

The development of the Lao PDR school self evaluation tool

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Abstract:

This paper presents work currently being undertaken in Lao PDR using a school self evaluation process, based on the Index for Inclusion, as a tool to promote innovative school based practice. The Ministry of Education in Lao PDR in collaboration with Save the Children Norway has been working to adapt the Index for use in Lao schools. One aim is to support schools in developing innovative practice in order to increase participation and engagement in the curriculum for all students. The presentation will discuss the work undertaken so far and highlight areas for possible future development.

We would like to acknowledge the work and influence of the following in the development of the Laos School Self Assessment Tool and the writing of this paper:

'The Index for Inclusion' by Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow. The Index has been a guiding framework for the development of the tool. We have been able to learn from the experiences of ourselves and others in the use and application of the Index in international contexts. Colleagues who are familiar with the Index will recognise that our work reflects this. Samantha Fox, University of Manchester, UK, spent 10 days with members of the Laos National and Provincial Inclusive Education Implementation teams in September 2004, facilitating the development of a series of indicators of Inclusive practice. This was a vital part of the process in the development of the self evaluation tool and we would like to thank Samantha for her expertise and guidance at this time. Vicky Shardlow undertook the co-ordination of the Lao Inclusive Education Project's Phase 2 evaluation. Parts of this report appear in this paper and we thank Vicky for her invaluable contributions.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a brief case study of a work in progress – the development of the Lao School Self Evaluation Tool. The tool is currently being piloted in nine schools across the country with a full evaluation of this process at the end of 2006. We hope to reflect on some of the lessons we have learned so far and discuss how we hope the tool will support the development of more inclusive practice in Lao schools.

Background

Prior 1992, when a special school was opened for children with visual and hearing impairments, Lao PDR had no educational provision for children with special needs. In order to address this, the Inclusive Education Project was introduced in the 1993/4 academic year. This was seen as a significant step towards fulfilling the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), as well as the United Nations World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons. With support from UNESCO and Save the Children UK in Lao, the project was

initially piloted in one primary school in Vientiane Municipality. The number of schools had expanded by 1995-1996, to include 9 primary schools and 3 kindergartens. Each year since then, with SIDA becoming the major donor, expansion to new schools, provinces, and districts has taken place. There are currently a total of 367 inclusive schools in all eighteen provinces of Lao and 2,754 students identified as having special educational needs are currently in attendance.

During this period, the Lao Ministry of Education has incorporated Inclusive Education into its policy documents and Ministerial Decrees. Inclusive Education has become part of the Lao government's response to their commitments to EFA and the CRC.

Phase II of the Lao IE project has covered the period 2000 to December 2004 and originally targeted an expansion of the project from 12 provinces, 28 districts and 78 schools to all 18 provinces, all 142 districts and at least 417 schools. This expansion was to be achieved by building provincial level implementation teams on the model of the existing National Implementation Team (NIT) and gradually handing over the management, training and support roles to these provincial teams. The planned rate of growth was later reduced after the mid-term review, held in May 2002, recommended that rapid expansion compromised the quality of the project.

Currently, in Lao PDR, mainstream inclusion for students with special educational needs is only available to a small proportion of children – those living in the catchment areas of the 364 Inclusive Education schools already established through this project. The ultimate goal is for every school to be an inclusive school. The next step towards this goal is to increase coverage so that all 142 districts that make up the Lao PDR have at least three Inclusive Education schools by the end of 2005. Phase III covers the period from January 2005 to December 2007.

The Lao School Self Evaluation Tool.

Stage 1: Development Phase

Following the mid term review of the Inclusive Education (IE) Project -Phase II in 2002, there was a recommendation for the project to develop a tool for quality assessment in schools, to be funded by SIDA. It was decided that the most useful way to approach this would be to develop quality indicators of inclusive practice in schools, so that the developments in school practice and the impact of the project could be measured. Between July 2004 and July 2005, a co-coordinating team, which included staff from Save the Children Norway in Lao PDR, the Ministry of Education National Implementation Team, teachers and advisors from 9 schools in 3 districts and external consultants from Manchester University, UK, and Canterbury Christchurch University, UK, worked collaboratively to develop a quality evaluation tool. This was based on the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow 2002), a set of indicators for the development of Inclusive practice in schools which has been adapted and used in many countries internationally. The aim was to produce a tool which was relevant to the Lao context and which could be used by schools as a self evaluation tool. The tool has subsequently become known as the Lao School Self Evaluation Tool.

The initial co-coordinating team for the project at National Level consisted of Sithath Outhaithany, Senior Technical Officer and National Implementation Team Leader for Inclusive Education, Ministry of Education, and Khomvanh Sayarath, Education Programme Co-ordinator Save the Children Norway in Lao PDR. They were later joined, in 2005, by Peter Grimes, in the role of external consultant and technical advisor.

Planning The Pilot Process

The original aim of the project was to design materials that could be used in the Inclusive Education Schools to measure the quality of the project. However, it soon became clear that the concept of Inclusive education needed to be clarified. Although in Lao the term is still used to describe the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream settings, it was decided that the quality assessment tool should be based on a school self evaluation process which was part of a school development and school improvement cycle. Because of this the tool would need to have a broader definition of inclusion. It was also felt that that the tool should reflect the ongoing work in Lao on Education for All and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A series of workshops were organized in July and September 2004, where Provincial Education officers and members of the National Implementation Team were introduced to the Index for Inclusion and discussed the concept of Inclusion as the reduction and removal of barriers to participation and achievement for all students (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Workshop participants worked through a process to begin the design of a set of indicators of inclusive practice in mainstream primary schools. This work was continued in November and December 2004. Initially 28 indicators were produced and it was decided that these would then be used as the basis of a week long workshops to begin formulating the practical framework of the self evaluation tool. The co-coordinating team felt that the best way to develop the self evaluation tool was in a collaborative working partnership with the schools and districts that would pilot the process.

Lao is organized into 18 provinces, each one with a number of districts, with 142 districts altogether. In each district there are education advisors who are responsible for monitoring the quality of education provided in the IE schools. They are supported by advisors at Provincial and National level. Three districts were chosen to take part in the pilot, with three IE schools from each district. The Provinces were chosen on the basis that we wanted a variety of contexts to work within. Lao is a country composed of lowlands and mountainous regions. It is landlocked and borders onto Myanmar in the west, Thailand and Cambodia in the south, China in the north and Vietnam in the east. There are at least 46 indigenous, ethno linguistic minority groups in addition to the Lao majority.

The provinces chosen were: Xiengkouang Province, in the north east; Vientiane Province in the centre, Champasack Province in the south. Each district was asked to choose three IE schools with the criteria that there should be a 'stronger, a weaker and an average' school. Each school was asked to create a co-coordinating team for the project who would attend the workshops and co ordinate the work in the school. They would be supported by two education advisors at district level and two more at provincial level, who would also attend the workshop. At this point we also began to clarify our thinking in terms of further aims for the project. It seemed to us that there was a real opportunity to develop the capacity of local advisors to fulfill the role of 'critical friend' that is so important in supporting school development. The role of the advisors within the IE project is to monitor schools and train staff but we felt they needed more support and clarification in this role. Our hope is that when the project is evaluated at the end of 2006 advisors will feel that they have developed their capacity for engaging with schools in a more reflective, supportive and also challenging way.

The participants were introduced to the concept of self evaluation and school development processes and spent some time working through a series of activities designed to share

experiences and understanding of inclusion. The outcomes of the workshop were the reduction in the number of indicators of inclusive practice to 14 and the production of a series of questions that would clarify the meaning of these within the Lao context. A series of questionnaires for teachers, students and parents were also produced.

The Indicators

1. All pupils feel welcome in the school
2. All students support each other in their learning
3. All students are well supported by school staff
4. Teachers and parents cooperate well.
5. All students are treated equally as valued members of the school
6. All students feel that their opinions and views are valued.
7. All students can access learning in all lessons.
8. All students can access all parts of the school building.
9. All students attend school every day.
10. All students enjoy lessons
11. All students are engaged in all lesson activities.
12. All students achieve their learning in all subjects according to their individual ability
13. All students learn together.
14. All students have appropriate access to health services as necessary.

It is important to stress here that the aim was to produce broad and balanced materials that would be practical and appropriate in the Lao context. The reduction in the number of indicators was based on an attempt to reduce replication and to ensure that the tool was not overwhelming for teachers to use. Most teachers in Lao are on extremely low incomes and have to supplement their salary with work after and before school. In addition most teachers have received only 1 year's basic training. In the IE schools teachers receive an additional 5 day induction training package and some further training. It was felt that it was important to produce materials which schools could use practically without creating an unsustainable extra workload for teachers. However, we also tried to ensure that the indicators and the clarifying questions were broad enough that:

They would provide an effective evaluation of the quality of educational experiences in the school; they would provide a sound platform for future development of the materials.

Although the materials were designed to support the inclusion of all students, in the accompanying guidance notes, we emphasise the need to be particularly aware of the diverse groups of students who may be most vulnerable to experiencing barriers to participation and learning. In Lao, these groups include the following:

- Students from diverse ethnic minority groups
- Students whose first language is not Lao
- Students experiencing physical, medical, sensory, cognitive or social / emotional challenges
- Students from poor socio-economic groups
- Girls
- Students at risk of dropping out of school because of sickness, hunger or low achievement.
- Students who should be in school but are not for different reasons.
- Students affected by HIV / AIDS

We argue that as education professionals, we all have responsibility to reflect as clearly and analytically as possible how far these particular groups of students are being successfully included in the school. For example there is a trend in Lao schools that students are more likely to ‘drop out’ of school after grade 1. We need to examine the reasons for this. Is it possible that this statistic is linked to the high percentage of students who speak languages other than Lao experiencing a curriculum that is exclusively taught in Lao? Are there other factors linked to socio-economic pressures? These are important questions for us all to address.

Between February and November 2005, time was spent preparing a set of guidance materials to accompany the indicators, clarifying questions and questionnaires. Overall the complete tool consists of:

- A series of questionnaires to collect data on the school’s inclusive practice from Teachers, Students and Parents
- Guidance notes for use, including materials to support working with and gathering the views of teachers, students and parents.
- Training materials for schools and advisors
- Templates for School Evaluation reports
- Templates for Advisors Evaluation reports

Stage 2: Pilot Phase

November 2005 has been spent working with the three districts and nine schools in their own schools in order to launch the self evaluation process. In each district we have worked according to the same structure:

Day 1. Workshop for the three school co-coordinating teams, two district advisors, 2 provincial advisors, led by Project co-ordinator. Members of the central IE team have also attended the workshops and school visits in at least one province.

Day 2, 3, 4. Visit to each school. The school visits aimed to introduce the self evaluation process to the school staff; run workshops with parents, students and teachers to model different approaches to data collection and ensure that the school co-coordinating team felt prepared to begin the process.

The workshops aimed to familiarise participants with the materials, since it had been some months since they had worked on them. We also wanted to emphasise that this was a pilot project. We were trialing the materials to see how they would work in real school contexts. Effectively there are two evaluations taking place. One is the school self evaluation and the second is the evaluation of the materials themselves.

We spent part of the workshop preparing school teams and local advisors for the data collection process. We found that a metaphor of ‘looking below the surface of the lake’ worked well in a Lao context, in terms of trying to convey the importance of analytical enquiry. It was interesting to note that advisors, reflecting on the work in schools, where they had run student or parent workshops and were sharing the data would say ‘It went ok, but it was very much on the surface - we didn’t get very deep down.’ This was of particular interest to us, because we felt the need to prove that Lao educational professionals were interested in discussion and analysis of the workings of their schools at a serious level. One criticism of our approach from other professionals within Lao has been that it is not within the Lao culture to criticise or discuss issues; that Lao is a hierarchical society where individuals don’t like to ‘rock the boat’. Therefore, school self evaluation would be a flawed process in Lao schools. We felt this was not the case and our experiences in the schools and workshops

seem to bear this out. However, we will have to wait and see the results of the next few months in schools.

One lesson we have already learnt in terms of preparing the schools in the workshop, is that one day is not long enough. To allow for a detailed examination of the materials and introduction of various data collection strategies, approaches to working with different groups, analyzing data, beginning to identify the strengths of the school and areas for development, we needed more time.

The most fascinating part of the process so far has been the school visits. The days have been very intense and sometimes very challenging for everybody. A typical day would follow this structure:

- 8.00 am Visitors – district, provincial, national advisors and Project Co-coordinating Team - arrive at school. This would be sometimes as many as 12 people. Meet with school co-coordinating team to check arrangements for the day.
- 8.30 am. Parent workshop
- 9.30 am. Parent Workshop
- 10.30 am Student workshop
- 11.30 am Lunch
- 12.30 pm Meeting with all the visitors and the whole school staff to introduce the project materials and explain its significance. This was an opportunity for the teachers of the school to find out about and discuss the implications of the project.
- 1.30 pm Student Workshop
- 2.30 pm Meeting between visitors and the school co-coordinating team to feedback any information gathered and to discuss how the project would continue in the school. This was also an opportunity for the local teams to discuss with the school how they could work collaboratively as a district and network of schools.
- 4.00 pm Visitors meeting, to reflect on lessons learned and prepare for the next day
- 5.30 / 6.00 leave the school

On the first school visit day, the project co-coordinating team would run all workshops to model different approaches. They would be observed by different advisors and school staff. On subsequent school visit days, local advisors would take responsibility for running all workshops, with support and guidance from the project team. It was important to try and build the confidence and the capacity of the local advisors in the processes of supporting schools in data collection with the different groups. They would be the ones working alongside the schools during the information gathering.

This paper is not the place to offer a detailed evaluation of the all work in schools but reflections from the visiting teams at the end of each work were always very positive: ‘I’ve learnt so much ...’ ‘its going to be really challenging, but I think we can do it if we all work together...’ ‘I’ve never done anything like this before; it’s all so new to me. I know I’ve made mistakes, but I also know we’ll get better the more we do it’. School co-coordinating teams were often rather nervous when we arrived - had they made the right arrangements, would parents turn up, would we have confidence in them to get the work doneWhen we left the schools at the end of each evening, they reported that the visit had been really useful. They felt supported, part of a national team effort; part of something important and significant. One teacher said: ‘Yes we’re worried – will we be able to do it all? But we know we can only do our best and we know that whatever we manage will be an important contribution.’ One Deputy Principle was particularly interesting in his comments: ‘We have to acknowledge in our school that there are some things we’ve got to improve. We know things aren’t perfect –

some things we can't change, like the buildings; but we can think about our teaching and how we work with the children and the parents. We know it's not always good enough.'

For us as a Project Co-coordinating team, writing this report at the end of the three weeks, we can say that it's been very tiring and intense. However, it has been very interesting and also very productive. Our assessment of the visits to the three provinces is that the project is now alive and happening. It is also out of our control and has to take on a life of its own. We have had to think on our feet, adapting ideas and materials, timetables, and teaching approaches as we have worked. It has stressed the importance of collaboration but also of the need for reflection. Initially we did not have a set time for the visitors to the school to reflect together at the end of the day. Perhaps we assumed it would just 'happen'. However, we soon realised we had to timetable this in to allow us, as a team, to try and make sense of what we were learning and the implications for our practice and organisation the following day.

The schools will be engaged in data collection and analysis or 'making sense' of their schools for the next eight weeks. They are at stage 1 of a school development cycle – finding out about their school, particularly what different groups think about it in relation to the indicators of inclusive practice. Towards the end of January 2006, they will be working through stages 2 and 3 where they identify the strengths of the school and also areas they want to prioritise for development and improvement. At this point, at the beginning of March 2006, we will be gathering all the schools and advisors together for a 2 week workshop. During this time there will be an opportunity to visit the schools in the project in Vientiane province and each school and local team will make a presentation to discuss what they have found out about their schools and also the lessons they have learnt in using the materials. This is clearly of enormous importance in developing the materials so that they can be used as easily as possible by other schools.

The remainder of the workshops will focus on two key areas.

Evaluating the materials in practice.

There are important questions to consider. How useful were they in practice? What were the challenges in using them and what were the strong features? How can we improve them – does the language need to be examined? Some participants have argued that the language is a little too formal. Others have said that it has to be written in this style or the meaning is lost and that once you become familiar with the materials the understanding is clearer. We are aware that this is sometimes an issue in the international adaptation of the Index For Inclusion, but it is still, a key issue to consider. We hope that this process enables us to re-draft and modify the materials ready for use with other schools. However, we also believe that it is likely that this modification will be an ongoing process. As different schools and districts begin to use the materials, different issues or challenges will emerge. The materials will need to develop as the project grows or they will become stagnant and ineffectual.

Introducing the UNESCO Embracing Diversity Toolkit

The second half of the workshop will focus on the introduction of the UNESCO toolkit. At stage 4 of the school development cycle, schools need to focus on the development of practice in the areas they have identified as priorities. It seemed vital to us that there was something in place to support schools during this part of the process. The UNESCO toolkit has been developed in order to support schools in developing more inclusive practice and we feel that the Lao Self Evaluation toolkit the UNESCO toolkit complement each other well. Each school will be trained in the use of and given a copy of the toolkit. We hope that local schools and advisors will be able to collaborate in creative ways to develop inclusive practice in schools.

The Final Phase

The final phase of the evaluation process will be school visits and workshops in each province by the Project Team, in November 2006. The aim then is for each of the nine schools to be teamed with a school not on the IE project for the second year, as we gradually begin to introduce the materials to other schools. However, it is our belief that this needs to happen organically rather than through a cascading mass roll out programme, where the understanding and significance of the process is likely to be lost. It also offers us the opportunity to develop the IE project into the wider mainstream sector and facilitate the transition for all schools to become Inclusive schools. We hope to present a more detailed examination of the impact of the project and the lessons learned at the beginning of 2007.