes at the school and classroom levels and to sustain them. The school's capacity in turn is linked with the opportunities for teachers to work together and learn from each other.

The literature also reveals that teachers who intend to influence other teachers often get involved in forging collaborative relationships and partnerships in their schools. Their efforts to promote collaboration generally take place at two levels. The formal level includes mentoring or supervising peers (co-planning and classroom observation), leading in-service programs and action research projects, and chairing teachers' meetings. The informal level includes everyday interactions with colleagues, situational interactions arising from need or interest, spontaneous problem solving, advice-seeking, and informal lesson planning. However, the formal and informal activities overlap.

Despite a growing emphasis on collaboration in schools, we have little empirical knowledge of how high school teachers perceive collaboration and relate it to school improvement or of how they go about forging a collaborative community of practice. In developing countries, little research has explored the dynamics of teacher collaboration – what circumstances engender collaboration. Very little is known about whether, why, or how teachers in high schools in developing countries collaborate with one another. In addition, few studies that have explored teachers' experiences in improvement present the same view on how teachers try to address challenges to building a collaborative culture.

2.5.2. Teacher Reflection on Practice

Research on effective teaching over the past two decades has shown that effective practice is linked to inquiry, reflection, and continuous professional growth (Harris, 1998). In order to facilitate effective teaching, teachers need to be aware of their own practice environment, which includes their pupils, and other people in their work situation. They must have insights or initiatives to plan and act for their duties and to react to their own practice environment. Using their own perception and (re)action processes, teachers can learn from their own experiences through reflection. Their reflection of experience is linked to the formulation and the development of their pedagogy, which has an impact on teachers' daily practice. The ability to reflect is widely

known as a factor affecting teacher development and continues to be an effective technique for professional development.

The term 'reflection' has increasingly appeared in descriptions of approaches to teacher education and is a beneficial form of professional development. In fact, Dewey (1916) is acknowledged as a key originator of the concept of 'reflection,' which he characterizes as a specialized form of thinking that involves the "reconstruction and reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (p.76). It stems from doubt and perplexity felt in a directly experienced situation and leads to purposeful inquiry and problem solution (Grimmett & Erickson, 1988). Through systematic inquiry and analysis, reflection is a way for individuals to create meaning and endure change by changing themselves.

Schön (1983, 1987) writes about reflection that is intimately bound up with action. He holds that professionals should learn to frame and reframe the often complex and ambiguous problems they are facing, test out various interpretations, and then modify their actions as a result. Schön also introduced the concept of reflective practice as a critical process in refining one's artistry or craft in a specific discipline. He recommends reflective practice as a way for beginners in a discipline to recognize consonance between their own individual practices and those of successful practitioners. Moreover, reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline. Schön (1987) argues that teachers should be encouraged to problematize their practice, to focus on particular aspects of their practice in order to both understand and to change it. Thus reflective practice is a vehicle that allows teachers the ability to explore, contemplate, and analyze experiences in the classroom. Reflecting on experience also helps individuals improve their own actions and professional practice. According to Grimmett et al. (1990), effective reflection should be based on what is being reflected upon, how the reflective process is engaged, and the purpose of reflection. Reflection can be seen as an instrumental mediation of action, as deliberating among competing views of teaching, or as reconstructing experience. However, Zeichner (1994) suggests that reflection should

be a guided process in which teachers are encouraged not only to consider the immediate context of the classroom but also to analyze the implications of their teaching.

Teaching is an integral expression of teachers' beliefs, thoughts, initiations, intentions, and actions, which cannot be divided into a linear process of thinking about a situation, devising a plan of action for it, and then performing the planned actions. Schön (1987) states that 'reflection-in-action' is an alternative to more formal sequences of conscious steps in a decision-making process. The 'action' of teachers is rather more implicated and simultaneous, a dialectic between thought and action. It is assumed that competent practitioners usually know more than they can say and that 'knowing is located in action.' This 'knowing-in-action' (Schön, 1983, 1987) or 'craft knowledge in teaching' (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992) is inherent in action based partially on the past experiences of the practitioner and the attributes of a particular situation and includes engaging in a reflective conversation with oneself and others, shaping the situation in terms of the reflector's frame of reference. Moreover, more experienced people work with initiates to help them rename and reframe situations (Grimmett, 1988; MacKinnon & Erickson, 1988; MacKinnon & Grunau, 1994; Schön, 1983; Zeichner, 1994). Thus reflective practice is a way to recognize consonance between individual practices and those of successful practitioners. Therefore, teachers reinterpret and reframe their role as teachers and students' learning and needs from different perspectives.

Reflective practice can be defined in terms of action research. Action research, in turn, is defined as a tool of curriculum development consisting of continuous feedback that targets specific problems in a particular school setting (Hopkins & Antes, 1990). It has become a standard concept in teacher education programs. For example, teacher educator as researcher and role model encourages students to put theories they have learned into practice in their classrooms. The students bring reports of their field experiences to class and analyze their teaching strategies with their mentors and colleagues. This collaborative model of reflective practice enriches students' personal reflections on their work and provides students with suggestions from peers on how to refine their teaching practices (Latham, 1996). Therefore, teacher educators can coach student teachers in reflective practice by using students' personal histories, dialogue

journals, and small- and large-group discussions about their experiences to help students reflect upon and improve their practices.

Those investigating reflective practices attempt to bring the “reason” of practitioners to the surface by learning to understand how practitioners attribute meaning to the phenomena surrounding them. This is an important initial step. However, it is important that after the “reason” of the practitioners has been made explicit, teachers should review it in relation to current notions of what constitutes appropriate practice. A further step is for practitioners to inform their “reason” to enrich their understanding of practice in order to confront and transform it. In doing this, Fenstermacher (1994, p. 359) suggests a notion of “practical argument,” which is “a reasonably coherent chain of reasoning leading from an expression of a desired state, through various forms of premises, some empirical, others situational to intentions to act in a particular way.” Practical argument can encourage teachers to examine their practical reasoning. This method could be used as a tool to reveal teachers’ practical reasoning in action, and it could foster reflection and examination of the interrelationship between teachers’ belief systems and their practice. This process could then contribute to general understanding of the development of professional autonomy.

Reflective practice implies reflexivity: self-awareness. But such an awareness brings with it insights into the ways in which the self in action is shared and constrained by the institutional contexts of one’s work as a teacher, which are not developed by separate cognitive processes, reflexive and objective analysis. They are qualities of the same reflexive process. Reflexive practice necessarily implies both self-critique and institutional critique. Individual reflection on practice allows practitioners to enter into a “dialogic relation” with the situation. If the situation can be “seen-as” an object for reflection, possibilities for viewing it differently, through the framing of it as object, may reveal alternate ways of dealing with it. According to Schön (1983), by consciously holding the situation as an object in the mind, practitioners may afford it respect rather than slotting it into existing routines of practice. When practitioners are able to actively respond to the situation-as-object, their response leads to deeper involvement with it.

What needs to be emphasized in this approach to teacher development is the dual nature of reflection: it is an individual process but one that often occurs in a social situation. By encouraging ongoing dialogue about practice among teachers, we attempt to provide opportunities to reframe routine situations and to exploit the potential offered when teachers with diverse backgrounds and experiences meet to discuss educational issues. Teachers are not only encouraged to reflect individually on their practice but also to discuss their reflection and practice with principals and colleagues in order to both inform and transform their practice. Reflective teaching focuses teacher's attention on their own practice, on the practices of colleagues, and on the social context in which these practices occur. John Elliott (1990 in Talbacnik & Zeichner , 1991 p. 8) maintains that institutional and social critiques are a natural part of the process of reflection. However, the ability to stand back from one's teaching, evaluate one's situation, and take responsibility for future action appears as a common thread running through discussions of reflective practice. Other threads that appear are the presence of an "other" and the importance of language in perceiving events and situations for reflection and for discussing reflective processes.

The literature shows that teacher development can take many forms including self-reflection, cooperative or collaborative and institutional interaction, or reflection aiming to improve practice both inside and outside school. Reflective practice has become a core element for teachers to use to improve their practices in the classroom and school community. It underlies classroom assessment of student learning, effective differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, and team-based school improvement efforts.

2.6. Teacher Professional Education and Development

There is wide agreement that schools need good teachers; and there is little agreement about what it means to be a 'good teacher' (Stronge, 2002). Even the usefulness of the term is disputed, with some researchers choosing instead to focus on 'effective teaching' (e.g., Beattie, 2004; Kilbourn, 1992), 'creative teachers' (Woods, 1995), and 'quality teachers' (Stones, 1992). These terms are often used interchangeably, and the descriptive criteria differ from study to study. This section looks at some of the

main trends in current literature pertaining to improving teacher education and the theoretical underpinnings of this research. It will not focus on what it means to be good, effective, creative, or quality teachers; rather, it will focus more on the current situation in teacher education and provide some ideas for its improvement. It discusses what teachers need to possess during their [professional] education, some challenges, and some trends to improve teacher education.

2.6.1. Content of Teacher Professional Education

The content of teacher education courses varies from one program to another. This variety is highlighted not in order to suggest that it would be possible to make all teacher education programs identical but to discuss what it means to learn how to teach and what theoretical and practical knowledge teachers need to possess. However, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and attitudes are all teachers' needs that appear repeatedly in the literature. It is important that [beginning] teachers understand the subject matter knowledge – *content knowledge* – they are to teach (Shulman & Sykes, 1983). Teachers need to understand the subject matter in order to be able to use it flexibly to address ideas that come up in the course of learning in ways that allow them to organize the content so that students can create useful cognitive maps of their understanding. They need to understand how inquiry in this field is conducted, what reasoning it entails, and how to connect across the fields and everyday life (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

It is worth noting that, while most researchers distinguish between content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, Shulman (1987) proposed a combination of content knowledge and pedagogy knowledge that is unique to the teaching profession as “*pedagogical content knowledge*,” which “represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction” (p. 8). Teachers also need to understand how children learn and how to teach children with a variety of needs. *Pedagogical knowledge* includes “how to” lesson planning approaches, instructional strategies, and assessment techniques. While pedagogical knowledge is knowing what to do in a situation, *pedagogical skill* is being

able to do it. Particularly important is skill in communication; research shows that students taught by teachers with excellent verbal ability and communication skills learn more than those taught by teachers with weaker skills (Stronge, 2002).

Moreover, Stronge (2002) argues that caring, fairness, respect for students, peers, parents and the general community, enthusiasm, motivation, and dedication to teaching (as distinct from dedication to the teaching profession) are necessary attitudes for pre-service teachers to become successful teachers. Sockett (1993) suggests that because teaching involves moral and ethical obligations to the students, their parents, the school, and communities, attitudes toward morality and ethics are also important. In addition, Darling-Hammond (1997) has noted that while teachers need to understand cognitively the differences that exist among students, for example, in culture, language, and family structure, they also need to have a sensitive attitude toward children's experiences. It is important that teachers possess these attitudes if they are to be successful.

The literature shows what knowledge, attitudes/behaviors, and skills teachers should possess. Teaching requires teachers to balance the complex relationship between what is being taught (subject matter/content knowledge), how it is being taught (instruction: pedagogy and skills), and attitudes toward students. Knowledge (of content and pedagogy), skills, and attitudes are important for teachers to possess if they are to perform their duties completely. The primary requirement for teachers is to have sufficient knowledge to pass on to students. Knowledge teachers acquired during their study at a teacher education institution may not be enough to make them successful teachers. Procedural knowledge and appropriate application of it is also necessary for teachers to be successful. Teachers must be lifelong learners and continually develop their professional abilities.

2.6.2. Knowledge and Skill Development: Challenges

In the opening of the first chapter of his 1994 book *How Teachers Learn*, Proerfriedt (1994, p.1) mentions the "persistent complaints about teaching today" that no significant progress has taken place in teaching during the last fifty years. What goes on in a classroom today is virtually identical to what went on fifty or even one hundred years ago. The reformers are not without solutions for what they think is wrong with education

in general and the education of teachers in particular. The remedy they offer for this perceived problem is educational research. According to reformers, teachers should acquaint themselves with the findings of recent research into teaching practice and apply those findings in their classroom. Reformers suggest that teachers should familiarize themselves with this constantly expanding knowledge base for implementation in the classroom.

Proefriedt (1994, p.1) also mentions a second criticism of teacher education that reformers level against teaching: that a competent layperson could just walk into the average classroom and teach a lesson that would be as good (if not better) than a class taught by a so-called professional teacher. Assuming that it is possible to develop a definition of an effective/good teacher, should that definition apply to this competent layperson just mentioned? If it is indeed true that there is a constantly expanding knowledge base about the process of learning, the nature of the learner, and the psychology of the students, then it would have to be an extremely well-read layperson, someone with special interest in the fields of cognitive science and educational psychology, to be able to teach effectively. If that layperson were so well-informed about these fields of inquiry, then (s)he would no longer be a layperson.

For teacher education programs, the 'scientific' or behaviorist model proposed by these educational reformers would identify the specific teaching behaviors that lead to increased student learning and then educate would-be teachers about them. Such information about the correlations between specific teacher behaviors and quantifiable improvement in student learning, between process and product, is now readily available. Moreover, in the teacher education program envisioned by these education reformers the training of teachers would be based on the latest findings of educational research. As newer and better information pours in and the scientific knowledge base about various aspects of the teaching and learning processes accumulates, teacher educators should, according to the "scientific" view of teacher education, incorporate it into their curriculum and revise that curriculum when necessary in light of the expanding knowledge about education (Proefriedt, p.5). This rather mechanistic model of teacher education neglects the human relationship aspect of education; instead, it breaks teaching

down into small parts that can be taken out and replaced by newer and better parts if and when those newer, better parts become available.

Moreover, what can almost definitely be said with certainty about teacher education programs is that during their pre-service programs, the majority of novice teachers take it for granted that what they are learning in lectures and seminars will transfer directly and unproblematically to actual classroom settings once they officially begin their teaching careers. As they gain experience during their first few years as teachers and start to figure out some of “the fundamental puzzles of professional education,” however, they begin to realize the limitations of the theoretical knowledge they are given in teacher training institutions and how irrelevant much of that course work seems from the perspective of practice (Russell et al., 1988, pp.77-78). Similarly, there is a weak relationship between the courses and the field experience (Fieman-Nemser, 2001), and the structure of the preparation program provides little time for reflection and for engaging in reflection practice.

Many programs of staff development emerge from a ‘technical-rationalist’ tradition, in which “professional activity consists in instrumental problem-solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique” (Schön, 1983, p. 21). They support the notion that carefully specified procedures and efficient organizational structures can ensure greater productivity, which is often translated as higher student scores on standardized tests. In this model, policy-makers or staff development specialists implement skill-oriented professional development programs designed to help teachers master and implement new instructional strategies such as cooperative learning or a process approach to teaching writing. This orientation to professional development has been criticized for its promotion of a view of practice as being primarily technical and instrumental, for its separation of knowledge into discrete components, such as production, consumption, and application, and for its neglect of contextual factors (Darling-Hammond, 1992, 1993; 1995; Hargreaves, 1992, 1994; Newmann, 1993).

In general, approaches toward planned changes and professional development that rely on externally generated knowledge ignore specific contextual factors and their effects on teaching, learning, and relations among individuals. Professional development

following this approach consists of generic, context-free activities and/or training sessions. Strategies developed in one context to accomplish specific goals are imported into other situations, sometimes without consideration of the fit between the specific context and the imported strategy. Workshops and sessions are presented as products that teachers are expected to use in their classrooms. The theoretical constructs on which the new approaches are based are not extensively developed or probed during these workshops. What seems to be missing from this approach to professional development is the recognition that the particular method or strategy being presented is the end product of a process of human inquiry and reflection in response to certain conditions. Understanding why and how the strategy had been developed is as necessary for professional development as is when and how to use the strategy.

Another characteristic of a technical-rational approach is that it pays slight attention to establishing a relation between the particular workshop or training session and other professional development activities in practitioners' lives. This approach does not view planned systemic change or professional development as ongoing, contextualized processes that support professional learning. Therefore, I focused my reading on studies that reflected a shift in the conceptualization of the nature of knowledge that considered relationships of power and that challenged ideas such as the power of language to represent external reality. I was interested in understanding how teachers made sense of teaching and learning, how change in their practice came about, and what conditions support professional learning. I sought information that supported my growing conviction that:

Teacher beliefs are an important consideration in understanding classroom practices, and therefore in conducting staff development programs designed to alter teachers' practices. If beliefs are related to practices, and more particularly, if beliefs drive practices, staff development that focuses solely on teaching practices may not be successful in reflecting change, unless the teachers' beliefs and the theories underlying the practices are also explored.(Richardson, 1994, p. 90)

It is difficult to make generalizations about the effectiveness of all teacher education programs and the strategies that are best suited to the education of teachers. Individual institutions have a certain amount of leeway in tailoring their own particular

teacher development programs so that they are based on their strengths. Each university or university college that offers programs aimed at producing teachers will meet certain standards and minimum requirements for the institution using two broad goals. One is to provide as much codified knowledge as possible for teachers so that they will have the necessary conceptual, methodological, and curricular instructional knowledge that is the foundation of good teaching. The second goal of teacher education is “enhancing independent thought and analysis, based on the assumption that best strategies have not yet been discovered or that they are too situation-specific to be prescribed, thus practitioners must learn to create solution for themselves” (Grimmett, 1988, p.69).

2.6.3. Knowledge and Skill Development: Trends

In any learning situation, teachers undergo a type of change. Smith (1982) indicated that the word “learning” has been used to describe situations such as product, process, and functions. When learning refers to a product, the emphasis is on the outcome of an experience (the acquisition of a particular set of skills or knowledge). When learning describes a process, the emphasis is on what happens when a learning experience takes place (how teachers seek to meet needs and reach goals). When it describes a function, the emphasis is on aspects believed to help produce learning (how teachers are motivated, what brings about change). Using knowledge about how learning is produced (function) and about what happens when people learn (process), participants in effective programs develop new knowledge and skills as teachers (product). Effective teacher education programs should address all three types: product, process, and function.

Recently, several writers (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Hammerman, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1994; Westman, 1998; Fullan, 2007; Beattie, 2007) have advocated the formation of professional, education communities – communities of learning where teachers can support and sustain each other’s growth. Little (1982) states that norms of collegial and experimentation are among the necessary conditions for professional development. Within such communities a commitment to lifelong learning is found and norms of mutual support and shared understanding are developed. Lieberman (1990) also suggests that the improvement of teaching is a matter of rebuilding culture, of reconceiving norms of competitiveness, individualism, hierarchical structures, and having

a faith in rationality to produce more fluid norms where communities are committed to shared goals, connection to colleagues and community through collaborative efforts, and the development of shared understanding. The notions of rebuilding cultures to include norms of collegiality and experimentation and forming professional educative communities of learning, although seductive and seemingly straightforward, will prove to be extremely complex.

Moreover, in order to enhance the connection between theory and practice, the development of reflective tasks has become a major concern in professional teacher education. Teachers also need to be able to analyze and reflect on their practice to assess the effects of their teaching and to refine and improve their instruction (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Reflection for, in, and on practice has become a major quest in pre-service teacher education (Gore & Zeichner, 1991). Student teachers are also expected to orchestrate collaborative teaching/learning partnerships that are qualitatively different from those they have experienced themselves; they are expected to demonstrate new kinds of professionalism that connect teachers with others in their school and community. Such partnerships can help link pre-service preparation to ongoing professional development and learning in the workplace. This system linkage can be used in universities and schools to form collaborative partnerships for career-long teacher education and school improvement. Universities are well situated to provide theoretical perspectives that can guide the process of interpreting, framing, and reframing dilemmas; research-driven knowledge that can distinguish effective approaches; and systematic understandings of how teachers learn and what fosters their learning. Learning in the workplace provides opportunities for teacher collaboration involving joint problem solving, development of new programs and practices, and examination and critical analysis of current ideas, practices, and taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions. Darling-Hammond (1999) argues that teachers need to know about collaboration. They need to understand how to collaborate with other teachers to plan, assess, and improve learning with and across schools.

Researchers exploring the nature of teachers' practical knowledge and personal theories, knowledge that informs teaching practice, examine such aspects as teacher planning, teacher thinking, and teacher decision making (Calderhead, 1987, 1988). This

strand of research promotes the notion that all practical activities are guided by some theory and that teachers develop personal practical theories of action from their interpretation of their own context as well as what they believe is possible to accomplish within that particular context. Teachers' perspectives are developed through their understanding of subject matter, learning theory, their context, social conditions, and how they perceive the interactions among all of the above. Sanders and McCutcheon (1986) assert that

Personal theories of teaching are the conceptual structures and visions that provide teachers with reasons for acting as they do, and for choosing the teaching activities and curriculum materials they choose in order to be effective... they undergird and guide teachers' appreciations, decisions, and actions.(Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986, pp.54-55)

This interpretation explains that teachers weave their knowledge of theoretical principles, value-laden beliefs, and the constraints imposed by the institutional context into the perspectives guiding their decisions and actions. These perspectives have practical value for teachers because they provide a framework to justify and explain actions. Another approach to understanding teachers' knowledge is to focus on the images and metaphors that teachers use to describe their context, their practice, their interactions with students, and their professional identity in order to discover how they frame their interpretation of situations. Elbaz (1983) suggests that teachers' practical knowledge consists of rules of practice, practical principles, and images. Images, metaphors, and practical theories of action may then be viewed as the 'scaffolding,' the skeletal structure that undergirds the knowledge and actions of teachers. These personal theories and images are historical constructions, selected, shaped, constructed, and interpreted over a professional career.

In addition, notions of effective professional development have changed in recent years. The literature does not support the use of short, one-shot workshops provided on an irregular basis by outsiders as an effective approach. Moreover, professional development previously focused more on the content (what to learn) than pedagogy (how to teach), and the learning opportunities actually offered to teachers have typically been developed from others' visions of what teachers need (Randi & Zeichner, 2004). In contrast to this type of workshop, the current staff development literature presents an

innovation of teacher education in which teachers are given the time and support for collaborating with colleagues, analyzing student work, reflecting on their practice as reflective professionals or researchers. According to research on adult learning, self-directness – including self-learning from experience in natural settings – is an important component (Licklider, 1997). It can be argued that effective teacher professional development should involve more than occasional large-group sessions; it should include activities such as study teams, collaboration between teachers and peer coaching in which teachers can continuously and cooperatively examine and reflect on their assumptions and practices. To improve teacher education, both for pre-service and in-service teachers, teacher educators need to reflect on their own practice and form collaborative relations with others (teachers, schools). Moreover, it is best in designing a course for teacher education program to consider mixed strategies that tie pedagogical approaches to the learning and understanding goals of the programs and the needs of the students (Richardson, 1999).

2.7. Summary

I reviewed the literature for general trends in teachers' experiences with change in the classroom, focusing on the key components of teachers' improvement efforts, the challenges, and their responses. The literature informs my study in different ways, particularly in terms of the evidence and the reasons that explain why and how teachers need to improve their practice. I was able to recognize how and to what extent the existing knowledge in the field helps to answer my research question. I also found gaps in various aspects of empirical knowledge about teachers' experiences of improvement efforts in their classrooms, their schools, and their profession. The literature also illustrates the close relationship between what teachers do in these contexts and the classroom outcomes of increased learning opportunities for students.

The insights from the literature point to the growing recognition of teachers' pre-eminent role in school reform, thus making it necessary to pay attention to how schools experience changes in the classroom and school community. Despite the growing interest in and emphasis on the teachers' central role in improving teaching and learning practices in the classroom and the influences and circumstance outside it that affect their work, few

studies have explored what changes teachers pursue outside the classroom and how these changes in turn affect their classroom practices. Fewer studies have investigated why and how school teachers go about improving their classroom practices, change the psychological environment of the classroom, deal with naturally occurring changes inside the classroom and outside it, and engage in planned improvement. Against this background, my study attempts to contribute more insights and a cross-cultural perspective to the understanding of teachers' experiences with improvement efforts in the classroom and the school community.

The insights from the literature on teachers' work in each of these areas emphasize teachers' personal and professional qualities and development – their work, personal dispositions, professional outlooks, motivations for improvement, and commitment to students. In their attempts to improve their classroom, teachers promote a variety of interactive teaching methods that focus on in-depth student learning of subject knowledge. Curriculum adaptation and assessment are integral parts of instructional improvements intended to expand and deepen students' learning. Teachers attempt to reshape their classroom environment in order to promote a caring and enabling learning environment where learners feel respected, accepted, secure, included, encouraged, and responsible for their own learning as well as for helping to forge a learning community in the classroom. The research indicates that all of these are important to encourage students' active engagement in learning.

Teachers' understandings of their influences and responsibilities beyond the classroom offer new possibilities for them to be actively involved in school-wide improvement processes. Their innovations and professional development activities are intended to promote collaboration and enhance their schools' capacity to respond or adapt to naturally occurring changes effectively and to develop plans and implement them while taking into account system guidelines and priorities. This view suggests teachers' voluntary or self-initiated improvement and development efforts such as collaboration and reflection would be included in the school-based development. Teachers' approach to improvement in the school draws on their professional competencies, and personal values.

Teachers' improvement efforts in the classroom and school are complex and challenging. With a commitment to change, they constantly search for ways and means to overcome challenges, exploring alternatives, adapting and modifying strategies, exhibiting patience and perseverance, and developing relationships with peers and colleagues. Their goals, efforts, and approaches to improvement influence our perception of teachers and school improvement. This emerging view thus supports the conception of teachers as essential agents of improvement and change in restructuring and reforming practices inside and outside classroom.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

Chapter 3 explains why and how a qualitative case study approach can be used to ascertain teachers' experiences, ideas, insights and perspectives in their teaching and learning practice and in their efforts to improve or reform their practices in the classroom and in the school community. The reason for using the approach here is to improve teacher education and consequently improve schools in Lao PDR. First, I explain the intentions of the research questions. Second, I discuss the rationale for using a qualitative case study design and briefly identify the theoretical underpinnings of the case study methodology. I also elaborate on the conceptual framework that specifies the boundaries of this particular case and guides the data collection and subsequent analysis. Third, I provide details about site selection, sampling, and recruitment of the participants. Fourth, I discuss the data collection tools, describe the process this study employs, and highlight the challenges I encountered during fieldwork. Fifth, I describe the processes and techniques I used for data analysis and identification of the themes. I also discuss ethical considerations – the ethical issues I came across during fieldwork and the ways I handled them. Sixth, I discuss the validity and the potential for generalization of research findings and describe the writing-up. Finally, I describe the challenges that I faced during my research study. The chapter concludes with a summary.

3.2. Research Intent: Research Questions

Research questions give direction to the study, limit the scope of the investigation, and provide a device for evaluating progress and satisfactory completion (Hatch, 2002). Therefore, identifying research questions is a critical step in research design because they are the only component that ties directly to all of the other elements of design (Maxwell, 1996). Question design based on the model of one overarching research question ought to reflect the general intent of the study but be specific enough to delimit its breadth and follow with sub-questions that remain general in nature but offer specific direction (Hatch, 2002). Drawing from this idea, the study intends to explore the

question: *How might descriptions of teachers' experiences and challenges in their attempts to reform or improve their work and practices affect teacher education?*

The research seeks to generate a deeper contextualized understanding of how teachers' experiences and interact with improvement or reform efforts. The study will explore teachers' experiences, ideas, insights and perspectives into the main research question using the following sub-questions:

- *What experiences or initiatives do the teachers make to improve their work inside and outside the classroom, and why?*
- *How do the teachers make these efforts?*
- *How might their efforts tell us about the education of teachers specifically and school improvement in general?*
- *What challenges do the teachers face and how do they address those challenges?*

3.3. Rationale and Theoretical Foundation of Qualitative Case Study Methodology

Over the past two decades, the focus of educational research has moved toward employing qualitative research techniques. Qualitative methods are rooted in interpretive traditions within social sciences that take as a starting point the realm of everyday lived experience (Eisner, 1991). Their purpose is to develop an understanding of social and educational phenomena and to generate information, theories, and knowledge through the interpretation of what is written, heard, or seen over the course of interviews, observations, and review of archival documents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It also helps researchers gain a wider, holistic, and context-specific picture of the phenomenon under study and allows multiple viewpoints and interpretations for understanding dynamic, ever-changing, and complex social realities. Moreover, Strauss and Corbin (1990) claim that qualitative methods can be used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known. They can also be used to gain new perspectives on things about which much is already known or to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively.

Case study research is an inclusive approach to qualitative research in which individuals, groups, institutions, or other social units are investigated. The researcher conducting a case study attempts to analyze the variables relevant to the subject under

study. The literature on qualitative inquiry views the case study method as an appropriate tool to better understand the dynamics of interactive social, cultural, personal, and academic phenomena in a school setting. It is believed that realities exist in multiple forms and are constructed culturally, socially, and linguistically (Eisner, 1991; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also, Merriam (1998) finds that the qualitative case study method is useful in studying a phenomenon systematically and therefore that it is a suitable methodology for dealing with critical problems of practice and extending the knowledge base of various aspects of education. Similarly, the qualitative case study is also helpful in understanding, informing, and improving practice (Merriam, 1988). Moreover, the literature shows examples of studies that have successfully used qualitative case study design to gain in-depth and culturally rich data about individual cases of teachers' work, lives, development, and school improvement (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As I worked with a small research sample comprising two university teacher educators and two secondary school teachers, a qualitative case study enabled me to carry out an in-depth, multidimensional investigation of these teachers' experiences in the interrelated fields of their work, allowing exploration of these concepts and their interrelationships at a deeper level. The qualitative case study approach helped me to understand teachers' experiences in their context of work. Even though qualitative case study methodologies, by their very nature, can be emotionally taxing and extraordinarily time-consuming, they yield rich information not obtainable through statistical sampling techniques.

Moreover, since this study tries to understand the phenomena of people's personal experiences from their own perspectives, it is related to the theory of phenomenology. According to Johnson and Christensen (2000), phenomenology is the description and the interpretation of one or more individuals' consciousness and experience of phenomena: how they construct, interpret, and enact these experiences. That is, the meaning that people make of their experience is contextualized (Eisner & Perskin, 1990). This case study also tries to understand teachers' experience from their perspective in the socially constructed nature of reality and stresses how social experience is constructed and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Moreover, it is also related to social constructivism, which is premised on the belief that all knowledge is constructed in an interactive,

dynamic process influenced by the historical, social, and cultural ethos (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990) and that knowledge and truth hence depend on the individual's perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The use of a social constructivist lens allows the researcher to extend explanations of human phenomena to the process of their construction (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). In addition, the case study approach to understanding teachers' experiences from their own perspective is related to narrative inquiry, which underscores the centrality of stories or narratives to experience and meaning making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). These perspectives provide a strong rationale for applying a qualitative case study methodology to explore the teachers' subjective experiences from their own perspective.

3.4. Context: Research Setting and Participants

In qualitative research, a context includes the physical setting in which social action occurs, a set of participants, and their relationship to one another and the activities in which they are involved. As the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize to a population but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon, the researcher can select individuals and sites (Creswell, 2002). The purpose of selecting sites or participants is based on consideration of which populations or phenomena are relevant, and they are selected to provide the information needed to address the purpose of the research (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Therefore, this research took place in the places I was able to select on the basis of my prior knowledge and information available: Champasak University (ChU), and a Secondary School District in Pakse, Champasak Province, in the southern part of Laos. Champasak University, a newly established university (7 years), is the main government-supported institution in the Southern provinces of Laos PDR, and it is where secondary school teachers are trained. The secondary school was chosen from among other high schools because of its location and the positive changes or innovations initiated over a period of time. Through a written application (See Appendix A), I obtained permission from administrators of both institutions (see Appendix B) to visit schools, meet teachers, collect preliminary information, and subsequently conduct the research.

I selected my participants with the leader of the school and the head teacher. The selection criteria were created drawing on my prior knowledge, the information on teachers available from schools, and how this information related to the literature review. The criteria for selecting participants were based on (1) work duration (not less than 5 years of teaching experience); (2) indication of work commitment in the classroom (teaching and learning practices that improve students learning and development) and school community (activities or programs to improve school); (3) indication of initiatives and efforts to change in order to improve teaching and learning practice; (4) indication of initiatives and efforts to promote change or innovation in order to improve their school; (5) relationships in the school community (other teachers); (6) indication of professional development strategies to improve their teaching and learning practice in the classroom and in the school community; (7) indication of knowledge ability, articulation, and curiosity as well as an optimistic, positive orientation; and (8) indication of interest in this study and willingness to participate. These criteria were translated into Lao and given to the leaders of the school who helped me selected the participants. Through conversation with the school leader and the head teachers, 2 teacher educators from the Faculty of Education, Chamapasak University, and two teachers from a secondary school were chosen. Choosing two participants from the Faculty of Education at Chamapasak University enabled me to learn about their experiences, ideas, insights, and perspectives as teacher educators. Two participants from a secondary school helped by providing their experiences, ideas, insights and perspectives as secondary school teachers.

After having identified the participants, I informed them about my intention to work with them in order to be sure of their willingness to participate in the study. I shared with them the purpose of my study and my research plans. I then formally invited them to participate in the study through a written invitation letter (See Appendix C) and obtained their consent (See Appendix D). Both invitation letter and consent form were translated into Lao so that they were able to understand them fully.

3.5. Data Collection Techniques

In a qualitative case study, data are usually collected through sustained contact with people in the settings where they normally spend their time. The researcher enters

the world of the people she plans to study, gets to know, be known, and trusted by them, and systematically keeps a detailed written record of what she hears and observes. The data collected in qualitative research have been termed ‘soft’: that is, rich in description of people, places, and conversations and not easily handled by statistical procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Moreover, the qualitative case study design allows a variety of data collection tools suitable to the research situation at hand including (semi-structured/unstructured) interviews, observation, field notes, and document analysis. Given the wide range of options and seeking to triangulate in order to enhance the “reliability and internal validity” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) of the findings of the research in this study, I used semi-structured in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and post-observation reflective discussions, teachers’ monthly reflections, document analysis, field notes, and personal writing. These data collection tools will be discussed with reference to their context, purpose, situation and the ways in which I used them.

3.5.1. Interviews

Qualitative interviews may be used either as the primary strategy for data collection, or in conjunction with observation, document analysis, or other techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Patton (1990) writes about three types of qualitative interviewing: (1) informal, conversational interviews; (2) semi-structured interviews; and (3) standardized, open-ended interviews. In this research, semi-structured interviews will be used.

3.5.1.1. Semi-structured Interviews: 60-minute, in-depth, face-to-face interview

This qualitative interview used open-ended questions that aimed to elicit the participants’ responses (e.g., experiences, practices, approaches, explanation, values, beliefs, feelings, impressions, awareness, perspectives, opinions, and attitudes) in relation to their work in the classroom and their involvement in the school community. Such in-depth interviews provided a more systematic approach to gathering detailed information about specific topics across a sample and also provide researchers with an opportunity to discuss the topic with the respondent in more detail and in an open-ended fashion (Creswell, 1998).

The semi-structured interview in my study was conducted in three 60-minute, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with each research participant. In this semi-structured interview, I used a list of open-ended questions or general topics to guide me in what I wanted to explore during each interview. These included (1) personal and education or training background (e.g. childhood and early education, family, qualifications, previous professional development/training, reason for being a teacher, number of years teaching); (2) experience about teaching and learning practice (e.g., teaching experience over time, changes or improvement efforts, challenges, tensions, strategies to overcome the challenges or tensions, satisfaction, instructions, assessments, factors and conditions inside the classroom that help the teacher learn more about teaching and learning, and metaphors that used to describe him/herself as a classroom teacher); (3) activities and interaction in the school community (e.g., responsibilities outside the classroom, working relationship with others, factors that help the teacher establish good working relationships with colleagues, factors that hinder forging collaborative working relationship among teachers); and (4) school improvement activities (e.g., involvement, role, or participation in the school improvement initiative, perceptions, experience, challenges or problems with the school improvement process). Although they were prepared to ensure that basically the same information was obtained from each person, there were no predetermined responses, and in semi-structured interviews, I was free to probe and explore within these predetermined inquiry areas (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). This list of questions helped me to ensure the good use of limited interview time; it made interviewing multiple subjects more systematic and comprehensive and helped to keep interactions focused. The questions were modified over time to focus attention on areas of particular importance or were excluded as I found them unproductive for the goals of the research (Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

3.5.2. Classroom Observations

To accompany semi-structured interviews to collect data in naturalistic or field research, researchers often observe participants in the context of a natural scene. Observational data are used for the purpose of description—of settings, activities, people, and the meanings of what is observed from the perspective of the participants. Observation can lead to deeper understandings than interviews alone because it provides

knowledge of the context in which events occur and may enable the researcher to see things that participants themselves are not aware of or that they are unwilling to discuss (Patton, 1990). According to Hancock (1998), observation is a well-established method for exploring social work; he recommends the use of observation in situations where detailed descriptions of a setting, activities and people's meaning and values are to be explored. Classroom observations will, therefore, help in drawing pictures of learning activities, the general ethos of the classroom, the challenges, dilemmas, and difficulties the teachers face, and the strategies the teacher uses to respond to these challenges. Classroom observation will also provide a context within which to engage the teacher in a reflective discussion on what he/she does in the classroom, and how and why he/she does it. In this study, I engaged in extensive classroom observations and seized the opportunity for post-observation reflective discussions to help me gain a wider and deeper insight into the teachers' classroom innovations, pedagogical choices, challenges, coping strategies, remedial actions, and underlying beliefs and conceptions.

There are several observation strategies that may be possible and desirable for the researcher: watching from outside; maintaining a passive presence (being as unobtrusive as possible and not interacting with participants); engaging in limited interaction (intervening only when further clarification of actions is needed); exercising more active control over the observation (as in the case of a formal interview to elicit specific types of information); or acting as a full participant in the situation, with either a hidden or known identity (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Moreover, Heck and William (1984, p. 107) argue that "observation data contains more than what is seen. They include which is heard, smelled, felt, sensed." Therefore, to observe the teacher's and students' actions in the classroom and to understand the details of the complex classroom interactions, I sat at the back of the classroom and maintained a passive presence so that I would be able to see and record all classroom events as they occurred. During the observation, important points and questions related to the teacher's actions and the students' reactions that required clarification or probing in the post-observation meeting were highlighted. However, I was aware that my presence was likely to introduce a distortion of the natural scene, and I worked to minimize the effect. Critical decisions, including the degree to which identity and purpose was revealed to participants, the length of time spent in the

field, and specific observation techniques used, were wholly dependent on the unique set of questions and resources brought to the study. I also considered the legal and ethical responsibilities associated with this naturalistic observation.

These classroom observations served as important sources of data for “triangulation” (Denzin, 1970; Merriam, 1985). The aim was to generate information and insight into the teachers’ instructions and encounters in the classroom context. Therefore, I initially planned three 60-minute class observations for each participant, but I actually observed some teachers more than three times and for two-period classes each time. To facilitate classroom observation, I developed an observation guide that included (1) the teacher’s pedagogy (e.g., teaching and learning activities, strategies, planning, feedback to students, remedial support, and innovation); (2) interaction with students (e.g., the teacher’s expectation of how students would react to the classroom instruction, activities, and the teacher’s behavior); (3) the teachers’ approaches to creating learning environments in the classroom and classroom management; and (4) the challenges and coping strategies (e.g., how the teacher responded to unpredictable situations, for example, learning difficulties). These were helpful and kept me focused.

3.5.3. Post-observation Reflective Discussions

The classroom observations were followed immediately by post-observation reflective discussions with the participant. The purpose was to find out explicitly the teacher’s perceptions of problems as well as the teacher’s thinking, actions, behaviors, and decision making during the lesson. This reflective discussion could inform the evolving image of the teachers’ teaching by asking them how they developed their beliefs and practices and how this development related to improve their professional development and consequently school reform/school improvement. In these discussions, the teachers were asked to describe what they did during the lesson and explain why. This reflective discussion was recorded and coded and later transcribed. The data from this source, along with field notes from classroom observations, could provide additional information about the teachers’ practices in relation to the underlying beliefs, perspectives, experiences, ideas, and biases that determine the teachers’ decisions, behaviors, attitudes, approaches, and actions during the lessons.

3.5.4. Reflective Discussion

I planned to have a meeting with all the participants every month in order to discuss factors related to changes and improvement and for the teachers to share or exchange their ideas, problems, solutions, and other matters related to their teaching practice. However, I could manage to do this only twice, at the beginning and at the end, because of their workload. This discussion was different from the post-observation discussions since teachers reflected not only on their ongoing everyday experience in the classroom but also on their ongoing experiences in the context of school community.

3.5.5. Other Sources of Data: documents

Another source of information that can be invaluable to qualitative researchers is analysis of documents (Creswell, 2002). Such documents consist of public and private/personal records that can be obtained from the research sites or participants. Public documents can be official records, minutes of meetings, official memos, official letters, planning papers, lesson plans, textbooks, examination papers, school records, file and statistics, and records in the public domain as well as the published data used in a review of literature which might give useful information. However, some documents may be difficult to obtain because some information can be prohibited from public use or located in distant places that require travel and expense.

Private/personal documents are personal journals and diaries, letters, and personal notes. In this study, I used both public and private documents. Public documents were records, statistics, reports, plans, curriculum guidelines, and other related documents that I requested from Phonxay Secondary School, Champasak University, and the Educational Section of the province. Teachers also provided me their personal written documents, for example, lesson plans. Having this material enabled me to record detailed reflections on a range of the teachers' experiences, issues, and the events of a typical day in a teachers' life. In addition, it provided the opportunity to probe deeper into issues, critical incidents, and the teachers' experiences in a reflective, dialogical environment. These documents represented a good source for text (word) data that are ready for analysis without the need for transcription (Creswell, 2002). This document analysis helped fill in some of the

missing data pieces and helped raise new questions regarding the accuracy of observations and interpretation.

3.5.6. Teacher Written Reflection

I also requested teachers' written reflections (around two pages) on their most significant experiences, views about reflections, collaboration, the description of activities carried out in a typical day (e.g., classroom events, feelings, the activity and the time spent inside or outside the classroom in school community). I used these teachers' written reflections to stimulate discussions in group meetings and the teachers' personal written journals. These written reflection journals enabled me to capture detailed reflections on a range of the teachers' experiences, issues, and events of a typical day in the teachers' life. In addition, they provided the opportunity to probe deeper into the teachers' experiences in a reflective, dialogical environment. Using them also helped me to triangulate the journal data with data from the interviews, observation, and post observation material to gain greater understanding of practices and issues inside the classroom and how they related to what teachers do outside the classroom or school community.

3.5.7. Recording Data and Field Notes

A basic decision going into the interview, discussion, or observation process is how to record data. Whether the researcher relies on written notes or a tape recorder appears to be largely a matter of personal preference. For instance, Patton (1990, p. 348) says that a tape recorder is "indispensable," while Lincoln and Guba "do not recommend recording except for unusual reasons" (1985, p. 241). Lincoln and Guba base their recommendation on the intrusiveness of recording devices and the possibility of technical failure. Recordings have the advantage of capturing data more faithfully than hurriedly written notes might and can make it easier for the researcher to focus on the interview.

Many field researchers will rely on field notes, which are running descriptions of settings, people, activities, and sounds. Acknowledging the difficulty of writing extensive field notes during an observation, Lofland and Lofland (1984) recommend jotting down notes that will serve as a memory aid when full field notes are constructed, which should happen as soon after observation as possible, preferably the same day. In order to record

the data, field notes and a methodological journal helped me focus on the internal dynamics of the school (e.g., interaction among teachers in the staffroom and outside it). Moreover, I documented my informal conversations with the research participants, which took place at different times during school visits. The field notes helped me identify, record, and describe challenges and realizations that might occur. Apart from taking notes, I also audiotaped and then transcribed so that I was able to focus more and listen again.

3.6. Data Analysis

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) refine 'analysis' as the ways in which the researcher moves from a description of what is the case to an explanation of why, deriving patterns in the data, looking for general orientations and trying to sort out what the data are about, why and what kinds of things might be said about them. Bogdan and Biklen (1982,p. 145) also define qualitative data analysis as "working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others."Moreover, qualitative researchers tend to use inductive analysis of data, which means that the critical themes that emerge out of the data require some creativity, for the challenge is to place the raw data into logical, meaningful categories, to examine them in a holistic fashion, and to find a way to communicate this interpretation to others (Patton, 1990). This is a continuous process for making sense of data and deriving valid meaning.

There are some stages of data analysis that may occur simultaneously and repeatedly. Data analysis may begin informally during interviews or observations and continue during transcription when recurring themes, patterns, and categories become evident (Creswell, 1998). Once written records are available, analysis involves the coding of data and the identification of salient points or structures. Moreover, Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that data analysis begins with identification of the themes emerging from the raw data. In this stage, it is important to identify and tentatively name the conceptual categories into which the phenomena observed will be grouped to create descriptive, multi-dimensional categories. Words, phrases, or events that appear to be similar can be grouped into the same category. These categories may be gradually modified or replaced

during the subsequent stages of analysis. When the raw data are broken down into manageable chunks, it is also important to arrange these data chunks according to the context. The next stage is to re-examine the categories identified to determine how they are linked (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to build a conceptual model, and to determine whether sufficient data exist to support that interpretation. The categories identified are compared and combined in new ways as the researcher begins to assemble the "big picture." The purpose is not simply to describe but, more importantly, to acquire new understanding of a phenomenon of interest. Therefore, underlining events contributing to the phenomenon, descriptive details of the phenomenon itself, and the result of the phenomenon under study must all be identified and explored. Analysis is followed by translating the conceptual model into a story line so that the research report will be a rich, tightly woven account that "closely approximates the reality it represents" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 57).

My study analysis involved discovering patterns in the data, looking for general orientations, trying to sort out what the data were about and how to understand what I might say about them and why. The data analysis also involved a 'methodological triangulation' (Denzin, 1970; Merriam 1985) of the data sources: interviews, observations, post-observation reflective discussions, monthly reflective discussions, teachers' written reflections, and document analysis. I kept reading through and reflecting on the data (listening to taped interviews, reading through interview transcripts) on an ongoing basis. This practice helped me to prepare for forthcoming interviews and observations and to identify the themes. I also read through my field notes and prepared memos and summaries in which I described and further explored an idea or clarified a piece of information in the notes.

3.6.1. Transcription and Coding of the Data

I transcribed all taped interviews in full and tagged them with an interview numbers and the date on which the interview took place. I wrote brief notes on emerging themes, questions, confusions, reflections, and new lines of thinking as reminders to be developed at a later stage of interpretation.

To begin the data analysis, I developed a coding or reference system by numbering the lines on individual pages of the interview transcripts and field notes. The interview number, date, and pseudonym of the respondent were put on the top of the transcripts. In combination, the interview date, respondent' pseudonym, page number, and number of the line containing the relevant information served as the code reference. I found data transcription, coding, and translation quite challenging. I had to transcribe many long recorded conversations. I found it time-consuming and laborious, yet it was rewarding.

The interviews with the research participants were in the Lao language, and the information for all data sources was recorded in Lao; only important chunks of data to be used in writing the thesis (pertaining to topics discussed in the thesis and quotes from respondents) were translated into English, and I found that creating an appropriate translation from Lao to English was a difficult task. Careful attention to the text's core meaning and constant double-checking helped me to improve the process. After having a viable reference system in place, I proceeded to the formal data analysis, which consisted of four consecutive stages.

3.6.2. Content Analysis

The qualitative data were collected in the form of descriptions, narratives, stories, anecdotes, and participants' responses, opinions, feelings, values, experiences, and awareness about practice as well as initiatives, constraints, and coping strategies. In order to carry out data analysis, I applied a content analysis (Marriam, 1998; Stake, 1995, Wolcott, 1994) procedure to all interview transcripts, classroom observations, teachers' reflection, field notes, and documents intended to deconstruct the data, to identify meanings, to discover relationships, and to begin initial analysis (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). During the content analysis process I read and reread the data thoroughly to recognize various emerging micro-themes or key ideas in each interview transcript.

3.6.3. Categorization Micro-themes

I grouped the numerous micro-themes from preliminary analysis around the three headings: classroom experience, school experience, and professional development experience of teachers. My four questions had guided the data collection under each of

these components. In order to group the micro-themes under the concepts that pertained to each of these questions, I developed a data analysis summary sheet consisting of a table with three columns and filled with all the micro-themes. I identified all the major concepts that corresponded to the questions under each of the three headings. I highlighted the micro-themes with different colored highlighter pens. Having finished the second level of coding, I used numbers to represent the different colors I used for the categorization of the micro-theme and entered these letter-coded micro-themes into the serial-number column). Then I sorted out all the micro-themes under the relevant major themes. However, the process was quite challenging intellectually, requiring a great deal of thinking and decision making, since it was often difficult to decide whether a particular theme, given the core meaning it carried, would ideally fit in one major category.

3.6.4. Recognizing Key Themes

This stage of analysis concerned data reduction and synthesis. The underlying purpose was to identify patterns or search for key themes within each broader category using the same process mentioned. I identified a number of key themes or phrases that described a central idea shared by a set of related micro-themes.

3.6.5. Cross-Case Analysis

During the earlier process of data analysis, I came to realize that more similarities existed among the four cases than differences. Therefore, instead of dealing with the four cases individually in the subsequent writing, I decided to undertake a cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this analysis, I sought patterns by looking at the cross-cutting themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) for similarities and differences. However, I found striking uniformity and commonalities in the four teachers' conceptions of improvement, their dispositions, their work situations, their struggles and improvement initiatives, the challenges they faced, and the approaches they employed to deal with those challenges. However, there remained recognizable differences among the teachers' biographies, perspectives, approaches, school working conditions, and respective school communities. The diversities in efforts, perspectives, experiences, challenges, and coping strategies have also been highlighted across the four cases.

3.7. Write up

After all the data have been collected and the analysis has been completed, the next major task for qualitative researchers is to re-present the study in the form of a paper. The current literature on qualitative case study research provides insight into reporting research data or the process of writing a thesis, but it does not recommend any single way of doing either, though it has emphasized such aspects as in-depth analysis, succinct reporting, audience interest, and description versus analysis (Merriam, 1985). As the “write up” is more analytical and interpretative than that which is written down or recorded, the write up of this study comprised a continuum of activities starting with collecting data; reading through it on an ongoing basis; writing summaries/memos; identifying significant ideas, concepts, anecdotes, stories, and events, categorizing and finding meaning in these concepts; reflecting on those meanings and relating them to the focus of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994, Wolcott, 2001). This process was a continuum moving from data collection to analysis and from interpretation to writing. The results were presented in different chapters including data about schools and the participants, the participants’ experiences, ideas, insights, and perspectives relating to their work in the classroom, and school community. Important questions and the data’s relevance were explicit and rigorously argued in the writing.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

Qualitative researchers often spend considerable one-on-one time with participants and stay for a long period of time at the research sites. The main ethical debates in qualitative research are related to the tensions between covert and overt research and between the public's right to know and the subject's right to privacy. Because qualitative case study research often deals with human participants, the potential risk to confidentiality and related issues is high (Stake, 1995). Since my study involved human participants, I made an Ethical Review application and had it approved by the Ethical Review Committee of Simon Fraser University. Sampling and data collection proceeded in accordance with the principles underlined in the Ethical Review Protocol. I made written application to administrators for both institutions (see Appendix A), and I

obtained administrative consent from them in order to get their authority to access schools and conduct study there. I also obtained consent form from all participants.

Also, because a school is a complex and sensitive social organization, the potential for ethical risks exists all the time. While working in the schools with the teachers, I was conscious of all the potential ethical issues and attempted to minimize the risks. I strictly held to all procedures and rules for protection and confidentiality of the participants underlined in the Ethical Review Protocol. These included respecting each school's internal cultural and values; harmonizing research activities with a school's timetable and a teacher's work routine; making my presence less visible in the school and in the classroom to avoid inconvenience for other people; remaining unobtrusive; and protecting confidentiality and anonymity. Moreover, Creswell (2002, p. 217) suggests that it is important that a researcher not only "conveys to participants that they are participating in a study" but also "informs them of the purpose of the study." Therefore, I provided the authorities and the participants with detailed information about my study: its purpose; its intended benefits; the sampling criteria; the demands on teacher's time; the timeline of the study; the data collection tools and procedure; and an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.

3.9. Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability

Validity and reliability are two factors that have been contentious issues in the context of qualitative research methodology that any researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analyzing results, and judging the quality of the study (Patton, 2001). Validity is the extent to which one's findings are congruent with reality. Reliability is the extent to which there is consistency in the findings, and it is enhanced when the investigator explains the theory underlying the study, triangulates data, and leaves an audit trail (Merriam, 1988). Triangulation has also been widely recommended in the literature on qualitative research methodology to deal with the issue of validity (e.g., Bogdan & Bilien, 1998; Eisner, 1998; Dinzen & Lincoln (1994) Guba & Lincoln, 2000; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), "For qualitative research, validity must be concerned with the degree to which findings capture the reality of the situation

under investigation” (p. 324). However, the philosophical underpinning of qualitative naturalistic inquiry portrays reality as “holistic, multi-dimensional, and ever changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered” (Merriam, 1988, p. 167). In this study, “methodological triangulation” (Denzin, 1970), a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning and verify the repeatability of an observation or interpretation (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was employed to address concerns about validity and reliability by using several methods to obtain data. The variety of data sources (in-depth, face-to-face interviews, classroom observations followed by reflective discussions, field notes, and document analysis) in my study allow for rigorous triangulation of the data. This triangulation of data brings multiple perspectives and allows my data collection to fit within an overarching study of teachers’ experience, insights, ideas, and perspectives, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

On the question of generalizability, Donmoyer (1990) has suggested three advantages of naturalistic case study research. First, a case study can take place in geographic and socio-cultural contexts that many readers may not have the opportunity to visit. Thus, it can widen the understanding of education and training in different settings, institutions, cultures, and countries. Second, such studies can help the reader to see reality through the eyes of others; in the process, there is the potential for understanding things that normally are not even visible to the readers. Third, case studies can help prevent defensiveness and resistance to learning. These thoughts imply alternate perspectives on understanding and suggest a different angle from which to view the issue of generalizability in the context of qualitative case study research.

For this qualitative case study, a small sample of two university teacher educators and two secondary school teachers was used. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings was approached with extreme care and sensitivity. However, since the case study is an investigation centered on a particular subject, the data are not generalizable (Hopkin, 1980). At the outset, the study did not aim to produce generalized rules and principles; rather, it was intended to provide a rich description of the teachers’ subjective experience from their own perspectives. The information and insights generated were intended to contribute to the understanding of how these teachers address the specific challenges they

come across in their efforts to improve what they do in classrooms and the school community as well as how secondary school experience influences the university educators who are responsible for training secondary school teachers and improving the teacher training programs. These insights should have some positive influences on school improvement efforts in the local setting.

3.10. Challenges and Realization

I found all the above data collection techniques useful in generating rich information about the research problem. I did not face any significant methodological challenges or constraints. However, I realized that the qualitative research case study is demanding when it is applied to explore teachers' experiences in school improvement by setting them in the interrelated contexts of classroom and school community. Qualitative research requires deep investigation of numerous, intricately interlinked organizational, personal, and socio-cultural factors. I worked with four teachers, which was a very demanding experience in terms of resources, time, and effort. My experience suggests that a smaller sample size allows deep probing into issues pertaining to the phenomena under study.

My second realization was related the 'open-endedness' of qualitative inquiry. To guide the research process, I used an organizational framework with clearly defined parameters. Within this frame, I developed an interview schedule containing sets of open-ended questions. By the end of the data collection, I had been able to elicit a great deal of data, but I was unsure whether or not the amount and variety were sufficient to help me develop a deeper understanding of the research problem. The temptation and the desire to gather more and more information persisted up to the end of the data collection.

A third issue related to meeting with teachers as a tool of data collection. In the situation of this study, setting up monthly meetings with the 4 teachers in order for them to share ideas and exchange experiences was not possible because they were unavailable, and I ended up with only two meetings.

Other situations that interrupted my fieldwork related to the incompatibility between my study plan and the school dynamics, such as variation of school operation

time, frequent exams, tests, school functions, and teachers' unpredictable absences as a result of sickness or personal or other circumstances. The data collection was conducted between two semester periods. Because Champasak hosted the National Games in Pakse District in December, schools were required to adjust their operation period so that the Phonxay Secondary School final semester examination took place earlier with a one-month semester break after that. In this case, I could not collect data as I planned. Two of participants were sent for in-service training during this break, so I only had their written reflection. Sometimes the other participants had official assignments in another province, which prevented me continuing interaction for sometime. However, I had very good relationships not only with the participants but also with the other members of the institutions. I was able to adapt my study plan to accumulate changes and emerging situations.

3.11. Summary

This chapter explains how qualitative case study methodology was used to conduct the study on "Reforming Teacher Education in Lao PDR" by exploring teachers' experiences, insights, ideas, perspectives concerning the improvements they pursue in the classroom and school community in the institutions of the southern province of Laos. I chose the qualitative case study research method to gain in-depth understanding of these phenomena. First, I discussed the research questions and the theoretical foundation of qualitative case study methodology. I understand that phenomena are socially constructed and a deeper, multi-dimensional understanding is constructed through triangulation, manipulation, and interpretation of the data. The qualitative case study, therefore, involves using multiple data collection tools: semi-structured, in-depth, open-ended interviews, classroom observations, field notes, participants' reflections, and analysis of the relevant documents.

I reported that organization, coding, transcription, sorting and data analysis began immediately after completion of the data collection and continued throughout the data collection. It involved reading data, writing memos, and identifying areas for further probing. As interview transcripts were made, field notes of observation or discussion compiled, or documents assembled, I continuously examined the data, highlighting

certain points in the text or writing comments in the margins. I identified what seemed to be important points and noted contradictions and inconsistencies, any common themes that seemed to be emerging, referring these to related literature, comparisons and contrasts with other data, and so on. That is, my data analysis involved the identification of micro-themes; categorization of the micro-themes; and synthesis of the micro-themes to identify broader categories. The stages of analysis occurred simultaneously and repeatedly. It was a cyclical process from specific to general.

In the context of this research, I faced certain methodological, process-related, and ethical challenges. Contextual challenges associated with disruptions such as school closures delayed my data collection. The methodological challenges included the participants' inability to keep a reflective journal regularly and to take part in regular meetings and the temptation to collect more data for transcription and content analysis of rich information.

My experiences in the study suggest that the process of qualitative case study in a school setting may not proceed according to the initial plan. Adaptation, modification, and adjustments are required to respond to unpredictable events and changing circumstances. It is therefore important to keep the work plan flexible enough to accommodate contingencies and emerging situations down the road.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE TEACHERS AND THEIR SCHOOLS

4.1. Introduction

Each school has its own history, unique characteristics, and organizational structure that explain the way that school functions. Similarly, individual teachers have their own biographies, educational experiences, and stories. This chapter provides a brief sketch of each educational institution and the participants' profiles. The description of each school includes: information on students, teachers, and support staff, physical structure, school community, school improvement stories, and current challenges. The descriptive sketches of the participants reflect each teacher's biography, educational experiences, and the various people and situations that have influenced their personal and professional experience. To conceal the participants' identities, pseudonyms have been used.

4.2. School and Participants Summary

I observed two educational institutions for my research: Champasak University and Phonxay Secondary School. Both institutions are in Champasak Province. Of the four research participants, two were males (one from Champasak University and one from Phonxay Secondary School) and two were females (one from Champasak University and one from Phonxay Secondary School).

Table 2 below represents some data on the participants focusing on their education, their teaching experience, and their responsibilities (including teaching grade/class, subjects and their responsibilities in the school community).

Table 2: Summary of Participants					
Participants	Schools	Academic and Professional Qualification	Teaching Experience	Teaching Grade and Subjects	Other Responsibility
Vanh (male)	Champasak University	-B.A. in Education (Mathematics and Physics) -Master's in Education – Mathematics	22 years	Year 4 and 5 Mathematics	Deputy Head of the Faculty of Engineering
Phet (female)	Champasak University	Bachelor's in Education – Lao Language and Literature	18 years	Year 4 and 5 Lao Language and Literature (Methodology)	Head of Administrative Official-Faculty of Education
Phai (male)	Phonxay Secondary School	Diploma in Teaching Mathematics	15 years	Year 6 Mathematics	Vice-president of Trade Union of School and Provincial Educational Section
Kham (female)	Phonxay Secondary School	Diploma in Teaching Lao Language and Literature	18 years	Year 6 Lao Language and Literature	Head of Lao Women Union of Social Science

The following sections, I briefly describe each educational institutions and its environment and then profile the participants from that particular educational institution.

4.2.1. Champasak University

4.2.1.1. Location and Physical Structure

Champasak University, the newly established university (7 years), is the main government-supported university in the southern provinces of Laos PDR. The university is situated about seven kilometers from the central city of Pakse (capital city of Champasak Province). It has an area of about 1,937 hectares. It is very new university and first operated without any buildings. It follows the policy of the party and government, focusing on training personnel with patriotism, socialist ideology, and self-sufficiency. Its main responsibility is to produce manpower covering all levels of the labor force with high academic knowledge and ability to serve to the public and private

sectors in several areas (e.g., industry, agriculture, commerce, art and culture, home economics, and tourism). Teaching and learning programs and short courses of vocational training are also offered in a wide number of basic vocational levels up to higher education degree programs. The university also promotes scientific research, conservative arts, national and traditional culture, provides professional services, and consults and trains academic and practical professionals. Champasak University is the institution in the southern parts of Laos for training secondary school teachers. The School of Foundation Studies and five faculties comprise Champasak University: the Faculty of Education, Faculty of Economics and Administration, Faculty of Agriculture, Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty of Law and Administration.

The Faculty of Education includes three departments: namely, the Department of English, Department of Mathematics, and Department of Lao Language and Literature. Currently, there are 50 staff and 610 student teachers. All students studying in each department have to take two years of foundation studies and another three years in their specialization. Students studying in this faculty are trained to be teachers of secondary schools. As these students are teacher-students, it is very important that they should be well trained when they graduate so that they will be able to apply what they have learned in this faculty in the practice or work as teachers. However, there have been insufficient qualified teaching personnel, instructional materials and equipment, and training facilities as a result of certain financial difficulties the university is facing at the moment. The backgrounds of students in terms of academic and economics are very different, which leads to difficulties in teaching and learning processes.

Even though the purpose of my research is to explore experiences of teachers who work in the Faculty of Education, most of the description provides overall information about the university because it is new. The conditions, problems, and challenges of the university are universally related to every faculty of the university.

4.2.1.2. Human Resources

At the beginning of the academic year 2002-2003, Champasak University had only 50 staff, including administrators, academic staff, and teachers, 14 of whom were female. At the present time the number of staff has increased from 50 to 225 in 2009. Of

these, 174 are teaching staff who hold different levels of qualification including higher diplomas, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees: 11, 138, 24, and 1, respectively. In the Faculty of Education, there are now 50 teaching staff; 5 of them hold master's degrees, 43 hold a bachelor's degree, and only 2 have higher diplomas in teaching. There is one rector who is responsible for the general administration and personnel, three vice-rectors who have different responsibilities: for academic affairs work including teaching and learning as well as professional development, for financial activities, and for research and technological activities and student management. The number of staff working in these offices differs in terms both of the number and their qualifications; for example, 13 out of 15 administration staff hold only certificates from technical or vocational schools. At the faculty level, some teachers do administration as well as teaching. The total enrollment in 2007-2009 was 4,862 students. These data are summarized in Table 3 below.

Students	Total Enrollment	4,862
	Average Class Size	40
Teaching Staff	Total	174 (Female 44)
	PhD	1
	Master's Degree	24 (Female 8)
	Bachelor's Degree	138 (Female 28)
	Higher Diploma	11 (Female 6)
	Certificate in Teaching	0
Administration	Rector	1
	Vice-Rectors	3
	Computer Assistance	5 (Female 1)
	Librarian	3 (Female 2)
	Administrative Staff	15 (Female 3)
	Personnel Staff	5
	Finance Staff	6 (Female 1)
	Student Management Staff	3
	Academic Staff	15 (Female 6)
	Office of Research and Technology	3
Faculty of Education	Total number of staff	50 (Female 15)
	Master's Degree	5 (Female 3)
	Bachelor's Degree	43 (Female 11)
	Higher Diploma in teaching	2 (Female 1)
	Total number of students enrollment	592 (Female 325)

Source: Champasak University Academic Year 2007-2008 Report and 2008-2009 Plan

4.2.1.3. Improvement Story

Before 2002, the National University of Laos was the only university in the country where students could further their education at the university level or a higher level apart from technical and vocational school or colleges. However, a large number of students have graduated from senior secondary education. In 2002, 27,000 students graduated from senior secondary education but there were only 10,000 places for them in higher institutions around the country. Thus, 17,000 students had with no opportunity to attend postsecondary institutions. The government decided to set up the National University of Laos-Champasak Branch (now Champasak University) at Pakse City in Champasak Province according to the order of the Prime Minister No. 21/PMO dated November 28, 2002. It was established in order to provide higher education for different target groups, especially for high school graduates in the southern part of Lao PDR. The establishment conformed to the policy and guidelines of the Lao government and was to make a great contribution to the socioeconomic development of the southern provinces as well as the country as a whole.

There have been structural improvements and changes in the university's academic activities. The significant structural improvements include construction of many new offices and classroom buildings; renovation of structural work, provision of facilities for examples, computers, and the library. More faculties have been opened to provide additional opportunities for students. In 2002-2003, the only faculties were Education (Department of English, Department of Lao Language and Literature, and Department of Mathematics), Economics (Department of Economics and Department of Administration), and Agriculture (Department of Agronomy and Department of Livestock and Fishery). The Faculty of Engineering (Department of Electrical Engineering and Department of Civil Engineering) opened in the academic year 2003-2004. The university has also started higher diploma courses in Agronomy, Livestock and Fishery, Tourism and Hospitality, and Electrical Engineering. Apart from these provisions, the university has also offered special courses in the evening to provide opportunities to government officials who work during the day and students who do not have an opportunity to study during the day. In 2006-2007, the Faculty of Law and Administration opened. The number of students has increased from 390 in the academic

year 2002-2003 to 4,862 in 2007-2008. The university plans to provide more choices to students in the next 5-year period with the addition of four new faculties: Faculty of Natural Science, Faculty of Social Science, Faculty of Letters, and Faculty of Medicine.

At first, Champasak University had a rector appointed by the Prime Minister on the recommendation of the Minister of Education with two vice-rectors, but now there are three vice-rectors appointed by the Ministry of Education on the Minister's advice. Only two offices were originally set up: administration and academic affairs. A personnel office, student management office, and the office of the research and technology were subsequently established. The university first operated with very limited facilities to support teaching and learning practices. Now, there are three 3 computer labs, a library, a university meeting room, and one meeting room in each faculty that is also used for lectures.

Human resources development has also improved. The number of staff has been increased from 50 in the academic year 2003 to 225 in 2009. However, Chamapasak University has organized many workshops for staff training. Over the past five years, there have been 56 workshops. Champasak University has also sent staff to further their studies at the Master's and PhD level inside and outside the country. More qualified teachers have been hired.

4.2.1.4. Current Challenge

The main aim of Champasak University is to become a centre for education, scientific research, and cooperation in the southern provinces in Laos as well as in the outside world. Since Champasak University is newly built, most areas still need to be developed and improved, including human and material resources, infrastructure, and buildings. However, the main problem that Champasak University faced when it was first established was that there were not enough teachers and administrative staff. Even though the number of teachers and staff has increased in the past five years; most of them are new graduates with little experience. The teachers' ability is still low and does not meet the requirement that at the university level half of the teaching staff should have a PhD. Teachers as well as administrative staff need upgrading; buildings and streets have to be constructed, and additional furniture, library resources, and laboratory materials are

required. Moreover, the curriculum needs to be developed to meet specific needs. The school and community must work together to overcome other different challenges (e.g., students absenteeism, dropout rates, and other issues arising from students' attitudes such as withdrawal and low morale) that constrain student learning and school change.

Teachers have not only academic problems but also economic problems that may prevent their full participation and involvement in activities devoted to their teaching. They need to improve their knowledge and skills, but they are responsible for teaching many hours a week. The poor economic position in which teachers find themselves prompts them to take additional employment (especially private teaching); thus constrained by work pressure and lack of time, they cannot concentrate on their work and learning activities in school. The pressure exerted by a central curriculum also affects how teachers work. Highly centralized curriculum leaves teachers with little time for their professional development. Another challenge is that there are many students in each class, which makes teaching and learning difficult.

4.2.1.5. Vanh

4.2.1.5.1. Biographical and Educational Background

Vanh is in his late 40s and married with 3 children. He was born in Salavanh Province. He attended primary school in Salavanh in 1968 until year 2 and then moved to Champasak Province because of the war. He continued his primary and secondary education in Champasak Province. After his secondary education, he traveled to Vientiane, the capital city of Laos, for his higher education. He received his Bachelor of Education degree, majoring in Teaching Mathematics and Physics, from Vientiane Pedagogical University (now the National University of Laos) in 1986. Upon completion of his degree, he returned to Champasak Province and started his career as a teacher at the Teacher Training College (TTC) until 1991. His wife is also a teacher, but she got her teaching qualification from the TTC so she teaches at a primary school in a remote village. They settled down there, which made it difficult for him to travel the long distance to teach at the TTC. For this reason, he had to move to teach at a secondary school, where he worked as Deputy Director as well as a head of the Natural Science Section of the school. With the decision of the Ministry of Education to set up a

university in Champasak Province, the government of Champasak Province had to appoint some teachers to undertake further studies in Vietnam. The purpose was to help Champasak Province in supporting human resources development of the university. Vanh was awarded one of scholarships so he was supported and sponsored to undertake his Master of Education degree, majoring in Mathematics, in Vietnam from 2001 to 2006.

4.2.1.5.2. Professional Development and Work Experience

Vanh started teaching in 1986, just after he graduated from Vientiane Pedagogical University. He taught at the TTC until 1991 and he moved to work at Banglien Secondary School where he not only taught Mathematics but was also the Deputy Director of the school and the Head Teacher of Natural Science Section (which includes Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology). After he received his Master's degree from Vietnam, he was assigned to work in Champasak University. Academically, he teaches in the Faculty of Education training student teachers, but in administration he also works as the Deputy Head of the Faculty of Engineering.

Vanh loves being a teacher. He said that this career is very honorable and respectful. He continued saying that *“I love being with students; I feel that I am like their second parent. They come to see me when they have problems. They come to see me when they have questions. Seeing them professionally grow is so great”* (Interview 27/10/2008). Even though he does administrative work in the Faculty of Engineering, he still teaches in the Faculty of Education and helps develop materials to train student-teachers there. The various experiences he has gained through his involvement in teaching, observing, policy making, planning, and implementing practical work are very important to help in finding and providing suitable strategies to train the student-teachers effectively.

Outside the classroom, Vanh is involved in a variety of activities intended to promote teachers' learning, a cooperative environment, and the development of the whole school. Vanh helped his colleagues improve their content knowledge in Mathematics. In the school, he has led different committees created to initiate improvement and facilitate ongoing activities, including periodic meetings with academic staff of the university,

liaising with the Field Education, and supervising assessment and resources development practices.

4.2.1.6. Phet

4.2.1.6.1. Biographical and Educational Background

Phet is in her 40s and married with 3 children. She was born and grown up in quite a big city – Sisattanak District, Vientiane Municipality. Her early background was not so difficult. Her father was a soldier, but her mother was a merchant. Her early education was quite complex in terms of the system because she started her primary education before Laos established the new regime, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) in 1975. Her first primary school was a private school where she finished only year 1 and 2. In 1975, she had to quit that private school and continued at the state school. However, in the public school, she had to start from year 1 again. These two schools were close to her house so she could walk to them. She continued her lower secondary education in the same neighborhood. Though she was not very good at her studies, she was a very hard-working student, and she was involved in many school activities (so she was always passed), and when she finished her lower secondary education, she was appointed to study abroad. However, she did not go because her parents thought that she was still too young to leave the family and live alone in another country where the environment is very different. As well, she wanted to study medicine or finance, but at that time those institutions only aimed to train officials who had already been working in those areas. So she decided to continue her upper secondary education. She still wanted to study medicine, but she was not strong in natural science. She was good in social science so she decided to further her higher education at Vientiane Pedagogical University, Department of Lao Language and Literature, and received her B.A in Education, majoring in Lao Language and Literature, in 1990.

4.2.1.6.2. Professional Development and Work Experience

After Phet graduated from Vientiane Pedagogical University, she started working as a teacher at Sisattanak Secondary School, in Vientiane. In fact, she did not want to be a teacher; instead she dreamt of being a doctor. Even as a teacher, she did not want to be a teacher of Lao Language and Literature; instead, she wanted to be a teacher of biology or

chemistry, but she did not do well in natural science subjects like biology, chemistry, or Mathematics. She mentioned that after the 4-year-period at Vientiane Pedagogical University, her attitude about being a teacher had been changed. She could find out what she was really fond of and good at. She explained that *“to help people is not necessary just to be a doctor as I believed when I was younger. I found that teachers are also great help and doctors learn from teachers”* (Interview23/06/2008). From her experience as a student learning from different teachers, she thought she would like to be a teacher. Still, she was quite frustrated and worried about teaching the first time in a class. After a few years teaching, her confidence has increased.

Even though she majored in Lao Language and Literature, she also helped teach Mathematics and Politics for the first year of secondary school for a few years. She has worked hard to upgrade herself, and she moved to teach at the upper secondary level. During that time, she had training on subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge as well as how to use course books.

Outside the classroom, Phet is involved, like Vanh, in a variety of activities intended to promote teachers' learning, a cooperative environment, and the development of the whole school. Phet assists the Head of the Faculty in management and administration. This work allows her to contribute to the improvement of the school's day-to-day management. It also provides her with the opportunity to interact with other teachers and share improvement ideas and strategies with them.

4.2.2. Phonxay Secondary School

4.2.2.1. Location and Physical Structure

Phonxay Secondary School is situated in the centre of Pakse District. It is easy for teachers and students to reach the school. There are many communities in the surrounding area, and students who live nearby can just walk to it. Because the school itself is not so large, its⁷ two-storey-buildings are quite crowded. However, it is comfortable, and many parents would like their children to have their secondary education there. It has two programs of secondary education. Both follow the National Education system, but they are different in terms of language of instruction. One of the

two uses French immersion as the language of instruction for most of the subjects except Lao Language.

4.2.2.2. Human Resources

There are 85 teachers in Phonxay Secondary school. However, only 22 have a bachelor's degree in Education, and most of them graduated from TTC (11+3 system). There are 6 classroom buildings and 1 office building with separate toilets. There are 44 classes of year one to year six: 9, 8, 7, 7, 7, 5, respectively; of which 14 classes are for two languages-instruction (3,3,2,2,2,2 respectively). Administratively, there is a director who is responsible for general administration of the school. The two deputy directors are responsible for the academic work and social activities of the school. The data are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Demographic Information about Phonxay Secondary School		
Students	Total Enrollment	1888 (Female 996)
	Average Class	50
Teaching Staff	Total	83 (Female 55)
	PhD	0
	Master's Degree	0
	Bachelor's Degree	22 (Female 10)
	Higher Diploma	58 (Female 8)
Administration	Certificate in Teaching	11 (Female 8)
	Director	1 (Female)
	Deputy Director	2
	Computer Assistance	3
	Librarian	3
	Administrative Staff	6
	Personnel Staff	2
Finance Staff	2	

Source: Phonxay Secondary School Academic Year 2007-2008 Report and 2008-2009 Plan

4.2.2.3. Improvement Story

Phonxay Secondary School was officially established in 1976. It was first built for the lower secondary level of education. There were only buildings for classrooms and offices, but not a library or any other facility. In 1999, it was upgraded to provide a complete system of secondary education (including lower and upper secondary

education), and the library, the computer rooms, and laboratory were added for staff and students.

The school is involved with the community around the school regarding school improvement, including improvement of the buildings and students' activities. The school staff holds discussions with parents in order to plan and solve problems with students' behavior or students' achievement so that they will become good children of the parents, good students in the school, and good citizens with knowledge. The community encourages parents to be physically and academically involved in all activities for school improvement.

Phonxay Secondary School is one of many good schools in Champasak Province, especially in Pakse District. The fact that students have performed very well in the examinations conducted by the Examination Board of the Educational Department of the province and the National Examination Board every year for the past three years shows its achievements. The students stood in first place. Many teachers are considered as being among the best teachers, especially my two participants.

There have been previous structural improvements and changes in the school academic activities. The significant structural improvements include construction of many new offices and classroom buildings; renovation of structural work, and provision of facilities. There are three directorate offices, three teachers' rooms, an administrative and academic office, and a meeting room. The school plans to build another 12 classroom-building in the following year. It also plans to remain one of the best schools in Champasak Province.

In terms of professional development, the school has annually organized workshop training for teachers. Also, teachers have been supported to take part in outside training organized by the Educational Department of the province. The leader of the school has supported teachers to work collaboratively with one another, so teachers work in teams or groups, observe one another, give feedback for improvement, share knowledge and experience, and help each other improve their practice.

4.2.2.4. Current Challenge

Since Phonxay Secondary School is a complete secondary school, it includes both lower and upper secondary level of education. There are many things that need to be improved at the school, including the development of teachers. Many teachers teaching at Phonxay Secondary School have only graduated from the Teachers' Training College, so they will have to improve and develop their professional knowledge and subject knowledge to be qualified to teach secondary school, especially at the upper level.

There are not enough facilities for learning in the school: three computer rooms, one laboratory for natural science, and one library room. There are some course books that students are able to rent at a very cheap price for reference and study, but there are not enough for every student.

Teachers still have economic problems that may prevent their full participation and involvement in activities relating to their teaching. Another challenge is that the student-teacher ratio is very high, so the classrooms are overcrowded and worn out.

4.2.2.5. Phai

4.2.2.5.1. Biographical and Educational Background

Phai is in his late 30s and married with 6 children. He was born in a hard-working family of 4 children and brought up in a suburb of Pakse District, Champasak Province. His father was a carpenter, and his mother was a gardener. He started his early education in 1979 and received his primary education at his village's primary school. He continued his lower secondary education in the surrounding region. Even though his family is not well off, he liked studying, and his parents always supported him. From his primary education onwards, he was always the best student in the class and in the school.

When he finished his lower secondary education, he did not continue his education at the upper secondary level, but he furthered his studies at vocational school for 6 years. He continued his education through the teacher education program at Pakse TTC. For the first 3 years there, he took system 8+3 as he was trained to be a primary school teacher. However, after graduation, he did not teach but continued his professional study at the same institution at a higher level for another 3 years. He graduated from Pakse TTC in 1993. He mentioned that he decided to have professional education earlier

because not only did he aspire to a career in teaching, but also he wanted to get job earlier so that he would be able to help his family. In fact, he should have started working as soon as he first graduated from TTC, but because of his hard work during his study there and the fact that he was the best student, he got promoted to further his professional study without any teaching experience after graduating.

4.2.2.5.2. Professional Development and Work Experience

During his studies from primary to secondary school, Phai was good at Mathematics. His Mathematics teacher's hard work, individual attention, and encouragement further strengthened his interest in the subject. By the time he entered college, Phai had developed sufficient confidence to study Mathematics at the Higher Diploma Level. In 1993, he completed his higher education in Education, majoring in Natural Science (Physics and Mathematics,).

After his graduation from TTC, he started working as a teacher at Phonxay Secondary School. He started his career teaching in the lower level of secondary education because at that time the school only offered the lower secondary level. His professional career as a teacher was influenced by many factors. Since he was always the best student in the class, he had been assigned to lead many classroom activities or practices ever since his primary education. This made him very proud, and he thought he would like to be a teacher. That is the reason he decided to further his education professional at the TTC just after he finished his lower secondary education. His parents also encouraged him to be a teacher. He stated that his father worked really hard as a farmer to support the family and that he did not want Phai to be like him but to work in better conditions. These perceptions created in him a deep sense of respect for the teaching profession.

According to Phai, professional and personal experiences and values are inseparable. He feels that his parents, teachers, and experiences in learning have profoundly affected his worldview. These feelings, in turn, influence his professional life as a teacher. He believes that a teacher's satisfaction is not necessarily tied to the material conditions (money, resources); instead it is a state of mind, the values and ethics of which are, to a large extent, under any teacher's control, provided that the teacher is determined

to live a simple life. Moreover, he loves teaching. He stated that teaching is a good service to humanity and a dignified source of livelihood. *“The present low status of teachers is not inherent in the teaching profession but results from teachers’ own behavior”* (Interview 03/6/2008). The prevalent working conditions in the school and its surroundings do not prevent him from carrying out his responsibilities in the manner he would like.

He began to enjoy teaching from his first day as a teacher without any stress or pressure. He stated that he was so confident teaching even for his first hour in the class because of his experiences when he was a student, when he always led class activities or practice instead of the teacher. Phai planned every aspect of his lessons in advance and tried out practical activities or experiments for teaching before carrying them out with students. These experiences helped increase his confidence in front of the students. He also enjoys his interaction with colleagues; at times, he finds his efforts rewarded by the resulting difference in students’ learning.

Phai has remained committed to various activities outside classroom that have aimed at the development of the whole school. He has undertaken various major assignments, including organizing special events, coordinating admissions, performing special duties for the school, supervising the practical component done by students in their final year, and marking examination papers.

4.2.2.6. Kham

4.2.2.6.1. Biographical and Educational Background

Kham is in her early 40s and married with 3 children. She was born in a family of 5 children. She grew up in a remote area of Khong District, Champasak Province, in a family with considerable difficulties. Her father passed away when she was 8 years old. She also had a difficult educational background. She had to move from place to place to finish her primary and secondary education. She received her the first two years of her primary education in one place, but when her father died, her family had to move and live in a new area and she had to continue her education there. When she went to lower secondary school, she had to leave her family and live with relatives, helping them work on the farm to earn some money for living and her studies. She also had to move to

another place and live with another relative for her upper secondary school. Even though her family is poor, she likes to study and she has been a hard-working person. She struggled to support herself and continue her studies even though there were no fees for her whole education (since they were all government schools). Kham finally managed to obtain her Secondary School Certificate with good grades. She was ranked between 1 and 20 for the upper secondary school leaving examination. When she finished her upper secondary school, she was appointed to study at Pakse TTC for 3 years (system 11+3) where she received her diploma in teaching, majoring in Lao Language and Literature, in 1990. She has been teaching at Phonxay Secondary School since then.

4.2.2.6.2. Professional Development and Work Experience

Kham has never thought of any other profession than being a teacher. She was happy to get trained for any career. She said that *“My family is poor, I am happy to work at whatever I was supported by the government”* (Interview 10/10/2008). As previously mentioned, Kham’s schooling was very difficult as she had to struggle with many problems. However, she managed and pushed herself to work harder. When she finished upper secondary school, she was among the top students and was selected to further her studies at Teachers’ Training College. After she graduated from TTC, she started teaching right away, but she has never given up improving herself in both subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. She has taken part in as many workshops as have been organized around Pakse District. She enjoys working with students, especially when she sees her students perform well in the National Examination Competition.

Support from the head teacher and senior teachers enabled her to develop confidence to cope with classroom management challenges and build a rapport with students. Kham believes that her temperament, her capacity to adapt to new situations, and her efforts to satisfy students were the major determinants of her success in coping. She learned about ways to deal with disruptive students. She focused on techniques of teaching that involved activities, practical work, and group work. In such difficult circumstances, she needed to work hard to keep on top of things.

Kham has many responsibilities in the school. She is responsible for tutoring advanced students who are going to participate in the competition examination both

locally and national. She has also been involved in social activities in the school community. For example, she was responsible for women's organization of the section and news agent of the school.

Like Phai, Kham mentioned that personal and professional experiences and values are inseparable. She also feels that her parents and teachers have powerfully influenced her worldview and that it, in turn, influences her professional life as a teacher.

4.3. Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced my research participants and their schools. It described the two schools, focusing on circumstances, such as structures, policies, and resources within the school. It sketched the four teacher-participants' biographies, emphasizing their education, training, work experiences, and their important life stories.

Being centrally located, the two educational institutions provide easy access to the students and staff. In local terms, these two institutions are moderately resourced; they are staffed by academically and professionally qualified head teachers and teachers. However, the student-teacher ratios differ between the two.

Phonxay Secondary School takes pride in its history. It is considered one of many good secondary schools in the district with a good track record of establishing and maintaining a climate conducive to reaching and learning.

The two educational institutions have recently made some progress in the following areas: improvement of physical structure (new construction, renovation); actions taken to improve students' academic results (tests at regular intervals, remedial teaching); development and utilization of teaching aids in the classroom: implementation of student-centered instruction.

Phonxay Secondary School has good reputation. Students have performed well in curriculum (e.g., one student held first place as tested by the provincial examination board for best students' performance and the first place within the national examination organized by the national examination board). Many graduates have had success in their personal lives and have made valuable contributions – as teachers, doctors, and in other occupations.

The two educational institutions differ in their history, organizational culture, need for material improvements, and the challenges they face in their struggles to initiate improvement and sustain it. The participants identified a few common hurdles standing in the way of moving their schools quickly toward improvement: institutional policies (e.g., externally controlled traditional examinations, mandatory coverage of the syllabus, lack of reinforcement of accountability, long seasonal vacations); lack of in-service professional development opportunities for teachers; physical conditions (e.g., inadequate facilities and resources – lack of examination halls, library resources rooms, toilets, sufficient classrooms, instructional resources, and books).

The participants' profiles reflect the experiences, personal stories, and circumstances and realities in their personal and professional lives. Their life histories and the present conditions in which they live influence how they operate in the classroom, school, and community. A closer look at the participants' profiles leads to the following general observations.

The participants have worked hard through their lives; they have endured difficulties (e.g., family economic problems) and challenges along the way to educate themselves, and they have made considerable sacrifices in life. Their identities as hard-working teachers and as productive, responsible members of their families and their communities are the result of their own efforts and the material and moral support and guidance they received from parents, family members, or teachers. Their families (parents, brothers and sisters) played a very important role for their education, the development of their habits, character, and self-image, and the realization of their dreams.

The participants cherish the memories of working with and learning from school or college teachers they liked. Their conception of teaching, especially their teaching experiences in the beginning, were profoundly influenced by these memories and by the image of the practices (hard work, friendly attitude, teaching, emphasis on understanding), mannerisms, and personal qualities of their favorite teachers. Their passions for and expertise in their subjects have thus been inspired by these teachers, as have their efforts to overcome the challenges associated with teaching. The memories of

their favorite teachers also helped them in managing instruction and coping with classroom management when they started teaching.

Of the four participants, Phet is the only one who did not prefer being a teacher as her profession. However, with the passing of time, and with no other choice, she developed a passion to learn to be a teacher and for the teaching profession and found teaching work rewarded. Phai, in contrast, had a great passion and respect for the teaching profession from the very beginning of his school life. All four teachers are now mostly satisfied with their jobs; their gratification comes their realization that teaching is a dignified source of income and a noble service to their community and to the society at large.

Teachers' professional development experiences including teachers' pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge of the subject matter have largely developed out of their experiences during their teaching careers. The professional development of teachers will be discussed in more detail in chapter 7.

CHAPTER FIVE: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE CLASSROOM

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents my participants' experiences in the classroom, a context where they have relative autonomy in applying, changing practice, and improving the conditions in which they work. They have tried to make the best of their work in the classroom in order to encourage their students' learning by trying something they believe to be better and different from what they experienced as students in the classroom. These teachers have attempted to initiate improvements in what students learn and how they learn it to meet the needs of the situation and forge a classroom environment that inspires and supports 'teaching for understanding.' However, they also believe that to increase students' learning in the situation in Lao education right now, teachers use many different techniques that include both traditional and new approaches to teaching.

The chapter begins with a description of the key attributes of teachers trying to reshape their classroom realities. It also outlines the improvements in which the teachers are most engaged in their classrooms. Next, the chapter elaborates on the teachers' conceptions of teaching for in-depth understanding, and then it moves to the teachers' academic efforts or strategies under three specific themes: general strategies to promote teaching for understanding, curriculum adaptation, and strategies to encourage student learning. The teachers try many ways to create a more relevant, engaging, enriched, and in-depth learning experiences.

The chapter also discusses the teachers' attempts to improve students' social behaviors by encouraging and reinforcing positive behavior, promoting positive ethical behaviors and moral virtues, improving students' social experience, and displaying friendly attitudes. The teachers apply specific strategies, to achieve these social goals and create a positive classroom climate, which is deeply connected to students' academic success.

5.2. Improving Classroom Realities: Teachers' Conceptions

From the data collected, it seems the participants' improvement efforts in the classroom focus on improving the academic and social realities of the traditional classroom by placing the students at the center of whatever activity they attempt in the classroom. They have tried to motivate and encourage students to be active, responsible participants in the learning process by having students involved in the activities of the classroom instead of being passive, subservient listeners.

These teachers have a progressive vision of educational improvement and student development as they help learners to acquire and interpret information, construct their own meanings, and develop appropriate skills and attitudes by having them participate in the activities. They understand that, traditionally, the teacher is an absolute authority and dictates ready made information based on control and hierarchy; however, they feel that teachers need to empower their students in classroom rules, procedures, decisions, and feelings of shared responsibility for what goes in the classroom. For example, through reflecting on problems of classroom life together, students are led to realize why rules are necessary; they have the chance to understand why they have particular rules and why they do things in particular ways.

Moreover, the teachers have tried to base their teaching on the principle that students do not learn only by coercion; they are also intrinsically motivated to create a socially and morally positive environment in the classroom and are interested in exploring with new materials. The teachers' efforts thus center on their desire to foster students' self-regulation so that students demonstrate positive social and moral behaviors and take greater responsibility in the learning process. The teachers attempts to avoid a unilateral form of action and encourage a cooperative form of action to enable students to develop understanding and follow the social and moral rules in the classroom so that they are not simply enforced by the teacher through coercive actions.

In Laos, covering the syllabus for the exam is the mainstay of traditional classroom instruction; in-depth understanding of the syllabus content receives little attention. As a result, students have little understanding of primary concepts and are unable to grasp advanced information in the given syllabus. However, the teachers have

tried to promote in-depth understanding as well as to ensure content coverage. They believe this enables students to take charge of their own learning, motivates students to become engaged in learning and learn more effectively, minimizes the students' memory load, and thus maximizes their ability to apply the acquired knowledge in new situations.

Traditionally, teaching is synonymous with transmission and equates learning with memorization of factual information from the textbooks or the teachers' lectures. However, teaching means creating an environment that is safe, enabling, and rich with opportunities for students' learning and development. The teachers need to facilitate understanding creatively by providing opportunities, means, and authority for students to interact with material, construct meaning, and explore knowledge by themselves and test their own understanding in order to take responsibility for their own learning. In the context of Lao education, participants mentioned that these two views of teaching are integrated in the teaching and learning practices. That is, in teaching many lessons, teachers might start with traditional ways of teaching and follow with some 'interactive student-centered' approaches to teaching and learning. They use traditional ways of teaching owing to the reality of the classroom: a large number of students in one class, not enough materials, not enough facilities to support teaching and learning. On the other hand, the teachers also understand that education is not merely preparing students for examinations and helping them to obtain high grades but is important for the overall development of the students. Education is a lifelong process. In a rapidly changing world, education should equip the graduate with appropriate skills, values, and powers of reasoning that will facilitate his or her adaptation to the changing world. The teachers adapted approaches to teaching curriculum content that went beyond just dispensing information. They recognized the need to teach in response to individual students' learning styles and to take advantage of students' existing knowledge or understanding of the subject; exploring students' prior knowledge and building upon it constitutes the core of these teachers' instruction.

5.3. Teachers' Conception of Teaching for Understanding

Improving students' academic achievement involves the different instructional strategies and ways through which the teachers try to create a more relevant,

encouraging, enriched, and in-depth leaning experience with the goal of ‘teaching for understanding.’ The theme of ‘academic improvement’ comprises how the teachers try to approach this goal. The key elements of this improvement include curricula and instruction (e.g., teaching strategies, testing, and evaluation) that are intended to facilitate students’ leaning of concepts in different subjects.

Teachers concerned about students’ understanding of the concepts in various curriculum subjects attempted not only to transmit textbook knowledge and facts but also to focus on the learners’ active engagement in the learning process. They intended to nurture students’ curiosity, develop their critical thinking and analytical skills, and promote conceptual learning. To do so, the teachers attempt to combine different methods, including discussion, demonstration, question-answer, inductive or deductive reasoning, and discovery. This kind of teaching also involves using different activities and appropriate teaching aids, using groups, and making teaching relate to daily life.

Kham understands that learning goes beyond the mere acquisition of information from textbooks or class lectures by linking classroom learning to physical phenomena outside the classroom and applying the knowledge to changing situations. Seeking understanding requires the learners to follow through in real-life situations, making connections between their experiences inside the classroom and the realities of the outside physical world. Similarly, Phet emphasizes that understanding a concept requires the learner to understand both the individual parts and how they come together to create a system. Thus, to understand a topic, the learner needs to have a deep comprehension of all the primary ideas or sub-concepts involved in the formation of a concept. Phet’s perception of learning subject matter with understanding implies that the learner can offer reasons and explanations, make connections, and relate subject matter to the actual physical environment.

Likewise, Kham always tries to encourage her students to learn critically, saying that *“I always tell my students that the focus of the examination is very little on the definition but more on expressing ideas or explanations so I get them practiced to do so in the classroom and also provide them with homework”* (Interview 27/102008), Moreover, Vanh insisted that the education system does not promote scientific thinking

(thinking deeply, examining situations, and deriving answers) among learners. He mentioned that he himself lacks these habits and skills because he was not exposed to a learning environment that helped to promote critical thinking, nurture the inquisitive mind, or foster habits of inquiry in the learner (Interview 10/102008).

Moreover, Phai emphasizes the teacher's central role in creating a classroom environment that inspires learners to interact independently with the material in order to nurture their mental capabilities. He also highlights the need for instructional practices that help students engaging in thinking, inquiry, and discovery-oriented learning, which he believes are essential tools for promoting a deep understanding of subject matter. He commits himself to teaching not in the way that he was taught but in the way that he believes promotes in-depth understanding and optimal learning. He argues that

Our education system used to be based on memorization, and lecturing without regard to critical thinking, so I have tried to include elements of discovery, demonstration, and discussion or question-answer in learning which I believe are important techniques in promoting students' understanding. (Interview 28/10/2008)

These reflections show that there are many similarities among the concepts of pedagogy that teachers hold. They understand that learning a subject is more than the mere acquisition of new information or the simple memorization of available definitions and formulas. It is a dynamic cognitive process that requires learners' active engagement such as relating ideas and information, constructing meaning, defining phenomena operationally, deriving formulas, creating hypotheses, thinking, conducting inquiry, forming opinions or constructing personal meanings, reasoning, making connections, applying knowledge, and relating the concepts to examples in real situations.

A wide range of instructional techniques or pedagogical tactics that have been tried by teachers in their classrooms and grouped into general techniques to promote teaching for understanding, curriculum adaptation, and strategies to encourage students' learning are discussed in the following section.

5.3.1. General Techniques to Promote Teaching for Understanding

5.3.1.1. Highlighting Key Points

Each subject contains a few key ideas or points that the students need to master in order to deeply understand the concept. Teachers mentioned that students fail to gain a deeper understanding of a concept because they cannot figure out the key ideas. In their efforts to promote conceptual understanding, the teachers attempted to reinforce students' knowledge of these ideas or concepts by stressing key points and drawing students' attention to important information.

The teachers intervene whenever possible in order to draw students' attention to key ideas or to resolve confusion by asking questions, asking for further elaboration or explanation, and sometimes challenging the students to defend the argument by providing reasons or evidence. For example, in one Lao Literature lesson, Kham assigned students to work in groups to present their work. She then asked follow-up questions and asked for further elaboration to check whether they understood the concepts or were just copying from the textbook. Similarly, in a Mathematics lesson, Phai had a student carry out a mathematical calculation on the board. In each step, he stopped the student and checked with others to find out whether or not the student had performed the step correctly (Observation field note 30/10/2008).

The teachers also pointed out that students sometimes try to hide their problems, pretending that they know the answer or can perform a task. Deep probing can reveal the conceptual gaps or problems facing these students. The teachers then focus especially on the students whom they know have a tendency to shy away from divulging their learning difficulties or asking questions. To some extent, this probing helps students articulate their knowledge of the topic, which in turn helps to improve their understanding and prolong their retention.

5.3.1.2. Relating to Students' Prior Knowledge

Prior knowledge refers to the ideas, views, conceptions, information, and experiences students have about particular concepts or phenomena before being exposed to new academic knowledge. The teachers consider learning to be a developmental process in which earlier experiences provide the foundation for making sense of later ones. They believe that individual learners construct knowledge through an interaction

between what they already know and new experiences. They all find out that the students' background knowledge is essential in building up students' understanding.

Kham tries to link students' prior knowledge to a new concept. She considers this linkage central to promoting conceptual learning. She mentions that *“if students' prior understanding of a concept is probed, it helps a great deal in fostering deeper understanding of the subject matter”* (Interview 30/10/2008). Similarly, Vanh also acknowledges the importance of students' prior knowledge, which can help build up their understanding of the concept. He indicates that *“It is highly desirable to consider how I can make a connection between new and prior knowledge of subject matter and how the connections can variously support or confound students' acquisition of new knowledge and understanding”* (Interview 1/11/2008). Phet sees prior knowledge as a fundamental contributor in shaping new learning, saying that *“with the appropriate teaching strategies, students can gain deeper understanding through interactions between new knowledge and previous knowledge of the concept that students possess”* (Interview 29/10/2008). In addition, reflecting on one of his instructional decisions during a Mathematics lesson, Phai tried to build on what students already knew about the topic by eliciting responses, discussing what they know (previous knowledge) about the subject matter, and connecting it with their new academic knowledge.

While exploring their prior knowledge, the teacher does not merely focus on the students' knowledge of the concepts but, rather, on how it is connected to the cultural, social, or domestic knowledge they possess or believe. Teachers underscore the need for valuing students' ideas, conceptions, opinions, experiences, and knowledge and linking them with a new knowledge or experiences. Such perceptions of a phenomenon that students bring to the classroom need to be valued and explored prior to presenting expert knowledge to them. To carry out their exploration, teachers may use, as one example, a brainstorming technique.

5.3.1.3. Using Examples

The participants' concern for the understanding of their students, especially with abstract concepts, requires them to search for more effective strategies of communicating information and helping students to make cognitive links in order to organize information

in their minds. They pointed out that some concepts are very abstract; if they are not introduced with concrete examples, they will remain abstract. Given concrete examples, students can more easily grasp what concepts are all about. It has been widely recognized that the appropriate use of examples relevant to the topic can produce good results in the classroom in terms of students' enhanced understanding of subject-matter knowledge. The teachers explained why giving examples is very important to promote understanding and help students overcome conceptual difficulties. For example, Vanh asserted that "*I always give examples to the given situation. I believe that when we provide proper examples from real life, students can understand unfamiliar abstract concepts easier*" (Interview 1/11/2008). Phai provided similar reasons and showed the importance of the use of analogies or examples in his teaching. He mentioned that

I can imagine that when I was a student I found it very difficult to understand a concept if there was no analogies and examples from daily life for such concrete concepts. Therefore, it is very important that we, teachers, need to know about how students pick and understand the concepts. (Interview 28/10/2008)

These reflections show that using analogies and examples are important strategies to promote students in-depth understanding.

5.3.1.4. Using Deductive Learning

Some concepts are very abstract; they need to be introduced with concrete examples. Teachers emphasize learners' self-construction of scientific definitions by giving more concrete examples. They insist that by giving concrete examples from the physical world, students can easily grasp the concept. They believe that memorizing ready-made definitions from textbooks or a teacher's notes may deprive students of productive mental engagement with the concept. Reflecting on specific lessons, they mention that the problem they faced was students' relying on the book definition rather than paying adequate attention to the ideas, reasons, situations, and facts underlying the phenomenon. Phai says:

Students believe that memorization of a definition is the only way to learn a concept; they have no idea of alternate ways to learn scientific definitions. When they memorize, they forget easily. I do not offer ready-made definitions; rather, my first priority is to take students through examples and processes to derive meaning from given information. Students work through simple examples and

construct their own definitions. In this way my students easily understand the material and actively participate in the lesson. (Interview 27/10/2008)

Phai points out that in traditional classrooms, students do not learn definitions and concepts deductively but through rote memorization. As a result, these students lack the ability to commit the information to long-term memory. A short retention period is the inherent disadvantage of learning concepts through memorization. As an alternative, Phai helps students to construct scientific definition themselves deductively by working through multiple examples.

5.3.1.5. Promoting Mixed Ability Cooperative Working Group

The teachers also encourage their students to work cooperatively with their friends in order not only to help each other but also to help build up their confidence. This method will also help integrate learning positive social and moral behavior with learning academic content. The cooperative working strategy they usually apply involves students working in pairs or in groups. I observed that my participants sometimes set students to work in a group to complete the tasks assigned or had them do pair work or group work before the whole class discussion. Students feel more secure talking within the group than with the whole class. For example, in Lao Literature, Kham assigned her students to work in groups to read the story and report to the class. She did the same in Lao Language. She suggested that one representative from each group present what they discovered within their group. For example, students worked in groups to discuss tenses in Lao Language. Different groups were responsible for different tenses. In doing so they had to work out how each tense is used and provide as many examples as they could (Observation field note 27/10/08).

Phet also assigned project work for students to do. In this case, students could not only work cooperatively with each other to complete the task but also learn to search for information by themselves. She asserted that *“This activity or task encourages students to work harder on their own time by discovering information themselves. This also promotes their independent learning, self-confidence, and decision making.”* (Interview 29/10/2008)

5.3.1.6. Question-Answer Technique

Another important aspect of the lesson is its high interactivity: the teacher frequently asks question, probes, requests reasons, and challenges students' knowledge, judges their capacity for absorbing knowledge, encourages discussion, and provides opportunities for observation and explanation.

In the interviews, the participants also pointed out that in order to encourage students' cognitive thinking, they always use the question-answer technique together with other techniques. By providing questions, the teachers would also be able to discover students' thinking and how much they understood. Good questions would help students develop or think critically to discover the answer so that they would be able to grasp the knowledge by themselves. For example, after Phai introduced a new concept by using examples or by using teaching aids, he also would use question-answer techniques. He mentioned that

Using question-answer technique is necessary in teaching and learning Mathematics. Teachers would be able to find out from answer from students not only what they think but also how much students understand the lesson. Good questions will help students develop their cognitive thinking until they would be able to find out the answer. (Interview 28/10/2008)

Vanh also asserted that raising questions was very important, especially for the student-teachers, to demonstrate for them how they can help students critically learn. He mentioned that

I always address the importance and the necessity of using of questions in teaching and demonstrate appropriate questions that can be used in teaching Mathematics. Teachers need to use questions to create or encourage students' interests in the lessons. Questions can be used in all parts of the lessons and be combined with any other strategies in teaching. The purposes of using questions are not only for students to answer the questions, but also lead them to build up their critical thinking by noticing, discovering or analyzing. (Interview 10/10/2008)

In the Lao Literature subject, both Phet and Kham always use questions to elicit the information from students when they tell stories. They emphasized that they used questions to get students to pay attention and follow the lessons, to encourage students to use their imagination and make predictions, and to make students actively participate in the lesson.

5.3.2. Curriculum Adaptation: To Promote Teaching for Understanding

Teachers use ‘curriculum adaptation’ to support academic improvement by extending opportunities for learning (knowledge, ideas, and experiences) beyond the textbook and moving beyond the traditional ways of mediating between academic knowledge and learners. In the context of these teachers’ classrooms, curriculum adaptation is intended to broaden and deepen students’ understanding of curricular concepts. Teachers also pursue curriculum adaptation –evaluating, adapting, and altering existing curriculum practices by including or excluding subject material, by relating the material to local experience, or by expanding /adding outside information. The following are common strategies that teachers used in adapting the curriculum.

5.3.2.1. Adapting Learning Material to Individual Differences/Needs

The data show that some students did not participate in the activities, so teachers have tried their best to get every student involved in the lesson by making activities interesting. They also work with individual students in order to understand their needs, strengths, problems, and weaknesses so that they willingly participate in the lesson. Phai mentioned that, “*when individual students are involved in the lesson, they not only learn content knowledge better but also increase their ability to learn content and develop new skills and attitudes*” (Interview 28/10/2008). He also expressed the need to adapt learning materials to capture the interest of all students. He said that:

The fast learners quickly understand the instruction, are quick to perform the assigned tasks and need more challenging tasks while slow learners take more time; and need the instruction to be repeated and demonstrated. To get every student interested and participating in the lessons, I usually prepare different tasks to meet the needs and the situation of both slow and fast learners. (Interview 28/10/2008)

Vanh also pointed out that for student-teachers, a variety of different tasks are needed. These will not only help to give them practiced mentally but also demonstrate to them how they are able to adapt the learning materials so that when they graduate they will be able to provide more interesting tasks than just follow the tasks in the course book (Interview 10/10/2008).

5.3.2.2. Providing Additional Information/Material

The information in the textbook is often limited and does not help students to gain insight into the diverse aspects of the concepts. Providing additional materials, examples, or information is important to promote teaching for understanding and encourage in-depth learning. For example, Phai mentioned that he always prepares additional examples or exercises so that students will be able to practice more than the exercises available in the textbook. He said that,

There are only one or two examples or exercises provided in the course book, so I have to work harder to prepare more exercises to give students practice both inside and outside the classroom. The other thing is that it is boring to just follow the examples or exercises in the textbook especially for more advanced students. (Interview 28/10/2008)

Similarly, Vanh indicated that,

It is not interesting to just follow the course book. I rarely use the textbook during my teaching. I only use the content and prepare my own examples or exercises for them to get practice in the class. Students can learn it from the textbook individually or with friends in their own time comparing what they have learned in the classroom. I also use exercises written in other languages, such as Thai and Vietnamese. (Interview 1/11/2008)

Moreover, Kham also work hard to prepare more materials for her teaching. She asserted that

Even covering the syllabus for the exam is the mainstay of the classroom instructions, but the content of the examination is not only directly transferred from textbook, but also related additional information especially for composition writing for both Lao Language and Literature subjects. In this case, I need to prepare extra information to use in my teaching. For example, some topics may be related to environmental problems, the negative effects of drug abuse, or addictions. (Interview 29/10/2008)

In addition, Phet provided similar reasons for providing additional material in her teaching. She said that

One important task that students need to do in learning Lao Literature is to analyze the character of the story. In this case, students need to read many other stories and practice to do the task. However, there is only one example story in the textbook so I have to prepare more and ask students to find others themselves. For example, in the course book, some of the characters in different stories are mentioned, I need to prepare the related stories, provide them the information or

ask them to find stories as additional information to promote their understanding.
(Interview 29/10/2008)

5.3.2.3. Relating or Expanding the Context to the Daily Activity/Environment

Some of the teachers' efforts at curriculum adaptation are concerned with linking curriculum knowledge to the students' existing experience in the local environment, including local material, food, fruits, stories, beliefs, and practices. For example, in teaching the Lao Language, Kham and Phet have compared the usage of the local language with other regions in the country. This technique helped students relate the concept of local environment and aroused their curiosity and interest. Kham and Phet have tried to promote deeper understanding of the topic by matching it with students' interests and with the larger social or environmental context.

Both Phai and Vanh also emphasize the importance of using examples of daily life activities or environment in teaching and learning Mathematics. Vanh insisted that apart from using a question-answer method, group work, teaching aids, or discovery method to encourage understanding in learning Mathematics, using examples of daily life is a very effective way of teaching because students not only learn Mathematics but also recognize its importance and its usage in daily life. He said that "*If each lesson relates to daily activity, it will help students learn Mathematics more effectively because Mathematics is used in many areas, for example, economics, marketing, banking, trading, industry, and architecture*" (Interview 1/11/2008). Phai also mentioned that

The importance of relating the Mathematics lesson to the daily life activity makes students like to learn Mathematics more. It also helps disadvantaged students imagine the content of it so that they are able to understand it easier. They are also able to understand the abstract concepts easier. It can be said that from what they see or use daily becomes something that they have practice in the class so they learn it more effectively. (Interview 28/10/2008)

The teachers' efforts toward curriculum adaptation explain the ways in which they attempt to structure learning experiences and opportunities for students in their classes beyond the planned curriculum. Their improvements strive to adapt curricular material to reflect the kinds of experiences, knowledge, attitudes, and abilities that students need to acquire, learn, and develop. The teachers try to adapt curricular subject matter by providing additional examples or information; they also attempt to relate the

curricular content to the local environment so that curriculum knowledge reflects a broad range of the regional culture, geographic, and economic realities. By applying these strategies, they try to ensure that the knowledge they present sufficiently connects to the students' interests and developmental needs.

5.3.3. Strategies to Encourage Students' In-Depth Learning

5.3.3.1. Responding to Individual Differences

Students differ in their interests, motivations, learning styles, values, and capabilities. These differences present teachers with the challenge of adapting instruction or learning materials for them. The teachers need to devise strategies and create a positive social and moral climate in the classroom to enable all the individual students to participate in and benefit from the learning opportunities the teachers create. The strategies the participants usually use to deal with issues pertaining to classroom diversity include: adapting learning materials to individual needs, providing remedial support to individual students, using mixed ability cooperative working groups, and using rewards as a motivator.

5.3.3.2. Using Rewards as a Motivation Technique

In any class, there may be students who are passively participating: not paying much attention to their learning, lacking interest, or not putting in a desirable effort. The participants showed that they used the technique of rewarding to encourage students' positive attitudes or efforts. They focused on problematic students to identify the problem they faced in understanding the subject matter. They set targets for individual students, provided guidance when needed, and rewarded students when they reached a target goal. For example, in the Mathematics lesson, I observed Phai reward his students with scores when doing exercises in the class. He said that

I give scores when students can do the task as my reward technique. Giving marks to students encourages students to get more involve and participate in the lesson. I also some times give assigned tasks for student to complete and hand in the next day, but the tasks are varied and related to the ability of each student. That is I give the task to the better or advanced students different from the less advanced or poorer students. (Interview 28/10/2008)

5.3.3.3. Articulating High Expectation

The teachers in this study have talked to their students and openly articulate their hopes and optimism. They have informed students that everyone is capable of learning if they have paid attention to the instruction and believe in their ability. Students should understand that no one is inherently incapable of learning concepts; instead, their difficulty in learning lies in their lack of effort. For example, Phet discusses her high expectation with students, reminding them that they can accomplish any challenging task in the classroom provided that they commit themselves to hard work.

Some students may have both academic and socioeconomic problems; for example, they do not have enough material to support their learning. Kham used the examples of her own stories when she was a student to show students how she solved problems she faced, believing that stories and events help students reflect on ways to cope with difficult situations and explore their creative energies. Similarly, Phai explained to his students how he has come to believe in their power to comprehend concepts and told about his personal experience, which he said prove to be a watershed in transforming his expectations of students.

Vanh contended that if students cannot perform any assigned task, it is inappropriate to blame them for being unable to cope with learning; the pedagogical approaches and strategies teachers adopt towards dealing with students should be held responsible. Provision of the right conditions should help students develop positive habits and enhance their cognitive abilities.

The teachers' reflections suggest that articulating their students' expectations is essential. They are optimistic about the abilities of students. They show empathy and express their appreciation for students' efforts despite the difficulty they face. They were more patient and persistent in trying to improve students' self-image. They believe that if students' expectations are high, they will pay more attention to their study.

5.3.3.4. Sharing Personal Experiences

The teachers have had their own experiences of learning subject matter in different subjects in school. Introspectively, the teachers tried to make their personal learning experiences and stories accessible to their students. They highlight the way in

which they acquired information, made cognitive connections, constructed knowledge structures, strengthened retention, and consolidated understanding. They discussed with students their own unique ways of grappling with the difficulties of learning content knowledge in the many school subjects.

For example, during the Lao Language and Literature course, Phet shared with the class the story of how she improved her own knowledge about Lao Literature by reading. She insisted that she could assess students' problems better if she looks at them from the students' perspectives by reflecting on her own experience as a learner.

Reflecting on students' problems, Kham noted that students frequently do not ask the teacher questions about their confusions and difficulties. She said that when students did not speak out, the teacher could not get feedback about the kind of help they need. To deal with this situation, Kham used the strategy of probing deeply into her own experiences as a learner.

Teachers' reflections on how their personal experiences as learners contribute to shaping their pedagogical behavior and influence how they analyze students' problems and find ways to help students overcome those problems. Teachers recognize that students are different, contexts vary, and situations differ. Therefore, any strategy that could help them in their own unique learning situation may not necessarily work in other situations; they need to make adjustments and adaptations to fit their old experiences into new situations.

5.3.3.5. Building Students' Confidence and Fostering a Sense of Responsibility

The teachers intend to build learners' confidence. They insisted that if students were confident, they were more likely to participate and get involved in the lesson. Generally speaking, students are afraid of making mistakes: they are afraid of losing face, and they are shy if they make mistakes. Vanh stated that "*Students' self-confidence is critically important in their success in education, career and the life that follows. I try to provide students with opportunity for interaction and self-expression; this, I believe, is an effective way to develop their self-confidence*" (Interview 1/11/2008).

Phet also addressed the importance of building students' confidence and stated that *"I try to be open, friendly and systematic in my formal and informal interactions with students inside and outside the classroom. The aim is to help students develop their self-confidence"* (Interview 29/10/2008).

Besides the teachers' intent to build learners' confidence, they also foster a sense of responsibility to promote a congenial, enabling, and collaborative learning climate in the classroom so that their students become active participants. They believe that if students are responsible, they play a key role in their learning, education, and development. Students' academic and social development depends on how much they are responsible for what they do. When students begin to develop a sense of self-responsibility, they can advance more quickly in academic learning and in developing social skills.

Vanh also points out that the entire process of making students autonomous learners involves the teacher's efforts toward building students' confidence, enhancing their prior knowledge, enabling them to cope with difficulties, and steadily shifting responsibility for learning to them. He found transition from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction difficult. Both he and students encountered difficulties, uncertainties, and setbacks on the journey to implement student-centered learning. For example, initially the students strongly resisted taking responsibility for their own learning. He constantly encouraged them to perform the learning task independently. He helped the students overcome the fear that they might be held accountable if they made mistake in learning (e.g., solving mathematical problems, answering the teacher's questions, or interacting with peers).

Kham echoed these ideas when she described her experiences of adapting student-centered learning strategies in her classroom. She finds its implementation easier said than done. She says that teacher-centered pedagogy is generally believed to be relatively easy, simple, and straightforward compared to student-centered learning, which demands more time, higher motivation, good planning, better learning materials, and more supporting activities.

The teachers' reflections suggest that the transition from simple and straightforward lecturing to student-centered learning is difficult. It is compounded by limitations of time, motivation, confidence, teaching resources, and other factors. However, these challenges are surmountable when students demonstrate confidence and responsibility in interacting with the teacher and with the learning environment. The teachers believe that their students are inherently as capable as students anywhere but that they simply lack background and confidence. They needed extra assistance and encouragement to reinforce their positive self-image so that with enhanced confidence these positive self-image students become deeply engaged in learning. They worked hard to develop students' confidence and build strong personal relationships with students.

5.3.3.6. Advising Students How to Learn

Participants spoke of many strategies and techniques to encourage students' learning, and advising students how to learn is also very important. They mentioned that most students pay much more attention to their learning just before the examination period. From my observation, Phet had explained to her student-teachers in her Literature class that

To expand your understanding you need to read more stories because you need more examples to compare to what you have been provided in the class. If you do not read more outside the classroom, you will have limited knowledge of the subject matter and when you are teaching you will not have a variety of examples to support your explanations or give examples to students"(Observation field note 29/10/2008).

Similarly, Kham also gave similar advice to her students at Phonxay Secondary School. She mentioned that *"I always suggest to my students that, in order to get higher marks in the exam, students need to continuously learn and need to expand their knowledge of subject matter by reading more"* (Interview 30/10/2008). Phai always demonstrated how students should solve mathematical problems instead of just memorizing the rules. He also explained to his students that *"One way to promote your understanding is to critically analyze the information, for example, when you have solutions to any Mathematics problem, you need to critically think why this is the solution, why not that way?"* (Observation field note 30/10/2008).

Participants also mentioned that they had tried to persuade students not to memorize the information from textbooks. Phet also showed her students that *“to critically read the story, you need to imagine the story as long as you read, put yourself in the story, be part of the character in the story, then summarize the important events, analyze the story including main characters”* (Observation field note 29/10/2008).

Vanh strongly advocated increasing students’ academic achievement by providing advice about how to learn effectively. He said that *“to master the knowledge, students need to know how to learn. It is useless to just spend many hours on their own teaching if they do not know how to learn”* (Interview 1/11/08).

The teachers also provided students with the opportunity to learn different types of information through different medium, for example, TV programs, magazines, and newspapers instead of just from the teacher and the textbooks. This process was meant to provide the students with alternate learning experiences in order to broaden their understanding of an important curricular topic with important real-world implications.

5.3.4. Summary

Given the current situation in classrooms in Pakse District and Champasak Province, for both teachers’ and students’ promoting conceptual understanding in subject areas is a task easier to agree with than to do. However, the teachers have tried to use different approaches or strategies in order to respond to individual students’ learning needs or styles in order to help them better understand the subject matter. The teachers are aware that in response to the complex task of improving students learning and improving realities of classrooms, they need to adapt approaches to teaching curriculum content to their students that go beyond just transferring information. They understand that deeper understanding is produced by meaningful mental engagement of the learner, which, in turn, is linked with the wider context of teaching and learning. They have tried out their own unique remedial tactics and instructional strategies in order to engage students in interactive learning and assist them to grapple with their conceptual difficulties in grasping the subject matter. They are very much grounded in their personal experiences as learners and resulting intuitive understanding of ways through which to help students form conceptual structure, construct meaning, and make connections.

Another strategy involves building students' understanding upon their knowledge, ideas, conceptions, and experiences. The teachers' efforts to value and explore students' prior knowledge and use it as a basis to help students construct an understanding of new knowledge are grounded in their expectations of students and in the theories they hold about student learning and development.

Moreover, in their efforts to enhance students' learning, the participants need to combine knowledge or information provided in the textbooks and adapt the curriculum by providing additional information, exposing students to new ideas and experiences, offering explanations and insights from their own experiences, and probing and prompting students' experiences. In this way, the teachers have tried to help students understand the relationship between what they learn from textbooks and their knowledge and experiences of the real world. These are multiple ways and means through which teachers can make knowledge and experiences relevant, comprehensible, and interesting for the learners.

In addition, the teachers understand that a deeper approach to learning (cognitive engagement) is more likely to occur when the students are motivated, more confident in their abilities to learn, and ready to accept responsibility for their own learning. Teachers also feel that students' success depends on how much they are responsible for what they do. When students begin to develop a sense of self-responsibility, they can more quickly advance in academic learning and in developing learning skills. In the effort to change students, they tried to foster in them a strong sense of self-responsibility. The teachers' reflections show that they highly value building students' confidence and strengthening their sense of responsibility.

5.4. Improving Students' Social Behavior

The data show that teachers intended to create positive a psychosocial environment, which is not only important on its own but is also connected to teaching for understanding. This comprises the relationships between teachers and students, including the expectations, norms, and behaviors involved. They believe that students' improved academic learning is positively related to academic motivation, which in turn is linked with the classroom psychosocial environment. The teachers would characterize a positive

psychosocial environment as one in which the students know, help, and are supportive of one another, and the teachers help, befriend, trust, and take an interest in the students; the students take an interest in the lesson and actively participate in activities and discussions; the students are encouraged to engage in inquiry and problem solving; the students are helped to express their views and explain or justify them to other students; the teachers treat the students equally; the teachers try to connect classroom learning with the students' out-of-school experiences; and the teachers involve the students in creating and controlling the learning environment.

The data suggest that these teachers try to find as many ways as possible to achieve their goals, customarily using several strategies, for example, encouraging and reinforcing positive behavior, promoting positive ethical behavior and moral values, involving students in social experiences, and displaying a friendly attitudes.

5.4.1. Encouraging and Reinforcing Positive Behavior

Reinforcement is important in teaching and learning because the teachers believe that if students' actions or what they have done is accepted and praised, they are motivated to learn. The teachers see encouragement and positive feedback as a precondition for boosting students' morale, building confidence, stimulating motivation, and creating a sense of responsibility. While observing them in the classroom, I recognized that these teachers made conscious efforts to encourage students and provide them with constructive feedback. For example, Phai usually commended students' work "Correct," and "Well done." Likewise, in Lao Literature, Kham reinforced her students by asking them to present the stories in their own words and understanding. When a student retells what he or she read, she asked others whether the student had present from his/her recollection or from the textbook. This reflection highlights the importance of teachers' encouraging and reinforcing behavior as an essential element in boosting students' morale and creating a positive classroom climate.

5.4.2. Promoting Positive Ethical Behavior and Moral Values

Positive ethical behaviors and moral virtues are what constitute a person's character, which is the mainstay of educating young people and preparing them for life in the real world. Teachers may not achieve the instructional goals until they balance the

development of academic competency with building positive ethical behaviors and fostering moral virtues among students. To address this issue, teachers pointed out that they give direct input on ethics and model a positive behavior to students at all times. Direct input refers to the actions the teachers take in the classroom to foster positive behavior and moral virtues among students. Their direct input normally involves focused classroom discussion with students about certain behaviors and emphasizing morality in routine informal conversation with students. Of course, this direct input is not enough; teachers need also model positive behavior.

The participants believe that they are role models for their students in many aspects. They model positive social behavior (e.g., cooperation, cleanliness, punctuality) and moral values (e.g. honesty, fairness, and keeping one's promises). Teachers are students' second parents; they may follow how teachers behave, so it is important that teachers need to look characteristically and personally good to model for their students. Direct input and modeling go together. They pointed out that if teachers want students to be disciplined; teachers must discipline themselves.

5.4.3. Involving Students in Social Experience

Teachers strive inside and outside the classroom to help nurture positive attitudes, good habits, understanding, and social skills in students. The most significant evidence is that teachers get students involved in different activities of the school. For example, in the classroom, there are many duties or roles that students need to be responsible for some of which are leadership roles such as head of the classroom, two deputy heads, head of mass organizations (Youth Organization, Women's Organization, and Trade Union), leading roles in each subject. To get people to be responsible for each of these, the teachers hold student elections. Other responsibilities that students have include cleaning, playing sports, and taking part in social events organized by the school, district, or province. Phai told me that he gets students involved in volunteer work organized by the school. (This activity will be discussed further in Chapter 6)

5.4.4. Displaying a Friendly Attitude

The participants described a "friendly attitude" as their greatest strength in building rapport with students and in building their confidence to engage in learning

happily. From my observation, teachers locate their efforts to expose students to an open, friendly, and interactive climate. Kham explained that,

When I was a student, I was afraid and did not feel safe to try out my ideas because each time when I had wrong information, the teacher never showed the encouragement of what I had tried. Instead the teacher sometimes blamed what I did. To me, this seemed to be limit to students' total development and not preparing students for real life and for the future opportunities and the challenges, or not providing them with the desire to continue learning and self-improvement. (Interview30/10/2008)

Similarly, Phai mentioned that

I am worried if some of my students do not happily engage in learning and I always try to find out causes or problems by friendly and openly talking with them to help them, sometimes individually in their free time. (Interview 28/10/2008)

Vanh also indicated that

Using encouraging and inspiring language, encouraging students in individual and group assignments, providing necessary help with the assignment, posing challenging questions, and giving positive oral or written feedback on students' work" (Interview 1/11/2008).

The data suggest that the teachers' sense of humor and friendly attitude is manifest in various behaviors and actions; for instance, they use humor or jokes as a pedagogical technique to stimulate motivation and reduce classroom anxiety. For example, Phet joked about the personality of different characters in the story she told comparing with students in the classroom (Observation field note 29/10/2008).

5.4.5. Summary

The teachers recognize that improvement in students' self-regulation and social behaviors in the classroom are both important on their own and connected with academic improvement. In-depth understanding of subject matter does not result from any single factor; rather, it is promoted or inhibited by a variety of academic and social factors in the classroom. In their teaching, the teachers focus on creating and nurturing a positive social and moral climate. This requires them to move away from the traditional controlling, authoritarian way of dealing with students, toward a more friendly, flexible, and democratic approach.

The important social aspect of the classroom involves encouraging morals, ethical behavior, and virtues the teachers want their students to exhibit. They attempt to instill these principles by presenting themselves as role models of good social and ethical practices. They also try to create a context in which they can reflect on ethics together with their students and help students develop an appreciation of important ethical principles or moral virtues. The teachers also create a friendly atmosphere in the classroom, which they believe contributes to the improvement of students' academic performance.

The data suggest that the teachers' efforts to improve the classroom social practices include the realizations that students' motivation and willingness are indispensable for students' deep mental engagement with learning material (academic) and are influenced by the classroom social climate; that the students need to take responsibility for acting and interacting fairly and honestly (ethical); and that a positive classroom climate is deeply connected to the students' academic success. In brief, the improvements the teachers attempt in the classroom social world combine their academic, social, and ethical objectives.

5.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the experiences of pedagogical improvements the teachers pursue, why and how they pursue those improvements, the challenges they face in making these instructional improvements, and the various actions they take to deal with these challenges in the classroom. The chapter situates the teachers' attempts to reshape, restructure, or reform various practices and to teach for understanding in both academic and social practices. The teachers see the effect of simultaneous improvements in both academic and social practices on the learners' meaningful mental engagement as linked to a wider context for teaching and learning. The teachers' efforts to promote in-depth learning thus require them to focus on circumstances and address issues in classroom practices.

The improvements the teachers' attempt in the classroom suggest that they identify the improvement areas, their approaches, and their intervention strategies on the basis of their own judgment of what they consider important to change on behalf of their

students and in their own understanding the process of change. They try to bring about changes in classroom practices within the current framework of institutional policies, norms, and structures. Inside the classroom, the teachers seem to enjoy a good deal of freedom to plan and execute activities, modify and adapt practices, and carry out pedagogical experimentation to improve students' learning and development, particularly in-depth learning of subject matter. Most of the improvements they pursue draw on their personal experiences, expertise, intuitions, and understanding. However, the teachers realize that the scope and effect of the improvements they attempt in the classroom will remain limited unless they attend to circumstances in the wider context of teaching and learning.

The strategies of academic improvement focus on what students learn and how they learn it by showing different ways and opportunities to engage students in in-depth learning of the subject matter beyond traditional routine classroom activities. They consider in-depth learning a worthwhile mental activity; it requires learners' deep cognitive engagement with the subject matter and involves processing, analyzing, and connecting information and constructing their own meaning of the information or materials. The teachers also extend the academic content curriculum subjects by adapting them to the local environment, daily life activities, or individual needs, providing more materials, and making the context relevant and interesting in terms of the students' learning needs and experiences. They use subject-specific, innovative and instructional strategies that attempt to deepen understanding and extend students' learning beyond the textbook.

Moreover, differences in individual students' abilities, habits, interests, and orientations to learning present the teachers with challenges to ensure that all students learn from experiences and opportunities in the classroom. Reaching out to the individual students in a large class of 35 to 50 teenagers and attending to their unique personal circumstances (needs, abilities, and problems) is a difficult job. However, the teachers try to create opportunities for students to interact with friends and participate in cooperative learning activities. Moreover, building students' confidence, motivation, enjoyment, and encouraging them to take responsibility in learning are also important to encourage students learning. In other words, motivation and engagement play a large part in

students' interest in and enjoyment of school and study. These can be conceptualized as students' energy and drive to become involved in the classroom, learn, work effectively, and achieve their potential in the classroom.

The teachers' improvement in the classroom social practices focus on the normative environment, including relationships, expectations, attitudes, norms, rules and regulations, and social and moral behaviors. They try to base their practices on the principle that their students do not learn by coercion under an authoritarian teacher; their alternatives focus on creating a classroom climate in which students strive to build self-confidence, develop positive self-images, and take an interest in learning. The teachers believe these can happen only in an environment where students feel encouragement and respect and believe that they are valued and included. This social improvement the teachers attempt in their classroom is intended to create opportunities for students to learn and practice ethical principles such as mutual respect, sharing, and collaboration. The teachers also try to promote positive social and moral behaviors through engaging their students in thinking about and discussing social and moral issues. They also try to model positive ethical behaviors in order to provide students with opportunities to appreciate and embrace them and to reflect them in their lives inside and outside the classroom.

The teachers' strategies in both academic and social practices in the classroom suggest that some of these strategies overlap and relate to both objectives of promoting academic learning and positive social behavior. The reason is that the academic and the social world of the classroom are inherently interconnected, and teachers' efforts to bring about change in practice in these two worlds are also mutually connected. However, most strategies or efforts these teachers attempt to bring about in the academic and social practice in the classroom relate to the broader theme of 'teaching for understanding,' the focus of all improvements the teachers pursue in the classroom.

CHAPTER SIX: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE SCHOOL

6.1. Introduction

This chapter reports on my participants' experiences related to their work in the school. It consists of four main sections, each dealing with a set of themes that emerged from the analyzed data. The first section begins by describing the teachers' conceptions of improvement within school. Next, it examines the features within a school's work culture that the teachers consider central to improving what they do in the classroom. It also includes a description of the teachers' efforts to alter or bring appropriate changes to the school's work culture. The second section discusses the teachers' approach to working with other teachers for improvement in the school. Collaborative working with others also aims to improve their practices and includes working out appropriate strategies for teaching and learning, preparing tests regularly, evaluating student's work, and giving feedback.

The third section explores the teachers' work under the leadership of their educational institution. It includes the activities and improvements, the special assignments they undertake, and the specific tasks that the participants carry out under the institutional leadership. The section reflects on how teachers' conceptions of personal values and professional qualities influence and help realize their plans for improvement.

The fourth section examines the efforts, activities, and improvement initiatives the teachers pursue individually. They focus on their attention on and devote energy and time to the practices that they believe have a direct and positive affect on the school's work culture in general and on student's learning and development in particular.

6.2. Teachers' Conceptions of School Improvement

The conditions inside school that contribute to the learning environment within classrooms focus on improvement, growth, and development. Teachers have their own views, values, pedagogical beliefs, priorities, expectations, capabilities, and professional experiences, which affect the ways in which they create learning environments within

their classroom that are constructed around a set of objectives, for example, promoting creative and critical thinking among learners and encouraging learners to ask questions and to express their opinions. These objectives connect to the outside world, which presents a different set of objectives in the wider society's values, norms, religious and political beliefs and practices, and economic and geographic conditions, which interact to determine the overall out-of-school environment within which students live, learn, and develop physically, socially, morally, and intellectually. The values, expectations, and practices outside often stress tradition, obedience to authority, and faith in received knowledge.

The teachers' experiences in the school community are related to the improvement of the school as the whole. The data about the participants' experiences concerning their work in the school community reveal that their conceptions of school improvements are determined largely by their values and beliefs about it and in turn influence the degree and ways in which they are involved. It is therefore important to examine the teachers' conceptions of school improvement in order to understand their choices in focusing on areas of improvement and their priorities in using improvement strategies.

The teachers also argue that school improvement requires efforts on the part of the whole school to help develop procedures, standards, and practices that would gradually evolve into a credible system to initiate and sustain school improvement. The teachers' views on the improvement in the context of their schools include different factors that shape the school's work culture – the routines and responsibilities of school members that are organized, performed, or practiced. The teachers' conceptions of the school's work culture include such aspects as physical environment, teaching-learning practices, relationships, and the quality of individual members in the school community.

Moreover, the supportive work culture in the school emphasizes the degree and the manner in which attention is given to students' academic learning and social and moral development, which the teachers considered the most central aspect of the improvement. Teachers working in the forefront of improvement are responsible for altering existing conditions or creating new ones and translating these into positive effects on students' learning and development. For example, teachers can plan lessons

together, mentor each other, and conduct lessons together in order to have a greater impact on students' learning. The teachers' views suggest that the need for improvement not only inspires, encourages, and supports teachers to initiate changes at their classroom level but also obliges them to collaborate in activities to improve the school practices aimed at students' learning and development.

These reflections show that in their conceptions of school improvement and change, the teachers understand the need to shift the focus of school improvement initiatives towards improving the school as an institution with greater emphasis on the school work culture instead of depending on individualistic, uncoordinated, or isolated efforts. The analysis reveals that the teachers use three approaches to working for school improvement: working in collaborative groups with other teachers, working with and under the head teacher's leadership, and working independently. I discuss in detail why and how the teachers involve themselves in the work of improvement through each of these approaches, beginning with their collaboration with their colleagues in the following section.

6.3. Collaborative Work with Other Teachers

The teachers recognize that the quality of a school depends largely on how the members of the school community (head teacher, teacher, staff and students) work collaboratively with each other and with the outside community. The creation of collaborative culture in the school can lead to increased interaction and cooperation between teachers inside and outside the classroom. The teachers believe that bringing about positive improvement in the dynamics of a school's work culture will occur largely through consistent activities and collaborative ventures. Some of the teachers in their schools tend to be conservative about improvement and change in teaching and learning practice; some show lethargy or pessimism. The teachers relate how such conservatism, lethargy, and pessimism are manifested in strong adherence to traditional practice, reluctance to adapt interactive, learner-centered instruction, resistance or opposition to change, or avoidance of hard work. Such attitudes confound improvement and change. In such a climate, the individual teacher's efforts to change classroom practices and improve the wider context of teaching and learning yield few positive results. In order to be

effective, teachers need a supportive work culture in their schools. Such a supportive culture is characterized by teachers' genuine concern for students' learning and development, a high degree of individual staff member participation, collaboration based on shared interests and mutual respect, appreciation of hard work, a strong sense of self-accountability, a need for learning, interest in trying out new ideas and strategies, reflection on the practices, and a quest for creative ways to deal with problems facing individual teachers and the school at large. In this regard, each of the four teachers approaches working with colleagues and personal interaction differently, depending upon their individual situations and the realities of their school, and the objective for improving their practice.

6.3.1. Improving Their Practices

By practice, the teachers mean all those practices that are carried out to fulfill the schools' primary mandate, educating students through classroom instruction and extracurricular activities or opportunities outside the classroom intended to enrich students' learning experiences and nurture their overall development. The teachers assert that pervasive and long-lasting changes in various key areas of school cannot occur unless and until teachers work together to improve their practices in the school. At present, some teachers remain attached to traditional practices in key areas of school work, some try out new ideas and strategies in these areas, some keep moving back and forth between traditional and new practices, and some combine these two approaches in their practices. This situation may complicate the climate for improvement and change as Kham points out "*It is sometimes difficult to determine which direction it is moving to. I think for any efforts for any improvement it is important for teachers to collaboratively work together, discuss, share or exchange opinion and experience*"(Interview 27/10/2008). This reflection underscores the need for creating a shared understanding of improvement and change and adopting shared practices in the school.

Examination of the teachers' experiences with improvement in school practices reveals four interrelated areas where the teachers need to work to create shared understanding of their practices: (1) working out the appropriate teaching strategies including adaptation of learner-centered instruction to promote independent learning and

reduce students' dependency on textbooks and teachers, thus improving the milieu for teaching and learning across classrooms and subjects; (2) reforming examination practices aiming to encourage students' critical thinking; (3) regularly monitoring students' learning through tests and evaluations and creating standards of practices in dealing with tests and feedback on students' work; and (4) improving or developing their understanding of both subject matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, which will be discussed in Chapter 7.

6.3.1.1. Working out the Appropriate Strategies for Teaching

The teachers in general assert that the main focus of improvement in teaching and learning should be on creating conditions conducive to improvement in pedagogies in all classrooms by all teachers across the curriculum subjects. In high schools, students have many different teachers for many different subjects. Whether they implement traditional approaches to learning, interactive student-centered learning, or a mixed mode of delivery (traditional and interactive student-centered) in teaching and learning, the aim is to enhance or improve students' academic learning and social practices. On the other hand, Vanh says that

Contrasting approaches in different teachers' classrooms confuse students as to whose instruction to follow, therefore, it is better that a teacher's effort to promote critical thinking among students occurs in one subject, for example, and should have an overarching effect on students' learning of other subjects. That is, the development of social and cognitive skills can contribute to enhancement of overall capacity of the students to cope with the demand of learning in different subject areas. (Interview 4/11/2008)

Moreover, for a long time, teachers have been living under the shadow of the traditional culture of teaching and learning: students, textbooks, and teacher. Invariably, having been exposed to such experience, any different experience or ideas are difficult to adopt and apply. Phet mentioned that

When I conduct the lessons without looking at the textbook or ask them to read and discuss among themselves, it appeared that I was doing something wrong or had not prepared the lesson well. They work, but some of them do not have the confidence to talk or present ideas. I think in the current situation of teaching and learning, teachers need to work out appropriate strategies for their teaching to increase not only students' academic understanding but also their critical thinking, their cognitive development, and confidence. Therefore, I combine the

two approaches to learning in my teaching. By doing this, they can develop from what they have been told which can lead to their own discovery for their deep understanding. (Interview 29/10/2008)

In addition, Kham and Phai have regularly been graded as 'excellent' in the annual teacher appraisal, which adds to their reputation as effective teachers. They believe that their passion for working out the best or most appropriate strategies for teaching and learning, for example, applying interactive instruction, lies at the heart of their success, even though it was initially challenging. They mentioned they also faced the difficulty of having to challenge students' unwillingness to take responsibility for their learning or not wanting to cooperate when they were assigned to work in groups for interactive discussion, but over time their strategies of consistently trying and adamantly dealing with problems as they arose helped them address the challenge. Eventually, students became accustomed to having their roles constructed around interactive student-centered learning environment. As a result, they gained experience about how different techniques, especially in interactive student-centered approaches, work in particular circumstances, for example, in different subject areas or within a particular classroom context. Kham is eager to share her experience of how she adapted student-centered instruction and to learn more from interaction with colleagues. She says:

I have always been interested in knowing how other teachers carry out their teaching in their classrooms, what strategies they use, and how they solve the problems that arise in the classroom especially how they adapt and apply student-centered learning in their teaching. I am keen to share my experiences and views with teachers who want to bring about change in their classrooms. I have observed teachers being intimidated by the initial experience of confronting challenges presented by student-centered methods. (Interview 30/10/2008)

These reflections underscore the need for all teachers in all subjects to employ similar approaches to pedagogy if students are to develop academically and socially. Efforts by individual teachers or the irregular applications of innovative instructional pedagogies promise little lasting change or improvement and have limited effects on students' learning and development. To make improvement long lasting and to affect student learning and development deeply requires teachers to work out the best or the most appropriate strategies for their teaching practice for each class, probably by

combining or adapting different approaches, techniques, or strategies to meet the specific situations.

6.3.1.2. Reforming the Assessment Practices

The teachers believe the traditional examination system is a major barrier to the improvement of teaching and learning practices in schools. These examinations require students to memorize information by rote instead of understanding what they study. Other problems reported by the participants that further exacerbate the difficulties in the examination system are practices such as widespread cheating by students and corruption in the evaluation of answer sheets. Efforts are being made to reform the examination practices at different levels by including questions that assess understanding. My participants reported that they have been closely involved in the dialogues with other teachers about assessment practice and reforming it to test students' understanding rather than memorization of the answers. They mentioned that the teachers had, for example, developed assessment questions requiring written answers for more explanation to encourage students' critical thinking instead of just ticking 'yes' or 'no.' Moreover, to limit cheating, teachers mentioned that they create different versions of exam papers so that students had different versions.

The participants also mentioned that the traditional way of testing was only based in the examination conducted in the classroom. The other strategy that teachers used to encourage student thinking, discovery and creativity was to have students work through project assignments. Phet mentioned that she usually interacts with other teachers to work out how they could assign students written projects. She mentioned that teachers who recently graduated from the university have had more experience with project work assignment for students, so she often has discussions with them even though they are not teaching the same subject in order to get ideas from them (Reflection note 30/10/2008).

6.3.1.3. Evaluating Students' Work and Giving Feedback

Usually two big tests take place yearly in school: the end of the first and second semester exams. In addition to these tests, there are also monthly tests organized by individual teachers in their own subjects. They can accumulate the score/mark on a daily, weekly, or quarterly basis. Phai and Kham conduct monthly comprehensive tests in their

subjects assessing content areas covered. They also conduct tests at the end of each unit. Because they are based on a large content area, the monthly tests potentially reflect substantial progress in students' learning. The students' results and progress are reported to the teachers who are responsible and take care of each classroom. Then those teachers report the results to the director.

In the higher level where Vanh and Phet teach, it is not necessary to conduct monthly tests. They can test as much as they like, but the total grade is based on the students' participation, activity work, the mid-term examination, and the end of the semester examination (10%, 15%, 30%, and 45% respectively). For the activity work component, Phet has set up project work so that students can collaboratively work together.

The data show that preparing or conducting tests and evaluating them, giving classroom work and checking it, assigning homework and reading though it are key school activities and constitute a major portion of teachers' work outside the classroom. These activities are important to help provide valuable tools for teachers to gain insight into students' learning and enhance the teachers' progress. That is, it is helpful for the teachers to link students' learning with appropriate instruction and evaluation strategies or adapt appropriate techniques or progressive instructional principles to their particular classroom contexts. Also, evaluation-related activities allow students to assess their own learning from the teacher's perspective. Moreover, these activities also help students evaluate their learning in a way that they can read through the teacher's feedback and see where they have demonstrated better understanding and where they lack understanding of the subject matter. In addition, students need detailed, thorough, critical and fair evaluations of their work (including tests students write, class work or assignments) to learn and develop into lifelong learning, independent self-directed learners.

Teachers' evaluation and provision of feedback on students' work is another core area aiming to improve teachers' practice and students' learning on which the teachers want to focus while working with their colleagues to improve their practice. Vanh mentioned that "*regular assessment practices and teachers' feedback on students' work are identified as key areas for improvement*" (Interview 4/11/2008). However, the

teachers believe that such practices should be congruent with the appropriate learning techniques and draw on principles of authentic student assessment.

According to both Phai and Kham, a student's work is an extremely important resource and a great asset. It is the repository of information, ideas, and the student's own reflections and insights about questions likely to appear in examinations. If the student's work is not carefully prepared and the entries contain errors, gaps, and confusions, then the chance is greater that the student may reproduce those faults in the examination and be penalized. Therefore, it is critically important that teachers be careful about these things while checking students' work. Without thorough checking of students' work in order to highlight the writing and conceptual errors, teachers' positive feedback on students' written work may be counterproductive. Minor repeated mistakes left unattended can become big hurdles in further learning. After all, the most important thing in the whole process is habit formation, on which teachers need to focus. However, Phai reveals that some teachers do not see the importance of providing feedback on students' work. He expresses that the typical style of teachers' feedback involves just putting a "ticking out" mark with a red pen and writing "excellent" without a thorough assessment of the content or reasons why they work that way. Similarly, Kham commented on the ways in which some of her colleagues deal with students' work or exam papers:

Some teachers do not use feedback as an important opportunity to help students improve their understanding of the material. What they do is only blame students for not being capable of learning, not paying attention to or not being interested in learning. Teachers' ways of handling feedback on students' work are superficial and contribute little to student learning. (Interview 30/10/2008)

The data also indicate that it is important for the teachers to give detailed and more constructive feedback when checking students' work or exams. Any positive or negative feedback needs to be accompanied by clear reasons or explanation or even questions for further thinking. For example, Phet's views about teachers' feedback on students' work brings to light important aspects of the process. On the one hand, critical, constructive, detailed, clear, and thought-provoking feedback improves students' understanding of the subject matter. On the other hand, superficial, judgmental, negative, or unjustifiably positive comments or remarks either hurt students emotionally or unduly generate in them a feeling of achievement without recognizing the strengths and

weaknesses of their work. However, making it explicit that the work is good or bad followed with arguments that are strong and logical or with an explanation that is comprehensive is an important feature of teacher's feedback. Students want to have detailed, positive comments on the piece of work they have created through their efforts and energy. They share their work with each other to let other students know how positively the teacher has responded to their efforts.

In addition, students desire recognition beyond what they receive in grades and comments. Teachers also mentioned that it is imperative to hold students accountable, help them learn from their mistakes, and move forward. However, doing so requires the teacher to create a balance between encouraging students and making them accountable and holding realistic expectations of them.

6.3.2. Summary

This section examined my participants' experiences in relation to improving their work in order to improve schools through collaboration with other teachers. They emphasize activities, plans, and initiatives that aim at improving those conditions or situations that have the most direct influence on their work with students and their own professional development through collaboration with other teachers that aims to improve teaching and learning, testing, evaluating, and giving feedback. Such collaboration also creates a climate of collaboration in the school. Collaborative professional development will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

The results of my analysis also show that the teachers differ in the preferences, specific goals, and personal interests around which they organize their efforts to interact, cooperate, collaborate, and coordinate with their colleagues. However, the nature and the purpose of the teachers and opportunities they create to work and learn collaboratively with their colleagues depend largely on their conceptions of the worth of the perceived change and their confidence and expertise in the particular area of improvement they intend to pursue. The teachers also emphasize the need to help their colleagues improve their knowledge and skills in teaching and learning. The next section will examine the teachers' experiences in their work under the institutional leaders.

6.4. Working under the Institutional Leadership

The teachers considered their leaders responsible and powerful and the most influential figures inside their schools. In addition to day-to-day school management, the leader is central in any change initiated by the school or mandated externally. However, to manage school routines in an organized, orderly way and to think through design and execute improvement plans and initiatives, their leaders inevitably need the support of staff in general and the active involvement of those teachers and head teachers in particular who are willing, interested, and capable of playing a constructive role in improvement. For their improvement work to succeed, leaders need ideas, information, knowledge, spirit, moral and professional support, and insights into creative ways of bringing about change in different aspects of the school. Given their proactive approach and capabilities, the teachers are best positioned to provide most of what leaders need throughout the change or reform process, from conceiving worthwhile initiatives to designing a workable plan and selecting viable implementation strategies. In contrast, the teachers have their own ideas, agenda, preferences, and plans in regard to improvement inside and outside their classrooms. To implement these, they usually need to take their leader into their confidence because, as the leading authority, the leader can influence conditions within the school to facilitate or resist changes initiated by individual teachers. Also, any initiated changes or improvements the teachers' attempts are largely supervised and controlled by their institutional leaders. The data of the teachers' experiences suggest that their working under the institutional leaders for improvements includes leading specific academic-related tasks and joint contribution of goals.

6.4.1. Leading Specific Academic-Related Tasks

The leaders generally have responsibilities of initiating and spreading change in their schools. They strive to fulfill these responsibilities by providing leadership to the individuals and teams involved in improvements inside and outside the classroom. The data concerning the participants' experiences in specific improvement activities and assignments suggest that the teachers are the most valuable human resource; leaders depend on their efforts to reform their practice in order to improve their schools. In their schools, the teachers have good reputations as being trustworthy, hardworking, willing,

skilled, and capable. Their attributes, such as optimism, a proactive approach, promptness, trustworthiness, special skills (including creative thinking skills, organizational skills, interpersonal skills, and time management skills), and their knowledge (both content and pedagogical knowledge), all combine to make the teachers indispensable resources in the work of school improvement and change.

For example, during the time of this study, because of her previous experience of teaching in secondary school, Phet was responsible for Lao Language and Literature Methodology in training student-teachers. She also helps the head of the Faculty in the day-to-day management of the faculty and assists him in dealing with special assignments on behalf of the faculty.

Similarly, corresponding to his ability and experience plus his political advantage, his reputation as a social worker, and his leadership responsibilities and abilities under the supervision of the institution leader, Vanh is concurrently chair of the Academic committee of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and the Deputy Head. His responsibility is also to improve teaching and learning in the faculty. Moreover, he works administratively and academically with teachers and students as well.

Likewise, Phai also worked as the head teacher of the Natural Science subjects in the school. He also focuses on Mathematics. As a subject expert, his responsibilities involved working about specific problems facing Mathematics teachers in the classroom and providing on-the-spot help. The teachers commonly faced problems pertaining to content knowledge and designing activities to engage students in active learning. He helped them understand content and design activities prior to working on them with students. Owing to his expertise in teaching these subjects, he was best placed to provide academic support to the other teachers and to address academic issues. Similarly, Kham has been involved in different tasks assigned by the leader. She has been assigned as the head teachers of the Social Science subjects in the school.

The participants report that school officials frequently engage them in activities that take place outside school. However, the nature of these special tasks varies from teacher to teacher. Vanh and Phet helped organized the national entrance examinations. Every year, there is one very important examination organized around the country, the

entrance examination for higher education. In fact, there are many centers for this examination. In each center, some teachers are selected to help organize this examination. Vanh and Phet are among these selected teachers because they are trustworthy, respected, and hard working.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, both Phai and Kham coordinated the activities related to improve students' learning, for example, supervising students learning and providing extra classes for those students who are preparing for the provincial and national academic competition between schools. They were selected as the representatives of the subject matter to mark exam papers, including the leaving examination for year 6 students. They were selected because they are trustworthy, respected, active, and hard working as well as being the experts on the subject matter in their school.

6.4.2. Joint Contribution of Goals

The participants point to other venues and opportunities for cooperation between teachers and leaders, administrators, or outside school officers for development of the whole school. They suggest it would be good practice to cooperatively develop improvement goals and school development targets annually. The participants' accounts of these development targets suggest that reaching the targets would be easier if they were developed by the joint efforts of teachers, leaders, and administrators meeting regularly to review progress in the implementation of a particular school improvement plan.

In addition to professional collaboration and support for improvement, leaders need to acknowledge any good work being done and offer support for anything worthwhile inside and outside the classroom; focusing on weaknesses is not enough. Both leaders and teachers are the key architects of their school's environment; their respective and joint efforts need to be recognized, rewarded and made known to the public inside and outside the school. Phai says, "*When teachers are happy with their work and pleased work is recognized, their morale is high, even when working under difficult circumstances*" (Interview 28/10/2008).

6.4.3. Summary

This section explored the improvement activities associated with the expanded roles the teachers carry out under the leadership of their educational institution. The insights drawn from the teachers' experiences suggest that usually they get involved in the work of improvement under the guidelines of their leaders. The leaders occupy a pivotal place in initiating, implementing, and sustaining improvement and change in various factors of their educational institution's culture. They cannot accomplish the intended improvement on their own; they inevitably need to seek the involvement of teachers whose opinions, ideas thoughts, understandings, and actions help in the realization of the intended change. Conversely, working with and under their leaders gives the teachers a feeling of empowerment that leads them realize that individual teachers, as members of the school community, have the right to be involved in decision making and share responsibility for playing different roles in school improvement.

The teachers also have their own ideas and improvement plans, and they need their leaders' trust to initiate a change inside or outside the classroom; otherwise, they might not get the necessary support from the leaders. The teachers recognize that their motivations and their degree of involvement in improvement work are inspired by their leaders' positive behaviors, such as showing concern for students, fostering a teamwork spirit, involving teachers in decision making, providing fundamental authority, and acting as role models. These features, in the teachers' view, are creating an environment conducive to teamwork and learning from and with each other.

The teachers' involvement in the work of improvement under the leaders usually means undertaking special assignments or leading specific tasks delegated by the curricular activities to enrich students' learning experiences. Given their enthusiasm and interest in improvement, the teachers are the most suitable choice for leaders' delegation of tasks and special assignments or responsibilities. However, they tend to attribute their involvement in improvement work under this leadership to their own attitudes, including optimism, proactive approach, promptness, and trustworthiness, and their own interpersonal skills and task-specific skills and their knowledge of content, teaching, learning, and change. The constructive roles the teachers play, combined with their motivation, positive attitudes towards change, competitive skills, and strong subject

knowledge raise their reputation and increase respect for them, and they become models for the other teachers.

6.5. Working for Improvement Individually

The teachers perceive the need for improvement and identify improvement areas and intervention strategies in their own ways. In addition to their involvement in the work of improvement, they are engaged in school activities that are independent of external influences or pressure. They mentioned that they get involved in different activities not because of any external pressure or for any reward but out of a sense of self-accountability. Moreover, they individually attempt improvement that they consider worthwhile and feasible. In pursuing improvement, they strongly focused on practices that have direct implications for improvements in the school in general and in students' learning in particular. The context and the focus of the teachers' individual actions and decisions vary, but the driving force behind these efforts is the teachers' commitment to their students. For example, the teachers all show their concern for and demonstrate their commitment to students not only finding ways to help students learning outside the classroom but also providing counseling and guidance to improve their students' learning habits.

6.5.1. Students' Academic Counseling

The data reveal that teachers are always concerned about their students' academic improvement or understanding. Their concern proves that they provide help to students with their academic studies outside the classroom during free time after teaching hours. In the staffroom where Kham and Phai spend time before and after teaching, I observed some students coming to them about the problem they have or when they do not understand any parts of the lessons, activities or tasks. Phai mentioned that "*Some students learn slowly in the classroom while some are shy to ask questions, so they come to see me after class when they need more clarification or any help with the subject matter or assigned tasks*" (Interview 28/10/2008.). Moreover, Kham said that "*In order to help them improve their composition writing, I assigned them tasks that they can individually do at home. So many students come to see me when they have planned their ideas before actually writing*" (Interview 30/10/2008).

The examples from Phet and Vanh include supervising final students' writing projects as well as supervising student teachers for their teaching practice and giving feedback after they have demonstration their teaching in the classroom. Phet pointed out that *"Even I sometimes need to spend around thirty minutes talking with individual students outside the classroom, I am happy to do so if it helps them improve their academics"* (Interview 29/10/2008). In addition, Vanh noted that *"I am supervisor for the fifth year students' project writing paper. I found that some students had difficulties doing that but they rarely come to see me. I have to hunt for them in order to help them."* (Interview 10/11/2008)

The teachers' experiences reflect their sense of responsibility and concerns for students' learning and an awareness of their students' development. These teachers are well placed to help students' academic improvement not only inside the classroom but also outside. They show their obligations and the ways they could play a constructive role in the academic improvement of their students.

6.5.2. Coping with Students' Homework Habits

The data show that teachers also spend their time outside the classroom teaching with students who have problems completing homework. One way that teachers help improve students learning habits is assigning homework regularly. For example, teachers mentioned they noticed that some of their students did not regularly do homework, so they paid special attention to them. To understand the cause underlying the problem better, they talked with the individual students who seemed not to do homework regularly outside classroom teaching. Phai mentioned that

In my lesson, I usually assign many homework exercises that students need to do at home or outside the classroom. However, previously, I have noticed that some students did not do home work regularly. I was very concerned about this so I decided to talk to them individually after class to find out not only the problem they faced but also to understand the cause underlying the problem.(Interview 10/11/2008).

One key factor that he found was that at home such students were not allowed enough time to do their homework; the parents assigned them household chores. They also talked about their parents not paying much attention to their children' learning and

not being concerned about their children's problems. This initiative resulted in a visible improvement in students' diligence about homework.

The teachers also point out that, in part, parents' inappropriate attitudes towards children are the result of low expectations. Living under the influences of stereotypical beliefs, which are perpetuated by difficult socioeconomics, parents have developed a poor image of themselves, which becomes translated into the low expectations they have for their children. Moreover, the participants argue that the economic hardships facing families affects children's lives and learning in school in a variety of ways. For example, many parents cannot provide their children's basic education needs, such as books, notebooks, and uniforms. Furthermore, the participants mention that given the widespread lack of adult literacy in some families, it is far-fetched to hope that parents and elders will provide academic help to students, especially at higher levels. However, the teachers expect that any parents or family elders who have secondary, post-secondary, college, or university education will assist and guide children in their studies at home and help them acquire habits essential to overcoming adjustment difficulties in school.

The data suggest that students need academic, emotional, and psychological support from parents; they need ample time and a safe, clean environment to concentrate on their studies. The provision of such an environment, in the participants' view, includes the presence of materials such as paper and pencils, books, a few reading materials and quiet, clean, well-lit workplace with a table and chair. However, schools can address only a few academic problems that affect families and their children's education; for example, students can rent course books from the schools cheaply each semester.

From this experience of outside inquiry, teachers learned important information about students and homework. In order to motivate the students, teachers had shared with them their own experiences during their time of being learners. For example, Kham, shared her own experience – the difficulties, the problems and challenges she faced when she was a student, and how she coped with such problems and difficulties – with her students.

The teachers' stories about students' homework habits also reflect concern about the students' lack of motivation. Faced with this resistance, teachers customarily and

expediently revert to a traditional teacher's lecture as Phai explained "*Every day I start my lesson by lecturing them for five minutes prior to a lesson in order to make them realize their learning responsibilities, especially doing their homework.*" (Interview 10/11/2008).

These experiences had a visible positive impact on students' homework habits because the teachers could better understand why individual students had problems in not doing homework regularly and how to help the students overcome them.

6.5.3. Managing Extracurricular Activities

The data show that the teachers were involved in variety of extracurricular activities, including inspection of cleanliness and furniture before and after school, time management, like scheduling and keeping the overall environment of the school up-to-date, facilitating staff meetings, leading or organizing sport activities, or other improvement activities organized by the institutions. For example, leading or facilitating staff meetings on a regular basis is the demanding responsibility Vanh has. He needs to think through and prepare the relevant agenda, notify and ensure participation of individual staff members, facilitate discussion, and document the proceedings.

The data also show that the teachers are responsible for more than one activity not because they have to but because they are dutiful staff driven by a sense of self-accountability and aware of their responsibility. Phai said that he received additional tasks more than anybody else in the school; also he was assigned important and demanding responsibilities in improvement because the leaders and other teachers respect him as hardworking, responsible, and trustworthy.

The participants also reported that they were involved in school community activities as agents of social change. The activities the teachers carry out in their school communities are aimed at both educational and social change. Educational reform may engender social change, and social change in turn may contribute to the development and enhancement of educational opportunities. The teachers' contributions to improvement in their roles as social workers and emancipatory agents overlap, as do the activities they carry out in these roles. For example as mentioned earlier and in Chapter 4, Phai is the President of the Trade Union Organization of the school as well as Vice-President of this

organization at the Educational Department of Pakse District. He is also involved in volunteer social work as the leader of the Student Volunteer Organization. Many students voluntarily work in this social organization as representatives to encourage youth to play sports, dance, or take part in many other social activities in their free time. The aim is to take youth away from involvement in any useless activities or drug abuse. He mentioned that,

I am the head of the volunteer students who are the representatives of the school to promote other students or youths inside or outside school to take part in social activities like playing sports, dancing, working for the community, and school; or to encourage them not to get involved in any violence, any drug abuse or any criminal activity by showing or demonstrating them the negative effects of such involvement. I am so happy of involving in this social activity. Not every one can choose to be but because I am trustworthy, respectful and hardworking so I have been given permission to be responsible for this work. Moreover, I get involved in that activity voluntarily, due to my own interest and belief that such activities, on the one hand, foster confidence and creativity among students and, on the other hand, keep students away from indulging in unhealthy practices. (Interview 10/11/2008)

Similarly, Kham and Phet, are being trusted and respected by the others; Kham was elected as one of the School Women's Organization leading positions and Phet as the Head of the Women's Organization of the Faculty of Education.

The participants' engagement in different educational and non-educational tasks outside school is the result of the trust they have built up with education officials, including the head teachers. They believe that their opportunities for involvement in these activities are connected with their reputation as hardworking, committed, motivated, trustworthy, and academically and professionally able teachers. It appears that the teachers try their best to benefit from every opportunity to work for improvement and change in collaboration with other stakeholders. However, despite their working relationships with these stakeholders, the participants do not seem satisfied with the current level of their interactions with school officials. They want to increase interaction between school officials in various areas of improvement, especially inside school. Their greater degree of involvement in school affairs comes from their meritorious personal circumstances.

6.5.4. Summary

This section reflected on the degree and the ways in which the teachers engage on their own in the work of improvement. The various examples discussed above show the nature of the teachers' commitment, the foci of their improvement efforts, and their approaches to translating their commitments into improvement efforts. At the heart of these teachers' improvement efforts lies their desire to improve situations or conditions that influence what they do in the classroom. These teachers are engaged in improvement in their schools not because they sustain external pressure or incentive but because they are driven by their professional values, such as conscientiousness, a sense of duty, a sense of accountability, and a deep concern for the students.

6.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter explored my participants' experiences with improvement in the school community with a particular focus on the changes the teachers have initiated or the school-wide improvement activities they have engaged in and the factors in school they consider significant in supporting their work in the classroom. The teachers' accounts of improvement experiences suggest that the improvement activities they engage in the school community are closely related to the improvement they pursue in the classroom.

The insights drawn from the teachers' narratives and experiences reflect a shared understanding of a few key themes. While reflecting on their experiences in school improvements, the teachers articulated their conception of school improvement and change. The key elements of the school's work culture interact to shape the wider context of teaching and learning, in which the teachers act as agents of improvement. They agree that they need to play individual roles in school-wide improvement in addition to what they do in the classroom. The notion of their expanded role in school improvement and change originates from the personal understandings they have developed about it, which suggests that bringing about systematic institutional improvement through isolated efforts is difficult. Instead, improvement efforts need to draw on the collective thoughts and energies of all the school's staff members in order to have significant enough influence to change routines at classroom and school levels.

Driven by their personal conceptions, the teachers engage in the work of improvement through three main areas: collaborative working with other teachers, working with and under the leadership, and working individually. These are embedded in the different roles they intend to play in improving their schools. All three areas focused attention on the core practices of the school, which the teachers believe to be a direct and an overarching impact on what students learn and how they learn it. Thus, their improvement efforts largely focus on teaching and learning, inclusive instructional strategies, evaluation practices, and subject-specific pedagogies.

The teachers' emphasis on professional interaction among teachers involve sharing ideas, knowing about each others' practices, learning ways of dealing with classroom challenges, and helping each other in content knowledge. The teachers' strategy to form a climate of working and learning collaboratively involves the attempt to create a context for mutual cooperation or collaboration. The teachers also recognize the institutional leaders as the most influential variable inside school. Under their institutional leadership, they undertake special responsibilities, lead tasks, and coordinate activities. They attribute their greater involvement in the work of improvement and in special assignments to the positive image they have constructed for themselves in the school. Professional interaction, cooperation, and collaboration among teachers and between teachers and leaders in different activities lead to build a community of learning and spreading change throughout the school.

In sum, this chapter suggests that the teachers engage in efforts intended to improve their practices in their school firstly by working collaboratively with other teaches, believing that increasing collaboration in the working environment and professional interaction among teachers provides them with the opportunity to learn from each others' experiences and presents staff members with a context to combine their understandings of and efforts towards improvement and change. Secondly, they work under the leadership of the institution by making the most of the opportunities, resources, influences, and support systems present in the school. Thirdly, they attempt improvement independently, striving to make the best use of their own intellect, knowledge, energies, and time to benefit their students and the school at large.

CHAPTER SEVEN: TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE

7.1. Introduction

This chapter explores my participants' experiences related to their efforts to improve their professionalism. Individual teachers have their own strategies, ways, stories, and worldviews upon which they operate. In order to have insights on these development efforts, the discussion of this chapter consists of four related themes. It starts with a discussion of teachers' conceptions about their professional development, including their role as teachers inspiring to improve, and their understanding of development effort. The chapter then describes teachers' individual efforts to improve their professionalism, covering their attempts to observe other teachers and have others observe their practices, to read or study from available sources, and to reflect on their practices. The teachers considered these professional development activities very important in enabling them to improve their professionalism through their day-to-day operation.

Next, the chapter presents teachers' efforts to improve their professionalism in collaboration with others. Their collaborative efforts aim to share and exchange knowledge, ideas, perspectives, experiences and practices and to reflect and learn from them. The examples of the participants' involvement in collaborative efforts are also provided in this section. The last section's discussion relates to professional development activities, including workshop training and professional development programs that are formally organized inside and outside the participants' schools. Teachers emphasized this formal professional development as their opportunity to help them understand and learn new practices both theoretically and practically and their only opportunity to obtain higher qualifications.

7.2. Teachers' Conceptions of Professional Development

The teachers' experiences in their professional development involve any activities or opportunities to improve their professionalism, including content knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy in order to enhance teaching and learning. The data about the

participants' experiences in improving their professionalism suggest that their conceptions of professional development are determined largely by their system of values and beliefs about it, which in turn influences the degree and ways in which they have been involved in development. It is therefore important to examine the teachers' conceptions of professional development in order to understand their choices in focusing on areas of development and their priorities in using development strategies. The teachers' views on improvement in their professionalism point to multiple factors that shape what they mean by professional development.

The data suggest that teachers see their professionalism in terms of their daily routines of instructing students, grading papers, taking attendance, and evaluating their performance as well as looking at the curriculum and improving schools as whole. Their greatest responsibility is to educate children, so teachers need to develop professionally. Their professional improvements include the improvement of general pedagogical knowledge (knowledge of learning environment, instructional strategies, and classroom management and knowledge of learners and learning); of subject-matter-knowledge (knowledge of content and substantive structure and syntactic structures); of pedagogical content-knowledge (a map of instructional strategies and representations, knowledge of students' understanding and potential misunderstanding, and knowledge of curriculum and curricular materials); of knowledge about student context and a disposition to find out more about students, their families, and their schools; of knowledge of strategies, techniques, and tools to create and sustain a learning environment/ community and ability use them effectively; and of knowledge and attitudes that support political and social justice as social realities make teachers very important of agents of social change.

Moreover, the teachers' involvement in professional development activities depends largely on their self-understanding of their professionalism, their thirst to upgrade their knowledge and skills, their responsibility for their own professional development and their aims to improve their practices. Even though they have many other responsibilities (as mentioned in Chapter 6), they revealed that they never stop trying to improve their professionalism in both knowledge and skills.

For example, as mentioned in Chapter 4, Vanh is involved in a variety of activities intended to promote teachers' learning, cooperative environments, and the development of the whole school. Vanh also helped his colleagues improve their content knowledge in Mathematics. He pointed out that “*no matter where I am in my career, I am a learner as well because I am a teacher*” (Interview 10/11/2008). His understanding of professional development is that it is a way for people to change and move toward their own carefully articulated goals to improve their schools, their relationships with each other, and teaching processes for students. As far as the development of the intellectual autonomy of students is concerned, the direction of the change that appears most desirable was recently formulated in the ‘teach for understanding’ approach. Teaching for understanding is a sharable vision of possibilities not yet fully discernible. Teachers do care for understanding (Reflection notes 20/11/2008). Similarly, Phet states that

Teacher professional development is the continuous growth of personal and professional knowledge and expertise that enhances teaching in support of student learning. It engages individuals and groups in a broad range of activities, including teacher preparation, in-service, and individual, staff and organizational development. It has a collective as well as an individual focus. The focus of professional development should be to enhance teaching and support student learning. (Interview 11/11/2008)

Moreover, Kham points out the importance and the necessity of professional development in which teachers need to engage continually not just to develop their professionalism but also to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to increase the viability of regular classroom instruction for a broad range of students and improve their class management skills and repertoire of strategies. Teachers also need to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to ensure curriculum and evaluation that support inclusive practices in the classroom. She also argues that teachers' professional development and other innovations meant to facilitate school change need to be preceded by organizational reform from both “top down and bottom up,” perhaps including professional development for policy makers and implementers (Interview 30/10/2008).

In addition, Phai states that

Working with students can often be exhausting, overwhelming, and frustrating at times. There are days that I go home from the classroom and I do not know if I have enough energy or desire to return the following day and am not sure if I

want to start the next one. However, there are many reasons why I love teaching. I just need to keep a list of these reasons available and visible so I can review them during the tiring times. Being a school teacher is certainly one of the most challenging careers, but it is absolutely the most important profession. After all, without teachers, there wouldn't be any other professions. (Reflection note 20/11/2008)

He also describes his professional development practice as voluntarily engaging in a wide range of professional learning. He mentioned that

To improve professionalism, teachers can take part in training courses, engage in professional development activities and opportunities inside and outside the school and at provincial levels, for example, workshops, serve in school and provincial committees, write curriculum, and assess their own learning needs. (Interview 28/10/2008)

In addition, professional development involves the initiatives and activities teachers carry out independently in their day-to-day work. For example, having discussion with the head teacher and senior teachers enabled Kham to develop her professional confidence to cope with classroom management challenges and build a rapport with the students. Her capacity to adapt to new situations and her efforts to satisfy students were major determinants of her success. She learned techniques of teaching that involved activities, including practical work and group work (Interview 30/10/2008).

These reflections show that professional development is understood as the provision of activities designed to enhance the knowledge, skills and understandings of teachers in ways that lead to changes in their thinking and classroom behavior. Also professional development is a notion inclusive of the concept of reflective practice. What teachers take away from professional development efforts is based on their existing knowledge and beliefs. Rather than having information delivered to them, teachers need to examine their beliefs about subject matter, student learning, and instruction in the light of innovation. They strove to improve their professionalism according to their individual efforts for development as well as school plan.

7.3. Individual Efforts for Professional Development

Teachers perceive the need for improvement and identify improvement areas and intervention strategies in their own ways. In addition to the work of school improvement, they are engaged in their individual professional development independent of external influences or pressure. They consistently mentioned that they keep trying to improve their professionalism not because of any external pressure or for any reward but out of a sense of self-accountability (a feeling that they fulfill their contractual and professional responsibilities in response not to an externally imposed accountability but to their own choice to improve themselves). Moreover, individually, they attempt improvements that they consider worthwhile and feasible. In pursuing improvements, they strongly focus on practices in the school that have direct implications for improvement in the school's work culture in general and in students' learning in particular. The context and the focus of teachers' individual actions and decisions vary, but the driving force behind these efforts is the teachers' commitment to their students. Their individual efforts to improve their professionalism include observation, available resources, and self-reflection.

7.3.1. Observation

The four teachers reported that they had tried to improve their practice by observing other teachers teaching. Such observation, the teachers argued, gave them opportunities to learn and reflect on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that other teachers implement in the classroom. On some occasions, these observations constituted part of a larger professional development effort, whereas in others they represented the core of the professional development opportunity. For example, Kham mentioned that apart from officially planned classroom observation, she also observed the other teachers' classes on her own volition in order to improve her professionalism. She said that

Different teachers have different strategies; observation of other teachers' teaching is very beneficial and helpful in order to improve myself. I am able not only to learn the other teachers' teaching strategies, but also to increase my understanding of the subject matter. I can also learn how the other teachers deal with students' problems in the classroom, and the attitude toward students in which I sometimes do not see the importance of. For example, in the day that one teacher was teaching Lao literature instead of Lao Language. This would not be an ideal situation, but a teacher with the right attitude would try to focus on

getting through the first day without negatively affecting the students. (Interview 4/11/2008)

Similarly, all four teachers claimed that they had always been interested in seeing what other teachers do in their classroom. For example, Phai indicated that he also keeps his classroom door open to other teachers. That is, he welcomes other teachers into his classroom to observe him in action so they can learn from his practices and help him reflect on and refine them. He mentioned that

The best way to help improve teaching and learning is for teachers to work together in team. I always discuss with other teachers sharing or exchanging opinions about subject content knowledge and how to present that content knowledge to students in creative and effective ways. I often show my colleagues how to create a more effective learning environment in my classroom. I sometimes visit the other teachers teaching and they also visit my classroom, too. By doing this, we are not only able to learn from one another but also to help each other. (Interview, 28/10/2008)

Moreover, professional development opportunities can be created together by teachers and support people, either by choosing to focus on a new task that the teacher is interested in learning about or by focusing on a practice that teachers implement regularly but would like to change. The data shows that their individual efforts to improve their professionalism because of their own interest are also supported by the school leaders. The participants have reported that their school administrations also planned for teachers to observe other classrooms in order to develop their skills in teaching, expand their instructional flexibility, and assist the professional growth of colleagues. For example, as mentioned earlier, Kham and Phai mentioned that officially they have to observe other teachers' teaching at least two classes each month. That is the policy of the school. Kham stated that

I have to observe the teachers of the same subject twice a month. The others also observe my teaching. After each observation, we have feedback discussion and reflection. This can help me as well as the others not only to become critical about our own practice each time before teaching but also help improve the whole development related to our own teaching and students' learning by learning from each other. (Interview 4/11/2008)

In addition, Phet has been trying to turn the observation into an opportunity for helping others as well as herself to remedy weaknesses and other aspects of teaching and

learning. Phet was assigned by the faculty to observe other teachers' classroom teaching with the aim of helping them not only with subject content-pedagogical knowledge but also by building their confidence in teaching. She mentioned that by doing this assignment, she would not only be able to help them but also to learn from them and gain ideas for her lesson preparation in teaching student-teachers.

7.3.2. Reading or Studying from Available Sources

Reading or studying from available sources is considered an important alternative strategy or activity to improve teachers' knowledge and skills for their practice. The four teachers all mentioned that they never give trying up to improve themselves. Even if there is lack of financial support for having a professional development program organized, they try to improve themselves in their own time, for example, by reading or studying from relevant materials that are available for them. For example, Phai often improved his understanding or expanded his lessons by reading course books written in Thai. He got these materials from the library and bought them himself. Similarly, Vanh improved his content knowledge of the subject matter from Vietnamese course books or textbooks. Doing so has enabled him not only to improve his own knowledge of the subject matter but also to write out many textbooks for local needs. He also helped write teachers' manuals for some mathematic textbooks for some secondary schools in Champasak Province.

Phet likes reading, especially reading books that relate to her field "Lao Literature." She said that the more she reads, the more she understands deeply about the subject and the more she is able to provide concrete examples to show her students in the class. Reading helps her gain not only more subject knowledge but also general knowledge. She also encourages the other teachers as well as her students to read. She also likes to share her experiences and discusses what she has read with her colleagues. Similarly, Kham also spoke of the importance of reading to increase her understanding of the subject matter. This additional knowledge or information is very helpful, especially when she prepares composition writing tasks for students beyond the information or examples in the textbooks.

The teachers believe that one approach to improve their professionalism, especially their content knowledge of the subject matter, is working through different available sources by themselves. However, the data shows that in their attempts to improve their professionalism by reading, teachers were sometimes not able to afford reading materials. They could not get some books from the library either. The lack of resources sometimes limited their interest to read. To facilitate the process of inculcating independent professional development through independent studies, the teachers mentioned that schools need a well-resourced library facility as it is a most precious resource that can contribute to educational improvement in numerous ways.

7.3.3. Reflection: Teachers as Reflective Practitioners

Reflection builds on teachers' personal experiences. It requires that the teachers pay attention to daily routines and the events of a regular day and reflect on their meaning and effectiveness. The major assumption upon which this practice is based is teachers' commitment to serve the interest of students by reflecting on their well being and on which aspects are more beneficial to them; a professional obligation to review one's practice in order to improve the quality of one's teaching; and a professional obligation to continue improving one's practical knowledge. Phet stated that

Many of us are proud of what we do in our teaching, yet we may not be able to explain why it is working. Some may have made innovations, but are not sure if this has led to improved learning. In order to explain how and why something is working or to see if an innovation mattered, we need to collect specific information directed toward determining what is working and why.(Interview 11/11/2008)

The teachers regularly revised their views on what they had done well and what needed to be improved after their teaching, which is common strategy teachers use. The prominent way of reflection teachers thought was effective related to students' work. They mentioned that consistency in evaluation practices, particularly of students' work, could help teachers focus on better teaching and learning practice of their own as well as with their colleagues. Kham has been trying to turn the evaluation of students' work into an opportunity to remedy her own weaknesses and to find out what needs to be improved. She said that

As I hand in grades, I take a little time to review how my teaching went and write some notes to myself. I try to analyze where the students have difficulty, identifying the concepts they have trouble learning, the assignments or activities they seem to have a hard time understanding or doing, etc. I also look at the directions I give students for exams or assignments and check that they are clear. Finally I record what went especially well. As I revise my teaching for the next time, these notes will help jog my memory. (Interview 10/11/2008)

The teachers considered reflection as a core element in their professional development initiatives or strategies. They can develop knowledge in a process of reflection. It underlies classroom assessment of student learning, effective differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, and team-based school improvement efforts. Even more, it is a way of thinking that fosters personal learning, behavioral change, and improved performance. The benefit of reflective practice for teachers is a deeper understanding of their own teaching style and, ultimately, greater effectiveness as a teacher. Other specific benefits they mentioned include the validation of a teacher's ideals, beneficial challenges to tradition, the recognition of teaching as artistry, and respect for diversity in applying theory to classroom practices. Vanh argued that “*When we talk about reflective teaching, it is a systematic way of looking at our own actions in the classroom, what affects these action, what our strengths and weakness are, and how to increase our strengths and remedy our weakness*” (Interview 4/11/2008).

This section reflects the teachers’ effort for their professional development individually. They strive to do as many things as they can as improvement-oriented teachers in the school, and these personal improvements are directly intended to improve the classroom and school practice and student learning. Despite the value of some professional development experiences, these teachers’ pedagogical knowledge has largely developed out of their experiences during their teaching careers. Their understanding of pedagogy has been influenced by classroom experiences such as facing challenges and addressing them on an ongoing basis, particularly in their individual relationships with their subjects, their students, their colleagues, and their communities. The difficult circumstances in which they have lived, learned, and developed explain their personal commitment to their own continued professional growth and to the schools and students they serve.

7.4. Collaborative Efforts for Professional Development

The participants believe that collaborative interactions among teachers allow teachers to learn from their work and the work of others and then apply the learning to their classroom practice. However, collaborative interactions between and among teachers should occur around activities and areas of mutual interest. The teachers' experiences suggest that a common agenda for the teachers' professional development or an area of mutual interest is essential for bringing teachers together. The following are examples of teachers' experiences working collaboratively with the others.

7.4.1. Vanh's Sharing Insight about Good Practice

Vanh underscores the importance of collaboration for teachers' continued learning as well as for improving the work culture in the school through cooperative efforts. He elaborates by saying that he values teachers' knowing about one another's good practices. Their professional interactions in school are helpful; they help individual teachers learn about ideas, practices, activities, and strategies other than their own, which in turn benefits students. As well, sharing knowledge benefits the entire school in different ways. For example, good practices, success, and hard work in the spotlight create a sense of healthy competition among teachers. Teachers may not like to see their students lagging behind in achievement tests or performing worse than students in other subjects or classes. Further, teachers' observing each other's lessons provides a context for discussion on what ought to be improved in many individual teachers' classrooms.

Vanh believes that teachers differ in their pedagogical philosophies, techniques of teaching, and approaches to deal classroom management. Teachers can be strong in some aspects of teaching but lack skill in others. *“Professional interactions among teachers provide teachers with the opportunity to share and learn from each others' pedagogical practices. They also provide teachers with a critical lens through which they can view their teaching practices and their conduct”* (Interview 4/11/2008).

Vanh uses different ways to create context for interaction and collaboration with his colleagues. Some opportunities for interaction are created around academic activities. These interactions mostly take place among teachers of the same subject matter. They observe each other's lessons, help each other with content knowledge, share resources,

and engage in frequent discussions on matters of mutual interest in their subject areas. The teachers discuss problems and strategies to overcome them.

Vanh's interaction with other teachers in other contexts like the staffroom, during meal time, or other occasions are generally more social in nature and usually informal. However, on occasions, these interactions and professional communications with other teachers are shaped by his conscious effort.

7.4.2. Phet's Interaction in Content Knowledge and Pedagogy

Given her interest, abilities, and strength in specific areas, especially her experience teaching for a long period of time, Phet always both informally and formally coordinates and cooperates with her colleagues in order not only to provide them with help in content knowledge and pedagogy and address other academic issues of students but also to learn from them. Phet stated that

I have graduated and have been teaching for almost 20 years. I used to be exposed to the old material. From that time until now, there have been some changes in the course material so I need to discuss with my colleagues especially with teachers who have been trained to use such new material in teaching and learning. (Interview 11/11/2008)

She recognizes that performing in this way not only enables her to contribute to improvement of practices in different aspects of the school but also allows her to learn a great deal from these varied experiences. Inspired by new understanding based on this personal growth, she emphasizes the need for involving teachers in activities other than teaching. She believes that such experiences offer new opportunities for learning and interacting with different people. She has learned that while performing additional responsibilities, one often encounters problems and attempts to overcome them; this is what teachers' learning is all about. Undertaking additional responsibilities and fervently performing them brings new opportunities for learning and self-improvement. This experience is a means of improvement.

These reflections suggest that interaction with other teachers not only enables Phet to influence others with her ideas about improvement and change but also helps her gain diverse experiences and insights into teaching and learning that expand her own horizon of pedagogy. Phet usually interacts with her colleagues whenever they need each

other's help with content or in situations where they realize that certain issues inside or outside their classroom can only be addressed through mutual cooperation. However, most interactions take place not only with Lao Language and Literature teachers but also with other subject teachers. Within the same subject matter, her subject interests or individual teachers' need in her content areas determine the model and frequency of interactions among teachers. *"Content knowledge is an important area where teachers always need each other's help; we resolve the issues mutually together"* (Interview 11/11/2008).

7.4.3. Phai's Sharing Expertise on Teaching Mathematics

It can be said that Phai is the best Mathematics teacher at Phonxay Secondary School, and he has been assigned by the Head of the school to hold extra classes for the advanced students who are going to take the competition for Mathematics subject between schools in Champasak Province and as well in the National level. He is also the head of the natural science teachers, especially in Mathematics. He emphasizes the importance of teachers working together in order to work out the appropriate strategies or ways to cope with any problems or challenges related to the teaching and learning, especially those dealing with students' academic improvement in the subject matter. He told me that he often showed and demonstrated for the other teachers how he conducted activities that he believed to be the best strategies to increase students' participation and understanding of the concepts that he applied in his classroom teaching. For example, he indicated that he usually had different techniques in his teaching in the way that he led the whole class instruction with the provision of question-answer or concrete examples followed by the individual work, group work, or whole class discussion or interaction. From these techniques, he explained to his fellows, students could get students cognitively and consciously involved and participating in the lesson. He considered this to be the mixed-mode of delivery and thought it worked well in the current situation of the teaching and learning in Champasak or elsewhere in Lao PDR. He stated that

In the current situation of education in Lao PDR in general and Champasak Province in particular, there are insufficient materials, funds, facilities provided, traditional conceptions of teaching and learning among people. Teachers need to carefully plan their lessons to meet the specific situation. Even though the government's policy on education for the next years ahead emphasizes the

application of the student-centered approach to teaching and learning in his opinion teachers need to combine both the traditional and this new approach by adapting to the real situation and environment. (Interview, 4/11/2008)

7.4.4. Kham's Sharing of Student-Centered Approaches

Kham had interactions with her colleagues about the strategies that she used in her school. The growing emphasis on student-centered learning in the school, implementation of some activities considered student-centered instruction (e.g., cooperative learning, problem solving discussion, and presentation) concerns many teachers. However, sometimes for some teachers, application of student-centered teaching technique is easier to talk about than to do. They have concerns about the limited materials, facilities, support, time, and students' attitudes to their teaching. Some teachers have proved themselves skillful and advocate of student-centered pedagogy in their own way and are remarkably dedicated to the pervasive use of interactive teaching practices in the school. Others need help to learn more about how to implement student-centered approaches in the current situation of education in the region. This provides a context for teacher collaboration. Through observation in the teachers' room and from interviews, Kham has been sharing her experience with other teachers, particularly with the same subject matter. However, her interaction with some teachers in general, and with the senior ones in particular, has been limited. She mentioned that

I know little about how others apply student-centered pedagogy in their classroom, what issues they confront and what specific strategies they use to address them. I share my ideas with individual teachers, and frequently get involved in joint lesson planning with colleagues. This will allow us to share our ideas, discuss issues and explore solutions in a formal and organized way without facing the limitation imposed by other teachers' tensions. (Interview 4/11/2008)

To further elaborate on the issues involved in teacher collaboration, she refers to an interaction she had with another teacher on how to get students to work in groups and do presentations for Lao Language and Literature. She had asked the students to explore the information by themselves. They worked through the task and presented what they had learned. However, a few students did not work well with others, and so the teacher pointed out that instead of getting to work with the others right away, they could work by themselves first and then share their opinions in order to come out with the common position. She explained to the others that the method she used was designed to involve

students in discovering the information on their own (Interview 4/11/2008). However, implementing this change was not easy. She also confessed that she had faced challenges and problems given the limited number of support materials and large classes. She mentioned that the other teachers also mentioned the same problems when they had tried out this approach to teaching and learning. And these are the challenges and problems that she would like to work out.

The data suggest that when teachers come together in teacher development groups to reflect, they can complement each other's strategies and compensate for each other's limitations. The participants reported that the school also officially organizes reflections on practice by having the head teachers of the different subject matters come together once a month to reflect what they could do and what needed to be improved. They could also complement the strengths and compensate for limitations. Before the monthly meetings, some teachers of the subject matter had also come together to reflect their practice so that the head teachers would have enough information to share in the group reflection.

The participants also commented that they took part in the group reflection organized by the Provincial Department of Education by having representatives of different subjects taught from 10 different secondary schools in Champasak Province come together to reflect on their teaching and learning. Kham was the representative of Lao Language and Literature subject, and Phai was to present about the teaching and learning Mathematics in his school. They mentioned that this meeting was really helpful for sharing and exchanging knowledge, ideas, and practices with teachers from other institutions.

The examples show that for their self-directed professional development, teachers can identify one goal that they consider to be of importance to them – either individually or in small groups, list activities that they will implement to reach that goal, and discuss the resources needed and the ways in which their progress and accomplishments will be assessed. In such a situation, teachers takes responsibility for their own development, while the role for the administrators and supervisors is to facilitate, guide, and support that development. And what better way to learn than from colleagues who are

encountering the same challenges daily: how to address the complexities of teaching and provide the best possible learning experience for students. Kham stated that she regularly had meetings with other teachers in order to exchange experiences, share ideas, or discuss how they could improve their teaching and students' learning. She mentioned that observation of other teachers' teaching and collaboration with other teachers was very beneficial and helpful in order to improve herself. She considered herself a strong supporter of a collaborative working climate in the school in which teachers help each other and learn from each other. In her view, relationships between teachers and head teachers, teachers and students, and among teachers themselves need to be based on mutual respect and trust.

Their efforts to interact, cooperate, collaborate, and coordinate with their colleagues, the nature and the purpose of the teachers' interactions with other teachers, and the contexts or opportunities they create for themselves to work and learn collaboratively with their colleagues depend largely on their conceptions of the worth of their professional development and the need to help their colleagues improve their knowledge and skills in order to increase students' learning.

7.5. Formal Professional Development

The data reveal the institutional controls over teachers' work and the tensions teachers experience trying to balance the organizational and supervisory constraints imposed by the system with their professional responsibility to students. However, they mentioned that under the leadership reinforced by the head teacher, periodic professional development programs were held in the school. The teachers were also provided opportunities to take part in the professional development programs outside their school to upgrade their knowledge and skills. These programs provided teachers with the opportunity for reflection and to learn new ideas related to pedagogy, school development, and change. The most frequent formal professional development activities include workshop training and professional development courses or programs.

7.5.1. Workshop Training

Under the leadership, periodic professional development sessions were held in the school. These opportunities helped teachers learn about new teaching techniques, such as cooperative learning groups, pattern seeking, and problem solving. Phai attended sessions that endorsed some of the pedagogical practices in which he already engaged, giving him a professional legitimacy for what he was doing on the basis of his own beliefs and experiences. He also found these short-term professional development courses far more beneficial (in terms of new ideas, instructional strategies, polishing his teaching skills, and building confidence in teaching). In fact he found these sessions to be more useful than his three-year training program or pre-service program because it was in his judgment too theoretical, very overly transmission-oriented, and merely focused on teachers' skills, with little attention to their underlying attitudes and beliefs. He believes that teachers need to undergo personal transformation in order to develop and improve.

Similarly, Kham showed her interest in the workshop training and recognized the need to participate in it. She informed me that in addition to her pre-service training, she had participated in some in-service professional development programs, including both workshops and seminars organized inside and outside school, and by the Department of Education in the province. The training programs she attended further strengthened her abilities in overcoming classroom management problems and enhanced her knowledge and skills in interactive, student-participation teaching that she would be able to adopt or adapt to her teaching to improve students learning.

Moreover, Phet demonstrated her professional growth through workshop training. Even though she major in Lao Language and Literature, Phet also helped teach Mathematics and Politics for the first year secondary school for a few years, so she worked hard to upgrade herself, and then she was assigned to teach at the upper secondary level. During these times, she was involved in workshop training on subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge as well as on how to use the course books. Through these programs, she had an opportunity to learn new approaches to teaching that involved students working in pairs or groups for discussion or interaction. She also experienced how the interactive activities were constructed and adapted so that she would be able to apply them in her classroom. This training also helped her improve her

knowledge and skills in teaching by exchanging ideas and experiences with others. She said that *“the workshop training was helpful and provided me with opportunity to discuss with other teachers, which was helpful to help improve my knowledge and professionals”* (Interview 4/11/2008).

Vanh also valued the workshop training he had had the opportunity to participate in during his working life. He explained that before he got his scholarship to study in Vietnam for his master’s degree, he struggled very hard to improve his knowledge and skills in teaching. He did not have many opportunities to take part in workshop training that was officially organized. Only in the academic year 1997-98 did he have an opportunity to take part in training on how to use a new approach to teaching and how to use new materials. He mentioned that even that one opportunity was very helpful and important for his professional growth and teaching. It helped him understand, and he was able to adapt such techniques or strategies to his practices to produce better outcomes.

These reflections show how the teachers believe the pre-service program had a very limited impact on their learning about teaching and their work in their schools. They were concerned about the courses’ effectiveness in contributing to teacher development. They found that these courses were based on old-fashioned curricula, were poorly executed, did not offer them rich learning experiences, and were alien to their immediate needs in their schools. However, they found the short-term, innovative, in-service professional development training provided them with opportunities to learn about innovative pedagogies (for examples, interactive teaching and new classroom management techniques) and to share their perspectives with others in an interactive environment.

7.5.2. Professional Development Program

Formal professional development courses or programs can be full-time, part-time, or sandwiched into a work schedule. They can also be sequential, modular, or one-off, general or specialized, voluntary or compulsory, or they can be organized as self-directed learning. In these formal programs, the teachers were provided learning opportunities to improve their performance, to bring about their professional, academic, and personal development through the provision of a whole series of study experiences and activities

for the purpose of extending professional knowledge, interests, or skills and for a degree, diploma, or other qualification subsequent to initial training. For this model, new knowledge is presented to teachers that is often beyond their existing knowledge base.

As Kham and Phai only received a Higher Diploma in teaching, during my study they took part in a professional development program (equivalent 6 months) for bachelor's degrees during the academic year semester break. In terms of professional development, the course provided them with the opportunity to reflect on and address their teaching practice. They contended that their pre-service course was delivered in a traditional fashion (exposure to theories, little time dedicated to practicum) and thus had little influence on the ability to handle the practical aspects of teaching in the classroom.

Vanh had an opportunity to upgrade himself in Vietnam for six years. Phet was among the other participants who had never had opportunities for long-term professional development program. She said that

I never had an opportunity to take a professional course to upgrade my degree because one has not been offered within the country until few years ago. As I have now been working in the university, I really want to upgrade my qualification. (Interview 11/11/2008)

The reflections show that formal professional development such as workshop training and programs are seen to be very useful and that these teachers wish to have an opportunity to participate in them. Workshop training could help them improve their knowledge and skills in teaching and learning practices especially interactive student-centered approaches. Gaining knowledge from a training program, teachers are able to adapt the approaches to meet the culture and the context of a particular school in order to reach better outcomes.

These teachers also wished that they could have the opportunity to take part in professional development courses or program not only to upgrade their knowledge and skills but also to obtain higher qualifications. As shown in Chapter 4, many teachers, including my two participants, had only obtained a Higher Diploma in teaching. According to the National policy, teachers teaching at upper secondary level should obtain at least a bachelor's degree in Education.

Learning is seen as a continuous or lifelong process where teachers are strongly involved in their own ongoing professional development to extend their certificates and to remain current in both subject and pedagogy knowledge and skills. Instead of sending them out for training, attending workshops, seminars, or conferences, ongoing professional development for teachers could be done by carrying out regular in-house training, observing others teaching, mentoring, or supporting individual reflection.

7.6. Chapter Summary

The participants' approach to develop professionalism involves the initiatives and activities they carry out independently in their day-to-day work and in formal professional development activities. These activities are usually unstructured and intended to improve their practice in the school, influencing students' learning and development, and affecting the school's work culture by enhancing teaching effectiveness, and supporting professional growth, thereby permitting transition to roles of higher status and responsibility within the teaching profession.

Teachers may differ in their approaches to teaching, their ways of dealing with students, and the perceptions or understanding they bring to pedagogical issues. That pedagogical diversity between teachers seems to be compounded by each person's concept of self and of the other's professional or academic status. Critical dialogue and reflective practice are the means to improve this understanding, regardless of how much experience the teacher has.

The data suggests that collaboration, reflection, and observations were the common activities that the teachers were informally involved in. They also followed their own and the school agendas of collaborations and reflection aiming to improve their practice by interaction among one another to share experiences, ideas, and perspectives and to reflect on their practice with mutual support. They also observed one another with the goal of helping or learning from each other. Moreover, the data show that teachers still considered formal professional development activities important not only to upgrade their knowledge and skills but also to obtain higher qualifications.

Teachers' involvement in professional development activities aim to improve knowledge and skills of teachers, create a climate of collaboration for teachers to share, exchange, reflect on their practice, and learn from each other's experiences. The data show that professional development opportunities could be created together by teachers and support people, either by choosing to focus on a task which the teacher is interested in learning about or by focusing on a practice which teachers implement regularly but would like to change. They had opportunities to expose learners to active mental engagement with the material, the ultimate aim being to make students autonomous learners through their own professional development activities. They advocate a variety of these professional developments activities to execute their version of effective teaching that stimulates thinking and cognitive development.

The teachers place great value on professional or personal interaction among teachers, which involves sharing ideas, exchanging each other' practices, learning ways of dealing with classroom challenges and helping each other in content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content, knowledge of strategies, techniques, and tools to create and sustain a learning environment, and knowledge and attitudes that support political and social justice. Their strategy is to build a climate in the school conducive to learning collaboratively involves creating contexts for collaboration among teachers in professional development activities and so forging a community of learning.

The four teachers had all been educated in a traditional educational environment, which considered learning as transfer of information from the textbook to a student's mind through memorization. However, the experiences they gained in workshop training, observing other teachers, collaboratively interacting with other teachers, reflecting on their own practice, and reading related documents allowed them to see the end product of students' learning not as the accumulation of information but the development of their thinking ability.

CHAPTER EIGHT: KEY FINDINGS, SIGNIFICANCE, AND IMPLICATIONS

8.1. Introduction

This study has explored four teachers' professional life experiences and daily practices by using a qualitative case study methodology to capture in depth their conceptions of, core beliefs about, and approaches to improvement efforts for their individual growth and development and for their schools as a whole. Their stories illustrate their efforts in classroom and school community improvement and their professional development, individually, with others, or with key stakeholders; the challenges they face, and the strategies they adopt to address these challenges.

This chapter presents a discussion of the study's key findings, significance, and implications, and recommendations for future research. It is divided into six parts. The first emphasizes the key beliefs and practices about teaching, improvement, and change. The second part summarizes the study's key findings and significance as they relate to the principal research question. The key findings are synthesized under major principles. The third part presents the study's contributions in relation to the literature, especially the general and distinct contributions it makes to the existing literature on school improvement and educational reform and teachers' professional development. The fourth discusses the immediate implications of the study's results in relation to school improvement, educational reform processes, and teachers' development as an improvement or reform agent. The fifth presents the study's limitations and identifies directions for further research. It then explains the upshot of the study for participants, teachers, and students, key educational officials, and teacher professional education and development. The chapter concludes with my overall reflections on the important lessons the study has produced.

8.2. The Study Participants

In this research, my participants – the four teachers – are considered as 'good-experienced teachers,' with reputations for being on the frontline of improvement efforts

for themselves individually, for their classroom, and for their schools as whole, widely recognized by peers, administrators, and the school community. They stand out, work hard, and persist, sometimes with little institutional or collegial support, to enhance their own knowledge and capacities in order to improve and pursue improvements in the context of the classroom and school community. These teachers as agents of pedagogical, institutional, and social improvement may be characterized in terms of important improvements in their practices (e.g. actions, approaches, strategies, and responses to challenges) both inside and outside the classroom and the beliefs and values that underlie their professional knowledge and capacities and put improvements into practice.

The teachers' improvement efforts in the classroom are motivated by their conceptions of their role as teachers, their sense of commitment to their students, their willingness to try something new, and their interest in doing things differently in order to improve their practice inside and outside their classroom. They take risks in attempting pedagogical changes that transform their practice based mainly on transmissive teaching methods, hierarchical teacher-student relationships, and teachers' working in isolation. They believe that with appropriate help, support, and opportunity for learning, their students can succeed in learning beyond the boundaries of the prescribed syllabus and that they can make a difference in their students' lives.

The teachers' instructional goals emphasize conceptual learning and social and moral development by trying to develop students' problem-solving and critical-thinking skills and to connect students' prior knowledge to the topic under consideration. Their teaching reflects complexity and diversity; they do not rely on only one method but use a variety of methods and pedagogical techniques – for example, teacher-led whole class instruction followed by individual work or group work activities and whole-class interaction –to promote in-depth student learning. In their effort to promote teaching for understanding in the face of varied difficulties in the classroom, the teachers play many different roles – facilitator, enabler, helper, problem solver, counselor, advisor, guide, observer, decision-maker, instructor, resource manager, informant, and supplier of information – which reflect elements of both progressive and traditional pedagogies. Their understanding of multidisciplinary subject knowledge (in Mathematics, Lao Language, and Lao Literature), of general pedagogical knowledge (building relationships,

dealing with classroom management, knowledge of curriculum, assessing learning), and of pedagogical content knowledge all help them teach for understanding. They bring skills to their classroom work, including an extensive selection of teaching strategies and the ability to experiment with their own practice. These skills include problem-solving, deductive methods, cooperative learning, relating students' experience to the outside, question-answer and other techniques to adapt curriculum knowledge to suit students' needs, interests, daily activities, and personal situations.

The teachers believe that they cannot produce wide-reaching effects on structures and teaching culture in the school, generate and sustain widespread changes in classroom practices through individual efforts, or cope with the complex mixture of factors in the school's internal and external environments that hinder pedagogical and institutional changes unless they attend to these challenges by simultaneously improving their professionalism, working with the students, the other teachers, and the leaders and administrators both within the school and the district or province and within the community. They emphasize the importance of all staff members' becoming professionals who possess the motivation, enthusiasm, and confidence to make informal professional decisions in their classrooms in order to provide better learning opportunities for the students. In their view, the bottom line of teachers collaboration is to create a supportive school environment that encourages teachers to do things together (e.g., learning, planning teaching, adapting materials), to talk and listen to each other with the aims to learn from each other, to reflect on each others' practices and improvement efforts and to encourage each other to take risks and to solve problems. Only by working in such a supportive school environment can they engage in continuous improvements and address the challenges to these changes.

The teachers strongly believe that a school leader is in a critical position to establish a support system and a climate that generate motivation for teachers to take risks and experiment with any ideas that they believe will improve their practice and, as a consequence, improve students' academic achievement in their classrooms. In their view, when leaders and teachers support each other in a spirit of teamwork and collegiality, a positive emotional and psychological climate develops that pervades the atmosphere of the entire school and has effects even beyond the classroom. Good communication and

the teachers' personal qualities such as trustworthiness, professional competence, and being proactive are appropriate to change have served as keys to creating such working relationships with their leaders.

The teachers appear committed to pedagogical, institutional, and social improvement or reform. Their commitment to reform efforts in the classroom and school community is reflected in their core beliefs about improving their practice in these contexts and the efforts they make to translate these beliefs into practice. Their motivation and positive attitudes towards reform, combined with their confidence in their subject and understanding of pedagogy, enhance their ability to take risks, engage in improvement activities in their own classrooms, and build relationships and lead improvement activities in the school community. The pedagogical reform in the classroom and their development of a supportive environment in the school through teachers' collaboration and reflections both seek to improve students' learning, understanding, and development.

The teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, the school environment, and the improvement they pursue in line with these core beliefs make them agents of 'pedagogical, 'institutional,' and 'social' reform in the classroom and school community. For this reason, they continually improve themselves through many formal and informal professional development activities inside and outside their schools.

8.3. Key findings and Significance

My principal research question was: *How might descriptions of teachers' experiences and challenges in their attempts to reform or improve their work and practices affect teacher education?* This study sought to find out the teachers' experiences, ideas, and perspectives with improvement initiatives or activities in the classroom and school community linked to the professional development; the challenges they face; and the strategies they utilize to deal with challenges. The research was guided by four sub-questions for data collection, subsequent analysis and discussion in the chapters. However, I do not discuss each subsidiary question separately to summarize the key findings in this chapter; instead, I synthesize and address them by weaving together

the discussion on improvement efforts, intended outcomes, challenges, and coping strategies under the following broad, overlapping or interrelated principles:

- The teachers' efforts to improve classroom practices, school practices, and their professional development are all interrelated.
- There is a complex interplay between the various challenges in teachers' efforts for fundamental change in students' learning.
- The teachers simultaneously engage in pedagogical, institutional, and social reform.

8.3.1. Interrelated Improvement Efforts

The kinds of improvement the teachers' experience inside and outside the classroom and their efforts to develop their professionalism are interrelated. In the classroom, even though the teachers utilize traditional approaches (teacher-led whole-class instruction), they also try to encourage active learning, individual responsibility, participation in collaborative efforts, problem-solving, mutual support, and cooperation in constructing shared understanding of subject matter. These features of improvement are fundamental in trying to create an interactive and learner-centered climate in the classroom and in building a supportive school environment in which the teachers individually and collaboratively become involved in this continuous improvement. They also are involved in many professional development activities to enhance their knowledge and ability for such classroom and school improvement.

The kinds of improvements the teachers want in their school community, especially in the ways which teachers and leaders or educational officials interact, also emphasize the principles of meaningful interaction, mutual support, cooperation, shared understanding of opportunities and issues, and the development of mutual respect and trust. They believe that a supportive school climate inspires and facilitates the development of the value and practices, such as shared understanding of learning, opportunities for dialogues or interaction, mutual support, and the will to improve. Thus the teachers' approaches to improving their classroom, their schools, and their professional development are all premised on the principles of exchanging ideas, seeking and implementing new ideas and improvement, encouraging and exchanging with each other, engaging in increased communication, and fostering collaboration and reflection.

The teachers' approaches to professional development are based on the same premises of cooperation, mutual support, interaction, collaboration, and partnership to share knowledge and ideas to reflect their practice and to improve their professionalism. The teachers use their involvement in professional development to engender change in relationship with and among teachers in order to create positive, productive relationships in which different teachers can support each other to enhance learning opportunities, build the school's capacity for continuous improvement, and deal effectively with the many challenges to educational change inside and outside school that are predominantly cultural, political, and social in nature.

In the context of school improvement and educational reform, changes and challenges co-exist. Change often brings new challenges that require teachers to reflect on their own practices, devise new strategies, and invest additional energy and efforts. The teachers' stories about classroom improvement suggest that they constantly battle challenges in their efforts to make improvements. The challenges vary in their nature, gravity, and sources. Nevertheless, the teachers are faced with a complex interplay between these challenges because most of the important challenges are intricately interconnected; they cut across all these improvement efforts.

8.3.2. Interconnected Challenges

The main classroom challenges are those related to the participants' efforts to include the implementation of or adaptation of a new approach to teaching and learning – interactive learner-centered pedagogies that emphasize the learner's central role in the educational process. The aim is to help students understand what knowledge is and how it is acquired, reframe the teachers' and learners' roles in the learning process, and reorient the hierarchical teacher-student relationship to reduce teacher control and authority and thus empower students to become active participants in their learning.

The teachers' experiences in trying to improve their classroom practice make it evident that adapting by including the implementation of interactive learning in their teaching is easier said than done. These teachers and their students come across a variety of interconnected challenges that arise not only from situations in the classroom but also from circumstances in the school community. For example, the participants place

importance on teaching for understanding, which involves students' conceptual understanding of curriculum topics. In-depth understanding requires the students' deep cognitive engagement with the subject matter involved. It is often difficult because students do not spontaneously engage in the cognitive activity. In fact, the demands of conceptual learning are complex. Deeper understanding of subject matter is contingent on different factors, such as the quality of the material available, the relevance of activities or tasks that support or reinforce learning, the students' motivation and prior knowledge, the students' familiarity with the various ways in which to interact with the subject matter (e.g., how to connect ideas, construct mental structures, recall memory), and the teacher's ability to comprehend and represent the conceptual difficulties facing individual students and to find effective ways to remedy them. If these conditions are not met, students might be unable to gain a deeper understanding of subject matter. Pressure to engage in cognitive learning without adequate support and cognitive stimulation then leads to frustration among the students, which can manifest itself in apparent resistance to the improvement.

From the teachers' view, the challenges facing students in their efforts to engage in-depth learning are also intricately linked to the conditions inside and outside the classroom and the school environments that shape who students are as individual learners. For example, in the classroom, the students learn from different teachers who have their own ways of organizing teaching and treating students. Some teachers just teach through lectures, encouraging students to learn by rote from textbooks and discouraging them from thinking critically and learning collaboratively. The teachers believe that the differences in teachers' philosophies of and approaches to instruction leave students confused about what kind of education they are receiving in different subjects from different teachers. This problem underscores the need for guiding individual teachers' instructional practices in their school by a shared philosophy of teaching and learning, which can only be developed through professional interaction or development activities. Moreover, the students resist learning experiences intended to develop them as autonomous learners because their experiences do not conform to their deeply entrenched belief about teaching and their self-concept as learners. Students may wish to be lectured to, and they may not respond to teachers' attempts to encourage active

participation; they may lack the self-esteem to ask questions when they have difficulties; they may be accustomed to a culture of silence; and they may misinterpret the teachers' attempts to provide a friendly interactive environment in the classroom.

Moreover, the tension originating from the pressure to cover the syllabus together with an exam system that emphasizes memory recall questions has a significant adverse effect on the teachers' efforts to promote conceptual learning and the students' inclination to accept it. Syllabus coverage is further compounded by factors such as excessive holidays or long vacations that considerably reduce the actual instructional time.

Likewise, the participants reported that teachers in the local school are strongly individualistic. They rarely interact with each other, exchange ideas, or have a common motivation and determination to change their practices. Individual teachers' commitment to change in classroom practices and willingness to participate in school-wide improvement activities are affected by a large number of factors, including personal dispositions, values and beliefs, knowledge, abilities, and personal histories from their past and present lives, organizational factors such as a supportive environment (provision of resources, positive emotional and psychological climate, support from leaders and colleagues, provision of rewards and acknowledgement), and organizational policies (e.g., system of accountability, curriculum, assessment practices, and remuneration and other service benefits).

In addition, many parents do not have the necessary capacity (skills, awareness, and resources) to help their children in learning and socialization. Often, parents themselves have not had any schooling; therefore, they are not familiar with how they can support their children's success in education. Many of the students hail from families belonging to lower socioeconomic strata (poverty and lack of education in the family).

8.3.3. Pedagogical, Institutional, and Social Reform

Theoretically and practically, the teachers present themselves as progressive or reflective practitioners. Their approach to pedagogical improvement or reform emphasizes both 'academic' and 'cultural' aspects of the classroom and school life. In the academic aspect of their approach, they emphasize students' in-depth learning of academic knowledge. The learning activities they organize, instructional strategies they

adopt and adapt, pedagogical decisions they make during lessons, and the remedial actions they take to help students cope with conceptual learning together frame their role as a facilitator, an innovator, a helper, a problem solver, a counselor, an advisor, a guide, an observer, a decision-maker, an instructor, a resource manager, and a supplier of information. Acting in line with these roles, they make appropriate changes in everyday lessons depending on the pedagogical techniques or strategies they decide to apply to each lesson. Sometimes they try out new pedagogical ideas, techniques, and strategies to promote interactive learning. Sometimes, they adapt existing practices by making changes in how students interact with the material. Sometimes, they make necessary adjustments in the lesson to balance interactive learning activities with traditional models of teaching by providing additional information and relating subject matter to the local environment or student's real-life experiences with appropriate techniques for specific situations.

The other pedagogical reform in the classroom also relates to cultural alteration, including the relationship between teachers and students, opportunities for interactions among students, mutual expectations, and rules and regulations. They try to reform their relationship with students by adopting less controlling authoritative attitudes. They believe that a positive socio-moral climate can provide a non-threatening atmosphere in which students' strengths and successes are celebrated, their weaknesses receive special attention, their difficulties are accepted as part of learning process, their self-regulation is valued, and generally they are viewed as responsible, capable, and active participants in learning. The teachers also motivate students and create opportunities for students' mutual interactions by encouraging them to speak out and celebrating their participation by using rewards. Moreover, they provide students with opportunities to observe and appreciate positive social and moral behaviors (e.g., cleanliness, punctuality, sense of responsibility, self-regulation, confidence, motivation, self-esteem, and the virtues of respect, fairness, forgiveness, sympathy, and honesty).

The teachers' approach to institutional change in the school also encompasses both structural and cultural reform. They use an approach similar to the one they adopt in making changes or dealing with challenges in the classroom. Reforming the cultural aspect of school mainly involves changing working relationships with other teachers so

that teachers engage in professional interaction, sharing ideas and resources, interacting to reduce isolation and learn from each other's experience, supporting each other in pedagogical improvements, and cooperating in decisions and activities as strategies for their professional development aiming at institutional development. They believe that these professional development activities help foster collaborative learning and teamwork, which are necessary for building a school's capacity to engage in continuous improvement and deal with challenges that inhibit improvement. They emphasize professional shared understanding of important practices in order to ensure better learning opportunities for students.

Seeking structural and cultural changes individually and in partnership with the leaders and other teachers, the teachers play a "support" role. The teachers' function as "supporter" involves different activities and roles (e.g., initiator, motivator, helper, critical friend, and group leader). These roles and the working strategies aligned with them evolve in response to changing situations and overlap on occasions. Their efforts to improve classroom practice by making a shift from one tradition of instruction to another or by combining different approaches to teaching involves teachers' reflective critique of their effective and ineffective pedagogical practices and the theories underlying them. The teachers not only criticize weak aspects of their own and their colleagues' pedagogical practices but also highlight the alternatives that might help produce better results. Being critical friends or partners in the practice, they offer their reflections on practices that they consider inappropriate, for example, the inflexible use of curricular material and traditional ways of testing. In doing so, for example, they encourage teachers to visit each others' classroom in order to promote collective responsibility for students and enable more in-depth discussion or reflection around students' needs and their practices.

Such activities suggest that teachers can create reproduce and transform institutional and social practices and conditions through their activities or experiences in the classroom and school. At the heart of this reform, teachers are the key reformers who engage in both restructuring and re-culturing the classroom and school.

8.4. Contribution

The study has documented Lao teachers' experiences with improvement efforts in the context of the classroom, school community, and professional development. It contributes to knowledge in the field by providing teachers' perspectives and voices on the complexities of educational improvement in schools in Champasak Province in the southern part of Laos in order to contribute to the provision of effective professional development and practices inside and outside the classroom and should inform the discourse on and the efforts to improve schools improvement and introduce educational reform in the region.

Most previous research has discussed or described activities in Western and developed countries; only a small number are about Asia. Also, internationally, little research has focused on the teachers and the challenges and changes they experience in these related contexts. While consistent with what other studies have reported about some aspects of these issues, this study contributes unique perspectives on these phenomena and on other aspects.

Most of the previous studies' findings corroborate what other studies of school improvement and educational reform have reported about the complexity of the process, particularly the factors that inhibit or support pedagogical, institutional, and social reform. This study contributes to the existing literature by reinforcing our existing understanding of the improvement process and by extending the discussion a little further. It supports or corroborates the literature; it complements, supplements, refines, and clarifies perspectives; and it builds on, adds to, or deepens our understanding of the complexities of the process of improvement or reform.

The literature is replete with ideas about progressive pedagogies that help to improve students' learning and development in the classroom by encouraging the use of critical thinking skills, problem-solving, discussion, and other learning approaches to mobilize information and develop knowledge through inquiry and discovery. Reflecting on the teachers' classroom experiences, this study recognizes that the improvement process in the classroom is more complex; instructional improvement is not a linear process in which teachers replace traditional practices with new ones. In trying to

improve teaching and learning, teachers adopt new ideas and instructional strategies, but at the same time, they also adapt traditional methods in daily teaching. The study's findings contribute to our understanding of the current situations of teaching and learning in Laos; the combination of traditional and innovative approaches is preferable and work better than just rely on one or the other. Making the shift from a traditional classroom environment to an interactive one intended to make students autonomous learners appears to be a prolonged process, particularly under the conditions of traditional examinations, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of resources found in schools in Laos.

The literature emphasizes the importance of building a shared vision of pedagogy, norms, values, collaborative practice, and reflective practitioners and the need for change among teachers. It clearly emphasizes the extent to which the school can promote collaboration among teachers and engage them in ongoing professional growth through collegial and professional interactions involving collaborative inquiry, action research, mentoring, reflection, and cooperative curriculum development (e.g. Beattie, 2004; Little, 1991, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994; Rosenholtz, 1989; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993). However, few authors have discussed the various forms of informal interaction or opportunities for productive professional interaction on a day-to-day basis that teachers create for themselves without stimulation or help from external agents. My study adds to the discussion on how and why teachers become instrumental in promoting qualities such as a proactive approach in initiating relationships, strong knowledge in subject matter and pedagogy, emotional maturity, and sincerity.

Moreover, this study contributes perspectives on the multi-layered nature of teacher-initiated improvement. Teachers' desire for fundamental improvement in what and how students learn in the classroom is complex because of the numerous factors embedded in different situations within and beyond the classroom. For example, teachers find it difficult to promote teaching for understanding and students find it difficult to take part in the interactive activities because they require certain attitudes and skills, such open-mindedness, sociability, curiosity, critical and analytical thinking, problem-solving and inquiry. These difficulties are related to large class size, individual differences, lack of resources, and centralized control over curriculum, testing, class time, the school day, and the school year. Learning is a highly complex and dynamic process. Besides

students' own efforts, other variables, such as materials, instructional strategies, learning activities, and classroom emotional climate powerfully influence how well students learn. These are dependent variables, deeply connected to the beliefs, motivation, competence, and circumstance of the teacher who controls them. Some students lack academic support at home, and some have economic problems. The situation outside school: how they utilize out-of school time, what educational support they get from home, and what influences they experience outside school play an important role in determining their ability to cope with learning. The tensions and perplexities that complicate the total learning environment also arise with colleagues (e.g., unwillingness to collaborate and pessimism), and parents (e.g., lacking interest in their children's education).

Confronted with interconnected obstacles to fundamental change in the classroom, the teachers try to engage in improvement efforts at different levels with different activities. In the classroom, they help students cope with conceptual difficulties, encourage them to learn from the teacher, other students, and other sources and motivate them to incorporate their learning into their lives. The teachers promote change in how teachers work together and build access to each other, work as team and help each other to improve their practice and their professional knowledge, and help their school in removing obstacles to continuous improvement. Moreover, the study recognizes some overarching principles or values that guide how teachers approach challenges, including learning through cooperation, sharing and mutual interaction, pursuing common goals through collaboration, reflection, mutual support, building consensus, and sharing an understanding of the agenda for and approach to development efforts.

In addition, this study has explicated and illustrated the moral dimension of teachers' lives, which plays a significant role in shaping teachers' professional conduct and their reflections on their professional responsibilities and development. They put their best efforts forward to enhance their students' learning and to understand the process, system, and opportunities for continual growth and improvement by being actively involved in a variety of professional development activities. Their awareness of the whole educational system and the structure and processes is the manifest result of their quest for continuous improvement. They are in ongoing self-actualization, which is closely linked with continuous improvement. Their efforts require a high degree of moral

commitment to engage in constant improvement and dedication to the process of continuous improvement and development, for themselves and for others – students, colleagues, and society – in the classroom and the school community.

8.5. Implications

This study produced a detailed account of factors within and beyond the school that either support or hinder the changes the teachers attempt in the classroom and school community. In particular, it gives a perspective on what the teachers think of changes in these areas, how they go about making those changes happen, what challenges they encounter while pursuing those changes, and how they address those challenges. The findings about these questions contain a number of immediate implications for classroom and school practices for the process of educational reform and for teachers' continuing professional development.

8.5.1. School Improvement and Educational Reform

This study has attempted to understand the phenomenology of improvement or reform efforts from the participants' perspective as active agents of pedagogical, institutional, and social reform in order to improve understanding of how educational change occurs, how it can be facilitated, what inhibits it, and how teachers as reform agents deal with constraints (Fullan, 1992; Russell, 1987). The important lessons learned suggest, first, that any improvement efforts involving changes in the classroom to improve what and how students learn is complicated not only by classroom-based factors but also by a large variety of influences from the outside world. Second, individually and in collaboration with other teachers and the head teachers, these change-oriented teachers try to address the challenges they face. Third, educational stakeholders (e.g. parents, community members, educators, supervisors, and policy makers) need to gain a better appreciation of the complex interplay of multi-layered challenges that confound the fundamental change teachers attempt in the classroom. They also need to provide support to schools and teachers either directly (e.g., providing needs resources, removing hurdles) or indirectly (e.g., creating conditions or providing other supports to help teachers deal with the challenges). Thus, the insights this study contributes to the understanding of the change process can significantly inform decisions and practices in facilitating educational

reform in the secondary schools in Chamapasak Province and elsewhere in the country. Central to improvement and reform are teachers. Teachers' continuous professional development is necessary; teachers' collaboration is essential; and teachers' reflection is important.

8.5.2. Teachers are Central to Improvement and Reform

Plans for reforming education come from many sources. However, only teachers can provide the insights that emerge from intensive, direct experience in the classroom itself. They bring to the task of reform knowledge of students, craft, and school culture that others cannot. Moreover, reform cannot be imposed on teachers from the top down or the outside in. If teachers are not convinced of the merit of proposed changes, they are unlikely to implement them energetically. If they do not understand fully what is called for or have not been sufficiently well prepared to introduce content and ways of teaching, reform measures will founder. In either case, the more teachers share in shaping reform measures and the more help they are given in implementing agreed-upon changes, the greater the probability that they will be able to make those improvements stick.

Although teachers are central to reform, they cannot be held solely responsible for achieving it. Teachers alone cannot change the textbooks, install more sensible testing policies than are now in place, create administrative support systems, get the public to understand where reform is headed and why it takes time to get there, and raise the funds needed to pay for reform. Thus, school administrators and education policymakers need to support teachers. Teachers also need academic colleagues—scholars who are experts on relevant subject matter, student development, and learning.

The educational system in Chamapasak Province needs to consider or redefine the teachers' place in educational improvement and wider social change and the teacher's role in changing the complex world of school in Chamapasak Province. The system must also recognize the teachers' expertise in and understanding of their unique teaching context. The educational system should place greater trust in the teachers and provide the support teachers need in implementing changes and dealing with emerging challenges. Systems can empower teachers by recognizing their role as change agent in the classroom

and school community and moving them to center stage to play a leading role in shaping improvements and staff development programs within and outside the school.

These suggestions are made in line with the literature's emphasis on the strategy of specifying directions for educational innovations, formulating new standards of practices, and designing school improvement programs by drawing on the existing valuable practices and knowledge embedded in the teachers' day-to-day work. The educational systems in Champasak Province and elsewhere can certainly benefit from the inclusion of teachers' voices in deliberation, decision making, active planning, and implementation of change. Also, teachers' involvement in policy dialogue should be legitimized by according recognition to the perspectives on change and improvement that are embedded in their experiences. The teachers expressed their desire to get involved in these types of activities; they believed that teachers' having input into the development of programs would not only be a mutually productive experience but also produce greater gains for students because they have firsthand knowledge of what helps teachers become effective in the classroom. Moreover, the teachers' participation in research was a professional development experience for them because it provided them with an opportunity to review their own core beliefs about practice.

8.5.3. Teacher Professional Development and Their Role as Reform Agent

The literature contains a great deal of discussion on how teachers' in-service professional development can be restructured or reformed to make teachers' learning more responsive to their role as active agents in the frontline of pedagogical, institutional, and social reform. Most importantly, the growing recognition that treating teachers as lifelong learners is positively related to improvement in students learning underscores the importance for supporting teachers in Champasak Province and elsewhere in the developing world through various professional development opportunities inside and outside their schools. No matter how professionally competent they are, teachers always need to expand the horizon of their professionalism by renewing their commitment, deepening their understanding of the change process, learning about new ways, exploring innovative strategies, and enhancing their capacity to deal effectively with the complex and multi-layered challenges facing them in their efforts to improve what they do in the

classroom and school community. My participants considered the lack of in-service professional development opportunity as a great disadvantage. It is thus incumbent upon the educational system in Champasak Province to create more opportunities for teachers to energize and reorient themselves in response to the demands of continuous improvement, to become familiar with new developments in pedagogical knowledge, to update their knowledge and skills and develop a reflective mind in order to improve their professionalism as well as to handle changes and respond to emerging challenges effectively.

This study supports the literature's general view that professional development for teachers as improvement agents needs to focus not just on technical teaching skills but also on aspects specific to their change agent roles, which require them to respond flexibly to changes and challenges through innovation, creation, experimentation, inquiry, reflection, adoption, adaptation, and modification. To function as improvement agents in a complicated world of pedagogical, institutional, and social change, teachers need skills, knowledge, and values that apply to any situation both inside and outside classroom practice and challenges that lie within and across them.

As improvement or reform agents, teachers must gain competence in areas such as interactive, progressive pedagogies (skill in teaching for understanding) and relationship building (interpersonal leadership and communicative skills). The relationship skills they can apply to situations include facilitating cooperative learning in the classroom, supporting collaborative work with colleagues, and leading groups and professional development activities (workshops, mentoring, observation, reflection). These various reflections suggest that to play their change agent roles effectively in varied contexts, to make informed professional choices in their day-to-day work, and to become more reflective, teachers need both formal and informal learning opportunities inside and outside the school. The formal ones can include professional development programs, training, workshops, and participation in seminars and conferences; informal means may be school-based, but they can encompass a wide variety of opportunities such as time allowed for visiting each others' classrooms, team teaching, mentoring or coaching each other, collegial work in school in aspects such as planning, resource development, or cooperative problem solving through action research. These activities

may not be carried out within the existing structures (e.g., schedules and resources), which need corresponding changes. School officials need to review existing policies to make them friendly to teacher-initiated changes; they need to provide additional resources and allow schools to adjust their timetables to provide for these activities. These provisions are worth considering because they approach improvement or change by integrating teacher development with school improvement.

8.6. Limitations and Areas of Further Research

This study provides a number of important insights into teachers' experiences with change. It sheds light on the diverse challenges to improving teachers' experience in the classroom and school community and their professional development. Though certain considerations limit the scope of the study, some aspects of the study require qualification and provide direction for future research.

First, I worked with a small group of teachers of two subjects matters in two educational institutions. Future research should seek a large and more representative sample. It should also test the generalizability of the findings by extending the sampling to include teachers with varied subject and experience background as well as a broader representation of schools.

Second, my study took place in schools in an urban setting in the Laos' southern province. Compared with such rural societies, urban life is deeply influenced by technological developments, economic shifts, and political changes. In both national and international contexts, these circumstances exert greater pressure on people in urban settings to change and also present them with more opportunities for educational and economic development. Compared with rural ones, schools in urban areas are better resourced (qualified staff, material, equipment). In view of these variations, a similar study focused on teachers' from high schools in a rural setting is desirable in order to generate insights into teachers' experiences of improvement in the socio-cultural realities of the rural environment.

Third, this study was based on the teachers' own perceptions of challenges to their work with their students. They offered extensive commentaries and interpretations on

how their students behave in the classroom and outside it and on the implications of these students' characteristics for learning and development. They cited student characteristics such as resistance to interactive teaching, passivity, withdrawal, low self-expectations, lack of self-confidence and the like that impeded their efforts to engage the students in interactive learning. The teachers' conceptions of the students' characteristics may not necessarily represent the students' actual levels of motivation or abilities to learn. These findings should therefore be interpreted with appropriate care. Teachers may not always be accurate in their perceptions of certain motivational dimensions in students' academic lives, families, or community environment. Further research might also examine what perspectives or opinions the students have and how they contrast or coincide with the teachers' perspectives. Matching students' responses with teachers' will help develop a more balanced perspective on students' motivations, their underlying causes and their consequences for teaching and learning.

Fourth, the study mainly looks at teachers' experiences inside and outside their classrooms. Further study will be required to investigate the school-community relationships in greater depth. Moreover, further research is required to understand more fully which parental involvement activities most effectively meet the needs of specific groups of parents. Researchers should also examine the effectiveness of these parental involvement practices from the parents' and other stakeholders' points of view, for example, by asking how they want to be involved in their children' schooling.

Finally, in order to gain a deeper understanding into school reform in Laos, all of the recommendations above for further studies might also rely on more research into why education in high schools allegedly does not fully cater to adolescent students' learning and development. Some possible reasons have been indicated in this thesis such as the examination system, an unsupportive home environment, and pervasive use of traditional teaching methods. However, these all indications need to be investigated in depth. The teachers' perspective that situations in the home and community environment do not support the values and norms of learner-centered progressive pedagogies especially deserves further study. If learner-centered pedagogies represent a valuable contribution to the meaning and practices of school reform, the tasks before us may also be removing the

obstacles preventing the acceptance and use of certain progressive philosophies of teaching and learning.

8.7. Upshot

The educational systems in Champasak Province and elsewhere, the educational officials or stakeholders, the teachers, the educators, and the teacher professional education programs can certainly benefit and learn from the inclusion of teachers' experiences in deliberation, decision making, and active implementation of improvements and reforms.

8.7.1. Participants/learners/teachers

The study provided the participants with the opportunity to have their voices heard. It presented them with a forum to share their experiences, concerns, and practical knowledge of dealing with problems and enhancing students' understanding of subject matter within the wider teacher community, locally and internationally. They also had the opportunity to reflect on the interrelationships between personal and professional development and school reform and to articulate their understanding of the ways and the situations in which they learned, developed, and contributed to the change process inside and outside their schools.

The participants' reflections delineate the extent and the ways in which they have benefited from participating in the study. The study was planned as a qualitative case study based on interview questions and classroom observations. However, given the research participants' interest in the study, it became more of a collaborative venture in which the participants' frank, independent, and voluntary interactions provided access to new dimensions of the research problem that might have remained unexplored otherwise. The teachers' reflection on their learning in the research indicated that the interactive form of research was a professional development experience for them.

It is recommended, therefore, that teachers in Laos be given the opportunities to take responsibility and control of their own personal and professional development. Accordingly, teachers must (1) actively determine what they need to improve; (2) have access to obtain information and models of good practice; (3) be given the chance to

analyze and apply new information and skills; (4) focus on different components of the curriculum in different circumstances; (5) be given opportunities to develop professionally based on their personalities, concerns, and needs; (6) be provided chances to collaborate with others; (7) have opportunities for reflection and awareness and for innovation; and (8) be made responsible for their own learning by selecting activities such as workshops, seminars, training, or self-directed studies that enable them to improve their knowledge and skills.

8.7.2. Educational Officials and Educational Stakeholders

MOE is the central body of the program, but it is recommended that the Provincial Education Department liaise with MOE to provide professional development resources, for example, up-to-date textbooks, computers that schools can utilize, and professional development activities such as workshops, seminars, conferences, and activities that provide formal opportunity to collaborate so teachers are able to participate for their professional growth and development. The training content must be oriented to specific situations and be based on learners' prior knowledge and experience. The District Educational Departments and schools must be empowered to create and implement training plans at a local level that effectively utilize existing resources and those made available by the Provincial Education Department. They should also empower teachers' professional development at different levels or stages. Leaders should encourage teachers in self-directed learning and serve as facilitators who provide guidance and structuring activities.

The policy-makers, educational managers, and donors need to listen to teachers. We need a better representation of teachers' voices – inclusion of representative teachers who are committed to, interested in, and knowledgeable about the change process in secondary schools. These teachers can be mediators between educational systems and their schools, and they are the best-placed stakeholders to provide the authorities with well-informed views on the efficacy of new policies, programs, and projects. Their input will not only facilitate designing programs and innovations relevant to school change but also help to reduce the gap between teachers and educational managers, thereby enhancing the school's capacity to engage in continuous improvement. Educators,

planners, or program developers can seek teachers' input into pre-service and in-service teacher development, school management and change, and designing programs or interventions for school-community partnerships.

8.7.3. Teacher Professional Education or Development Programs

Organizing a training-activity program is still preferable in the Lao context. However, a case can be made for self-directed learning where individual teachers identify, plan, and pursue activities for their own learning. Teachers can identify and collect, analyze, and interpret data in an area of their interest and then apply it to their own practice. This process will help teachers increase their self-reliance in decision making and change from being dependent on external sources to solve the problems for their personal and professional growth.

It can be argued that effective teacher professional development should involve more than occasional large-group sessions; it should include activities such as study teams, collaboration between teachers, and peer coaching in which teachers can continuously and cooperatively examine and reflect on their assumptions and practices.

Collaborative activities should be used in professional development for teachers. Interest groups of teachers within and beyond school should learn together based on their needs. This bottom-up rather than top-down approach to professional development would empower teachers, and they would become lifelong learners and self-managers.

Reflective practice should be included in professional development initiatives or strategies both for pre- and in-service teachers. It underlies classroom assessment of student learning, effective differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, and team-based school improvement efforts. Even more, it is a way of thinking that fosters personal learning, behavioral change, and improved performance. Teachers or student-teachers would have a deeper understanding of their own learning and teaching style and, ultimately, greater effectiveness as teachers.

8.8. Conclusion

This study has attempted to develop a detailed sketch of the teachers' professional life experiences and daily practices in their everyday work. Their stories illustrate their

efforts in classroom and school community improvement and their professional development, individually, with others, and with key stakeholders; the challenges they face; and the strategies they adopt to address these challenges. These diverse multi-layered challenges to the pedagogical, institutional, and social changes the teachers pursue in classroom and school community and the strategies they adopt to address these challenges were generated by in-depth interviews, classroom observations, post-lesson reflections, and field notes. The improvement efforts and challenges that the participants cited are academic, social, structural, and institutional. These are interconnected, located in the context of the classroom teaching environment, school structure, and social environment.

While consistent with the literature in recognizing these general challenges to improvement and reform, this study has shown the complex interplay of diverse challenges within and across the contexts of classroom, school day-to-day practices and the professionalism the teachers have tried to develop. The classroom practice they teachers are attempting to improve and reform is complex because it is integrally connected to the wider environment of the school. The school does not function in isolation because it is located in the wider socio-cultural environment and controlled by forces external to it. This interconnectedness requires the teachers to engage in appropriate strategies or approaches to reform (classroom-based and out-of-school) that are mutually dependent and have important features in common, such as emphasizing relationships, interaction, reflection, collaboration, mutual support, and innovation.

Teachers' improvement and reform involve efforts to promote in-depth student learning, reflection, collaboration, and effective working relationships among teachers inside and outside their schools. Their efforts in the classroom primarily involve enhancing opportunities for interactive learning, addressing challenges that inhibit students' in-depth learning, and reorienting teacher-student relationships. In schools, the teachers have tried to create or renew the culture, structures, and the system's practices of relationships and to seek improvement in the ways the school is organized. To improve their professional skills, they engage in many different professionalism development activities including observation, reflection, interaction, collaboration, and training programs for their professional growth and development. Their beliefs about pedagogical,

institutional, and social reform and their commitment to their own continuous growth and improvement and that of the people with whom they work and live in the face of many complex difficulties, reveal them to be dedicated, thoughtful, responsive, reflective, optimistic, and hardworking practitioners in their own right. The professional development and the improvement the teachers pursue inside and outside the classroom are mainly inspired by their commitment to their students, as manifest in the concern they show toward student learning and development, their emphasis on promoting deeper understanding of subject matter and making students self-directed learners, and their efforts to foster positive social and moral behavior. This commitment to students is grounded in their personal morality.

Overall, the teachers are motivated, talented, knowledgeable, competent, and committed to their profession, which is a powerful influence on the people with whom they work. They are models of good practitioners, sustained and enlivened by a creative commitment to the profession and the well-being of society.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: A Letter Requesting Administrative Permission

Date:

Subject: Permission to conduct research in school

Dear Mr. / Ms.....,
(Administrator's name)

I am a doctoral student in the Curriculum Theory and Implementation program in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, Canada. In relation to my thesis, I am planning a research project that seeks to involve four teachers in Champasak Province, two teachers from Champasak University and two teachers from a Secondary school in Pakse District. In order to begin this project, I need your permission to access the school and conduct the research with teachers.

My study intends to explore the question: *How might descriptions of teachers' experiences and challenges in their attempts to reform or improve their work and practices, affect teacher education?* The research seeks to generate a deeper contextualized understanding of how teachers' experience and address challenges with any changes or improvement of their work. The ideas and insights will inform decisions and actions in the field of teacher development and school improvement in the southern provinces of Laos and elsewhere.

In order to collect data, I need a close interaction with the research participants over an extended period of time (at least eight months). My major data collection strategies will include a series of three classroom observations for each participant followed by post-observation conference, three 60-minute, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with each research participant, monthly meetings (discussing factors related to change and improvement and for teachers to share or exchange their ideas, problems, solutions, etc. related to their teaching practice), and document analysis (e.g. lesson plans, monthly journals, documents from school reports, and reports from the Ministry of Education). My study will not evaluate the school or the teachers involved in the study; rather, it seeks to understand the subjective experiences of the participants in their local context and in school reform.

The school and the research participants will be informed about the nature of the demands the study places on their participation. Participation in this study is voluntary, and participants will have the option of withdrawing from this study at any time without having to give any reason and without incurring any adverse consequence. In addition, they may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project.

The information gathered from observation, field notes, documents, and interviews will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location (locked cabinet at my home). All data collected will be used for the purposes of my doctoral thesis and perhaps later for subsequent research articles. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed after completion of the study.

If you agree to the terms and conditions stated above, please sign the enclosed information letter form and return it to me in the envelope provided. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by phone at 856 30 534 7614 or 856 20 685 2695 or by email ptheppha@sfu.ca or by post:

Faculty of Education,
Champasak University
Ban Chatsan, Pakse District
Champasak Province

Or contact my supervisor, Associate Professor, Dr. Allan MacKinnon at 011-778-782-3432, or by email at amackinn@sfu.ca , or by post:

Simon Fraser University
Faculty of Education
8888 University Drive
Burnaby, BC
V5A 1S6 Canada

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,
Phonesvanh Thepphasoulithone

Appendix B:Administrative Approval Form

I,, a of
....., Champasak Province, Laos, have read the description
Phonesavanh Thepphasoulithone’s project and am satisfied that I understand its content. I
support the research and give permission for Phonesavanh Thepphasoulithone to work in
the school and with 2 teachers selected for the research project. I understand that the
project will commence in May and end in December. I also understand that the teachers
can choose to withdraw from the project at any time before its completion and that the
information collected is confidential and will be used only for research purposes
(completion of her doctoral thesis and the publication of subsequent articles).

.....

Date:

Signature.....

Appendix C: A Letter to Research Participants

Date:

Dear Mr. /Mrs.
(Teacher's Name)

I am a doctoral student in the Curriculum Theory and Implementation program in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, Canada. In relation to my thesis, I am currently planning a research project under the supervision of Associate Professor, Dr. Allan MacKinnon, Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University.

My study intends to explore the question: *How might descriptions of teachers' experiences and challenges in their attempts to reform or improve their work and practices, affect teacher education?* The research seeks to generate a deeper contextualized understanding of how teachers' experience and address challenges with any changes or improvement of their work. The ideas and insights will inform decisions and actions in the field of teacher development and school improvement in the southern provinces of Laos and elsewhere.

I have been given the approval permission from your institution to conduct this research. Therefore, I am contacting you to inquire whether you would be interested in participating in my study. Your participation would involve the following:

- Three 60-minutes interviews about your teaching beliefs and practices, how these have developed, and how they relate to school improvement.
- Three classroom observations, each followed by an informal post observation (no more than 30 minutes) focusing on teaching and learning activities, student teacher interaction, and the learning environment.
- 1-2 pages reflection about incidents, lessons, or experiences that illustrate something important to you as a teacher; and
- Opportunities to read transcripts (of formal and informal interviews), field notes (of observation) and drafts of chapters.

I will take all responsible measure to protect your confidentiality and anonymity. I wish to audiotape and transcribe later all formal and informal interviews. Your name will not appear on your interview transcripts. Codes will be used to replace names, locations, and other potentially identifiable characteristics. These codes will be carefully designed and will only be known by myself. Pseudonyms will be assigned to the school, the class, and the place where you work and live. Only my supervisor, Associate Professor, Dr. Allan MacKinnon and myself will have access to the data and use it for research purpose. Associate Professor, Dr. Allan MacKinnon can be reached by telephone at 011-778-782-3432, or by email at amackinn@sfu.ca , or by post:

Simon Fraser University
Faculty of Education
8888 University Drive

Burnaby, BC
V5A 1S6 Canada

The raw data will remain in a locked filing cabinet in my home until I destroy them after the completion of my research thesis. Please note that two copies of the PhD thesis will be kept in the Library of Simon Fraser University, which will be accessible to all beneficiaries of the library resources at Simon Fraser University.

There will no risk in participation in this study. I will make every effort to protect the privacy of what you say about your activities inside and outside the school. I will select interview location in ways that carefully consider your privacy, convenience, time, mental peace, and physical comfort. I will inform you in advance of the schedule of my classroom visits.

Though there is no direct benefit to you for your participation, your contribution to this study is beneficial in helping educators and researchers better understand the development of the researchers who are conscious of the need of their own continued professional development and devote their expertise and energy to school improvement efforts and initiatives.

I very much appreciate the time and the efforts you may commit to this study, and, of course, you cannot be adequately compensated for this. I will provide a summary of the findings of this study to you at the end of the research project upon request. You can also borrow the complete thesis if you wish to read it. Please inform me at any time during or at the end of the study by letter, or email or phone. I would be glad to send you the whole thesis or any part of it you would like to read it by contacting me by phone at 856 30 534 7614 or 856 20 685 2695 or by email ptheppha@sfu.ca or by post:

Faculty of Education,
Champasak University
Ban Chatsan, Pakse District
Champasak Province

I would be happy to answer all of your questions over the phone, by letter/email, or in person. Your participation would be highly appreciated. But it is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time from the study without negative consequences. If you agree to the terms and conditions stated above, please sign the enclosed information consent form and return it to me in the envelope provided.

You may also register any complaint with the Director of the Office of Research Ethics.

Dr. Hal Weinberg
Director, Office of Research Ethics
Office of Research Ethics
Simon Fraser University
8888 University Drive
Multi-Tenant Facility

Burnaby, B.C. V5A 1S6
hal_weinberg@sfu.ca
778-782-6593

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely yours,
Phonesavanh Thepphasoulithone

Appendix D: Research Participant Consent Form

I, have read the description Phonesavanh Thepphasoulithone's project and I understand its content and agree to participate in this study under the following conditions:

1. At three separate occasions I will engage in 60 minutes face to face interviews with the researcher, which will focus on my personal history, education and training background, beliefs and feelings about teaching and learning, perception about teacher's images, activities and interactions with people inside and outside the school, contribution to school improvement. I will allow the researcher to visit my classroom and observe my classroom activities arranged at mutually convenient time.
2. I will keep a monthly reflective journal and take part in meeting.
3. I will allow the formal and informal interviews to be audio-recorded.
4. I understand that all information I provide to the researches will be used in the doctoral thesis and subsequent research articles.
5. I understand that all information regarding my personal and professional practices will remain anonymous.
6. I understand that I do not derive any material benefits from participating in the research.
7. I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that I may register any complaint with the Director of the Office of Research Ethics.

Dr. Hal Weinberg
Director, Office of Research Ethics
Office of Research Ethics
Simon Fraser University
8888 University Drive
Multi-Tenant Facility
Burnaby, B.C. V5A 1S6
hal_weinberg@sfu.ca
778-782-6593

Date.....Name.....Signature.....

Phone No.: Office.....

Home / Mobile.....