

Improving the Quality of Schools for All: Researching the Impact of The Lao PDR Inclusive Education Project 1993 – 2008

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by

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Abstract

The Lao People's Democratic Republic Inclusive Education Project started in 1993. During the last 15 years it has aimed to support the inclusion of children with special educational needs and other disadvantaged groups by working to improve the quality of education through its work with 539 Inclusive Schools across the country. In this paper we examine some of the achievements of the project and also the lessons that have been learned in trying to ensure Equity and Quality. We scrutinize the experiences of the project through a series of different lenses and perspectives, referring to evidence collected and analysed using a systematic research methodology.

Introduction

The Lao PDR Inclusive Education Project is one of the longest running projects of its kind internationally. In May 2009, funding for the project comes to an end, bringing to a close a 16 year long journey, during which many challenges have been faced and lessons learned. The aim of this paper is to share some of those challenges and lessons with a wider

audience. A more detailed analysis of the project will be available in a new Save the Children publication in 2009 (Grimes, forthcoming).

First, a short introduction for those who may not be familiar with the country's geographical location. Lao PDR is a landlocked country in South East Asia, bordering onto Thailand and Myanmar in the west, Cambodia in the south, China in the north and Vietnam in the east. There are 17 provinces and 141 districts with 49 indigenous, ethno linguistic minority groups in addition to the Lao majority.

Lao PDR is one of the poorest countries in the world and also has the distinction of being the most bombed country in history, as a result of the Vietnam War (Grimes, Sayarath et al. 2007). It is estimated that in excess of 266,000,000 cluster bombs were dropped between 1967 and 1974 (UXO Lao, 2008). Of these, 30% remain unexploded and only a small proportion, 0.49%, have been safely removed.

The education system is grade based with a primary national curriculum which relies on set text books, although these are currently being re-written to make them more learner-centred. Children begin Primary School in Grade 1, at the age of 7 and complete at the end of Grade 5, when they are 11. A small proportion of children attend pre-school and a similar number go on to secondary school. The country currently has 867 Pre-Schools, 8,529 Primary Schools and 926 Secondary Schools. The teaching language medium in Lao is the Lao language, but because many children are from ethnic backgrounds which have a different first language, they are vulnerable to experiencing language and understanding based barriers to participation and achievement in school. Consequently, nationally, these children are less likely to attend school and, when they do attend, more likely to drop out of school. For example, in the academic year 2002-03, over 75% of primary aged Lao-Tai children attended school, compared to less than 50% of Khmer and Hmong-lu Mien children and only 33% of Sino-Tibet children (Save the Children Norway in Lao PDR, 2008).

There are approximately 40,000 teachers, whose average monthly salary is between \$60 to \$100. Because of this relatively low salary, many teachers in Lao have to supplement their income with work after and before school. In addition, many teachers have received only 1 year of basic training, although the current National strategy is to 'upgrade' teachers through in-service training and to improve initial teacher training. The Ministry of Education in Lao is committed to reaching its Education For All targets (UNESCO 2008) although it is acknowledged that there may be serious challenges in achieving these by 2015 (UNESCO 2008).

The Inclusive Education Project

Prior to the establishment in 1992 of a special school for blind and deaf children, in the capital city of Vientiane, Lao had no education provision for children with special needs. In order to address this, the Inclusive Education Project (then known as the Integrated 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 (UN 1989), as well as the United Nations World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons. With support from UNESCO and Save the Children UK, the project had expanded by 1995-1996, to include 9 primary schools and 3 pre-schools. Each year since then, with SIDA becoming the major donor, expansion to new schools, provinces, and districts has taken place.

Inclusive Education has itself been on a long journey during this period of time and this is reflected in the way that the project has changed and grown over the years. An initiative which began in one school in the centre of Vientiane, aiming to provide access to a mainstream education for children with disabilities had, by 2009, expanded to 539 schools, including pre-school, primary and secondary phases, and 3 special schools in all 141 districts, in each of the 17 provinces throughout the country; ensuring that over 3,000 children with special needs and disabilities were being educated alongside their peers.

The project has not only grown in the number of schools and children it catered for. The understanding of the term 'Inclusive Education' has also changed and developed over the

years. During the life span of the project 'Inclusion' has become a subject of debate internationally (Peters 2003). The concept has become confused and lost its clarity, meaning different things to different people (Slee 2004). For some, inclusion is viewed as an attempt to move away from segregated provision for students with disabilities to creating mainstream placements for them (Rieser and Mason 1992). For others it is a broader concept concerned with identifying and removing barriers to participation and achievement for all students (Booth and Ainscow 2002), therefore maximising the participation of all in mainstream schools (Allan 2003) and demanding radical changes within schools (Barton 1997). The growth of the project has seen it move towards this latter perspective until by 2009, it has become a project which, although still viewing the rights of all learners with disabilities to have equal access to mainstream education as fundamental, also focused on the importance of ensuring that all students were fully participating and achieving in school.

This has meant that, in addition to continuing to ensure mainstream access for students with disabilities, the project has focused on two key initiatives in its final phase.

1. Ensuring that all students are participating and achieving in school, but particularly those from those groups who may be more vulnerable to experiencing exclusionary barriers. In Lao PDR, children with disabilities are just one of these groups. The list includes:

- Girl children
- Children with disabilities
- Children from economically disadvantaged families
- Children from ethnic minority groups where Lao is not the first language
- Children who are out of school

2. Ensuring that the education that all students receive is of a high quality. This has necessitated focusing on trying to change the dominant educational pedagogy from a teacher-centred to a child centred one.

The Inclusive Education Project has not been alone in Lao PDR, in focusing on these initiatives. The move to a new Educational Sector Development Framework in Lao is indicative of the way in which the Ministry of Education is working together with Donors and NGOs to formulate a coherent, strategic approach to developing quality education for all children in the country. Perhaps then, 2009 is an appropriate point for a separately funded Inclusion project to become subsumed into a country wide strategy which places the inclusion of all children at the centre of its strategic development. However, it is to be hoped that the individual needs of all students are kept paramount in any new systems which are introduced.

From its inception, the aim of the Inclusive Education Project has been to ensure that disabled students don't simply have access to school but that they also have a 'meaningful, relevant and quality learning experience when they get there.' (Holdsworth 2003). Education For All Targets (UNESCO 2008) have ensured that there is a strong emphasis on the numbers of children attending school. The recent Ministry of Education mid decade review, reported that:

'... both gross enrolment and net enrolment rates have risen steadily between 2000/2001 and 2005/2006. The increases have been higher for girls than boys: boys are more likely to go to school, but girls who go to school are more likely to be in the official age. Though improved over 5 years, repetition and drop-out remain high with repetition becoming more of a boys' problem in the latter grades. The rates of repetition especially in those in the early grades and for boys require both investigation and action. In addition, although there are 386 new primary schools, 68 schools were closed in the period 2001 to 2005. In NPA Program 3 (*Lower Secondary Education*) while transition rates from grade 5 to grade 6 were the same in the base year and at the mid-decade point, actual numbers of new entrants to grade 6 have shot up by 13,000 or 17%.' (UNESCO 2008)

This indicates the growing awareness at national level of the importance of collecting data which looks beyond school enrolment and answers questions about whether children remain enrolled in school and their progress through each grade.

However, there also needs to be an awareness of the importance of ensuring that there is a high enough quality education experience awaiting children when they get to school. Following Save the Children Norway in Lao PDR's Mid Term Review in April-May 2007, a series of recommendations were made to help the Inclusive Education Project improve the quality of existing provision and ensure future sustainability. A further recommendation was to prepare the process of handing over the management of IE provision to the MoE after the current phase through the establishment of an IE exit strategy. A key component of this IE exit strategy has been the collection of quantitative and qualitative data which assesses the effectiveness and impact of the IE project at all levels of the school. The remainder of this paper will focus on the outcomes from this Data collection exercise.

Background to data collection within the IE Project

One of the lessons learned by programme staff and MoE officials working on the IE project as they review its development over 15 years, is that there could have been a more systematic and strategic approach to the collection of quantitative data related to the impact of the project on disabled children's' educational experiences. The Project has been very successful in collecting data concerning the numbers of students in school. Throughout the 2000s, there was an emphasis on introducing software systems and trained staff which enabled a detailed record of types of disabilities in different provinces throughout the country which enabled Project staff to provide answers to key questions:

- How many children with disabilities are in Mainstream schools?
- How many children with disabilities are in Special Schools?
- How many IE schools are there:
 - In the country?

- In each province?
- In each District?

As the project developed, it was possible to ask more sophisticated questions:

- What types of disability are being identified in schools?
- What are the numbers of each disability:
 - In the country?
 - In each province?
 - In each District?
 - In each School?

This data enables an evaluation of the project's success in establishing schools which are able to admit children with disabilities. It provides some indication of the range of children with disabilities in school at any given time. However, it does not provide data of a high enough quality to be able to answer analytical questions concerning the impact of the project. Some examples of the questions that could have been asked are:

- How many children with disabilities, who are admitted into Grade 1, complete Grade 5?
- How many children with disabilities transfer to Secondary School?
- How many children with disabilities drop out of school?
- How many children with disabilities repeat grades?

Unless we know the answer to these types of questions we cannot be clear whether the project has had any real impact on the quality of education being provided for children with disabilities.

The fact that the project did not systematically set out to collect data around these sorts of questions was because these questions were not being overtly asked, either within the project or by external consultants involved in establishing and developing it. An analysis of

successive evaluation reports undertaken for the Project, show a failure to suggest a more systematic and analytical approach. However, it should be stressed that this is not surprising. Until recently, there has been a lack of rigour internationally to link the collection of impact / school performance data with provision for children with disabilities (J (Gross and White, 2003). For many, the challenge has been to get children with disabilities into mainstream schools. Clearly the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) has been a positive force in encouraging governments to aspire to changes in schools systems which enable '...those with special educational needs ...(to) have access to regular school. regular schools with ...(an) inclusive orientation ... can provide an effective education to the majority of children.' (UNESCO 1994). However, it has become apparent that in order to effectively evaluate the success of initiatives such as the IE Project, we need to apply the same rigorous process that is used to judge school effectiveness for all children. Therefore we need to know whether children with disabilities are making good progress in school, in the same way as we do for all children; Are all children receiving a high quality educational experience, including those with disabilities?

Therefore, when it came to designing a set of activities which would evaluate the impact of the project, both the Ministry of education and Save the Children Norway were aware that we would need to try and collect some meaningful school performance data. It was decided to collect data through two methods: a quantitative approach which would collate statistical indicators of project impact; and a qualitative approach which would gather data through case study visits to a selection of schools.

Quantitative Data Collection

The design of the quantitative data collection was begun at the beginning of 2008, involving the Ministry of Education Inclusive Education National Implementation Team, Save the Children Education Program staff and the IE Project consultant. The main factor affecting the design was the fact that the IE project only had 17 months of funding left. Therefore, there was a very slim window of time available in which to collect meaningful data.

Although the team's preferred choice would have been to consult widely on design and then establishing training at Local, District and Provincial level to enable as reliable a data collection process as possible, this was not considered viable. It should also be noted that there was only a very limited budget available.

It was also decided to focus on the last 3 academic years of the project:

2004 – 2005

2005 – 2006

2006 – 2007

It was more likely that schools would have records over this period. We would also be able to request data from Phase 3 schools which joined the project from 2004 onwards.

Therefore, a series of questionnaires for pre, primary and secondary IE schools were produced which aimed to gather statistics on enrolment, retention, grade completion, school completion and transfer rates for all students. The questionnaires also requested separate data for different vulnerable groups:

- Children with special needs and disabilities
- Girls
- Children from poor families
- Children from different ethno-linguistic groups

Excel spreadsheets were designed so that data could be extracted by school, district, province or by IE Project phase. These variations were important because we needed to be able to make judgements not only the effectiveness of schools in different areas of the country but also about the sustainability of the project over time. If the IE project had been

successful in developing the capacity of schools to improve the quality of education they were able to offer, we would hope to see that schools from Phase 1 and 2 of the project were demonstrating better results than newer project schools from Phase 3. However, it was also noted that some of the schools who entered the project during Phase 1 may have not experienced training during the last 8 – 10 years. This would mean that they had not had such up to date training on developing learner friendly classroom environments. In these cases it would be important to evaluate how effective the District Pedagogical Advisors had been in supporting the development of more inclusive practices.

We acknowledged some prospective flaws in the design of the data collection:

Time

It was considered to be important to aim to collect data from schools before the end of the academic year 2008 in May. This only allowed 3 months for production of questionnaires, liaison with Provincial Implementation teams, distribution and collection of questionnaires.

Training and support

With limited budget and time constraints there was no possibility of designing and putting in place a training programme for any of the Principals or advisors involved. However, it was decided that the NIT would travel to each Province to offer some support and guidance and this took place in April 2008.

Capacity

It was acknowledged that there were considerable concerns about the technical capacity of School Principals to be able to collect and enter the data into the questionnaires. We were aware that there was considerable variation in experience, skill and motivation amongst the

Principals. Even if the data was entered and submitted, we were unsure how reliable it would be.

With these limitations in mind, the question might be asked 'Why proceed?' The simple answer is that in economically poor countries such as Lao PDR, it has to be accepted that projects often have to work with limited budgets and low technical capacity amongst local staff. We judged that some data would be better than none at all. However, we also acknowledged that in order to make meaningful use of whatever data was collected; we need to be able to make a judgement about its reliability. Therefore, we also designed a series of qualitative evaluation visits to a selection of IE schools, to take place in November / December 2008.

In planning these visits, we created a specific role for one member of the evaluation team, to examine the school's records of data kept on the areas we were asking about. The purpose of this would be to compare the school's data kept in the school with that submitted for the data collection. The evaluator would examine the schools systems for collecting, categorising and storing data to establish the reliability of the schools submitted data.

Collecting the Quantitative Data

The team organised a workshop in July 2008, to be attended by Provincial Implementation teams, where the initial results of the data collection would be shared. We also wanted to get their perspectives on the data collection and the challenges they had faced. It was with surprise that we experienced a 100% return on the questionnaires by the end of June 2008. We had anticipated that there would be problems in collecting all the questionnaires and had been expecting a figure of approximately 60% returns. We also had a provisional plan in place to support Provincial teams who had not submitted their schools data in September 2008. This did not prove to be necessary. However, it should also be noted that the team

had concerns about the quality of the data that had been submitted. Some team members commented that the 100% return was an indicator that the professionals involved took the process seriously and wanted to do their best to provide what was required. However, it probably meant that the process in some areas had been rushed through without cross-checking of data at local level. Therefore we could expect some errors in calculations.

During the workshop, we examined a sample of the data by analysing in detail, the data submitted by 43 schools. The Provincial teams were asked to identify challenges that they and schools had faced during the data collection process. The following is a summary of their response.

Challenges Experienced by Provinces in Collecting Reliable Data

The time allocated for the data collection was very short but there was a lot of data that needed to be collected. Access to some districts was difficult – roads were flooded or completely inaccessible; in some cases it took a long time to get the data collection forms to the schools – it was then challenging to provide support to the schools in filling in the forms. This often had to be done by telephone.

There were insufficient instructions supplied on how to use the forms – this meant that some people could become easily confused. Additionally, Principals have not been trained in data collection or how to summarise their findings. This may also result in not checking their entries to cross check for accuracy. The school may not have previously collected data in some of the areas we asked about e.g. poor families – this may have caused confusion in some schools because of the way in which definitions may be used. There is a central Ministry definition of poor, but often local communities will contextualise this to mean ‘poorer’ than other families in the area, even though they may all meet the central definition of poor. In some cases, Provincial Advisors noted that schools in economically poor regions entered no data at all for poor children.

Some schools may have very unstructured / disorganised systems for collecting and maintaining data. There may be insufficient information stored, it may be inaccurate or there may not be any information at all. Some principals may believe that data collection is not their responsibility and that it should be the job of someone in a higher position. In some cases the principal of the school may be absent and the form has been filled in by a member of staff who does not have access to the necessary data or understand the complexity of the data required. It is possible that where Principals are unsure of how to fill in the form correctly, that some data has been 'invented' – therefore it is not all reliable.

The forms that schools and villages use to collect and store data are very different from the data collection form used in this exercise. Therefore, some schools will experience difficulty in transferring data to our form because they do not understand the complexity of it. The forms are new and unfamiliar to most people. Data collection took place at the end of the school year when schools were pre-occupied in preparing for exams and the end of semester. This meant that they may not have been able to give the process of data collection as much attention as was necessary. There was little time available to explain the forms to the districts and to the school; Ministry support was given to Province and then advice cascaded down through district and school. There was insufficient budget to support district and schools effectively.

In some areas there has been movement of the school population, such as resettlement of villages or movement of groups of families (e.g. soldiers families in Xiengkhouang Province moving to Luang Prabang Province, after year 2 of the data collection). This would need to be taken into account when analysing the data.

Initial Reflections on the Reliability of the Quantitative Data

In regard to the quality of the data we received and were able to make an initial analysis of, there seems little doubt that it was not 100% reliable. The lack of any tangible systems in schools for collecting and storing data, together with the fact that there was no real training or support at school level for data entry, means that it is inevitable that there are some errors, omissions and mis-entries. We were able to detect in several schools, in our initial sampling of data from 43 schools, examples where the data in different columns did not add up. It seems likely, therefore, that many principals did not check or cross check their data for accuracy. In the case of a small number of schools, the PITs thought it possible that some of the data might be fictional.

The implications of this for the IE Project data collection were that there needed to be a close check on reliability of school data in all the schools that were to be visited. For the purposes of this, a data inspection template / checklist was drawn up, to enable members of the NIT to analyse reliability in a uniform way. We then planned to use the findings from this checking exercise to make wider judgements about the reliability of the data submitted nationally.

Qualitative Data Collection

During November and December 2008, members of the Ministry National Implementation Team, Program Staff from Save the Children Norway in Lao and the Project consultant made a series of visits to evaluate the impact of the IE Project on schools. Team members were given the brief that the visits were to ascertain how successful the project has been in developing quality provision for disadvantaged children with particular emphasis on children with disabilities. Teams visited 26 schools, including pre-school, primary and secondary schools, in 16 Districts and 9 Provinces.

Schools were chosen to represent each phase of the expansion of the project – 1995 – 1999, 2000 – 2004, 2005 – 2008. They also represented a range of economic and geographical locations across the country including urban areas, semi-urban, rural and semi-remote areas. The only areas not covered were those which were designated as remote areas where schools may be several hours walk from an accessible road or track. This is because the expansion of the IE Project had only included semi-remote areas, those accessible by road, after 2005. It had not yet been possible to include completely remote schools in the project up to this point. Schools chosen also included those likely to have large class sizes and schools with a significant percentage of children from minority ethnic-linguistic groups.

Each team comprised three members with at least one from the Ministry of Education and one Programme co-ordinator from Save the Children. Teams had clear responsibilities and roles, decided upon before each school visit, so that one member of the team was responsible for

1. Evaluating the quality of the schools performance data and comparing it with the data which was submitted for the data collection in April / May 2008.
2. Observing and evaluating lessons
3. Collecting qualitative data from students, parents, teachers.

Additionally each team was accompanied by members of the local District Advisory Implementation team (DIT) and Provincial Advisory Implementation Team (PIT) who had been involved in supporting schools in the project. Where possible, they would also visit Teacher training Institutions around the country to assess the quality of the training being given to pre-service teachers.

Guidance notes were produced to cover every aspect of the evaluation visit to try and ensure that there was consistency in the collection of data and to reduce the likelihood of collecting unreliable data. Lessons had been learnt from a previous set of school evaluation

visits conducted by the authors in relation to the development of an inclusive self-evaluation tool for use by schools in the project (Grimes, Sayarath, Outhaithany, 2007). We had realised unless teams had clear guidelines for what data to collect and how to collect it, it was likely that each team would collect sets of data which could not be compared or collated. This also necessitated each that each team had a team leader to ensure that these guidelines were being followed.

The guidance for teams made it clear that the overall aim was to assess the impact that the IE Project has had on the District and on the school. Therefore the main focus is on children with disabilities and special educational needs. However, team members should also note wherever possible, the impact the project has had on other disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, e.g:

- Children from poor families
- Girls
- Children from different ethnic-linguistic groups

The team were also required to be alert to evidence that the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) are being met in the school, noting any evidence of

- Inappropriate punishments and discipline
- Discrimination against children or groups of children, by teachers or other children
- Negative attitudes towards any disadvantaged or vulnerable groups

The guidance stated that it was the responsibility of the team leader to ensure that quality data was being collected throughout the visit that will enable a comprehensive report to be written (report templates were provided for this purpose). The team leader should liaise

with colleagues throughout the day to monitor whether the data being collected is of sufficient quality and meets the requirements. The team was encouraged to operate flexibly throughout the school day, making strategic decisions about different activities that may need to take place in order to meet the requirements of the report templates.

Evaluating the quality of school based performance data

It was important that we had an assessment of the reliability of the data that had been submitted for the quantitative data collection by each school, so that we could develop an overall view of the quality of the data we had received. Evaluators were required to discuss the data collection and storage systems in the school with the School Principal, District and Provincial Advisors and answer a series of questions including:

Is there school data matching the questions we asked in our data collection for each of the 3 years?

In the school's data is it clear which of the 3 main ethnic groups children belong to?

Do you think the data the school submitted for ethnic groups was reliable? (this was repeated for gender, disability and poverty). Why do you think this is?

All of the evaluators had experienced the school self evaluation project referred to above and understood the importance of collecting clear and relevant evidence. They were therefore also asked to make a summary of the issues that may have affected reliability of data in each school and also to make a judgement of the overall reliability of data collected from each school, expressed as a percentage. Although the quality and consistency of the data collected during these inspections of the school based data was generally good, this final judgement caused the most difficulty for evaluators. There was not sufficient criteria provided in the guidance notes to allow them to make a judgement that could be reliably compared with the judgements of others in different schools.

Evaluating the Impact of the Project on Teaching and Learning

During the visits, at least one member of the team would begin by observing lessons. The purpose of these lesson observations was to assess how much impact the IE project had had on the school, teachers, children with special needs and disabilities, and other disadvantaged and vulnerable children. We needed to look for evidence that the training provided by the IE project had supported the development of a more child-centred teaching and school / classroom environment. Therefore, evaluators needed to be particularly aware of the Inclusive Education 5 Point Star, a core component of the IE training. Thus, there should have been evidence in teachers planning and the lessons of:

1. *A range of different activities* which should take place during the lesson. Ideally the teacher should introduce the lesson either by connecting it with children's previous learning OR asking the children what they already know about the subject for the lesson. This should be followed by an introductory activity, perhaps making use of resources to engage and stimulate the children OR a participatory activity such as role-play, singing, discussion;

The teachers' main input for the lesson should be next – the teaching of the skills / knowledge that has been planned for. We were expecting to see a move away from teacher centred pedagogy - rote learning, copying from the board or the teacher asking questions and pupils putting their hands up. Evaluators were asked to try and answer key questions:

- How effective is this part of the lesson?
- Is there 'real' learning for ALL children taking place.
- How is the teacher ensuring that ALL children are participating and learning – particularly children with special needs?

Often in Lao classrooms the teacher will organise the children into groups for the next part of the lesson. Where this was taking place, evaluators were trying to ascertain if there was a clear purpose? Did the children understand what they had to do? Was the group organised so that all students were involved or were 1 or 2 students dominating the activity? What was the teacher doing during this time? Was she engaging with students, discussing activities with them, assessing if they needed support or clearer instructions? Was she using this time to work alongside children with special needs? OR was she sitting at her desk or just watching the children and not 'teaching' them. Other questions we asked included: Is there differentiated work for different abilities or are all children expected to do the same work? How are children of different abilities and with different special needs supported by the teacher?

The lesson should conclude with some sharing of the learning that has taken place and / or a summary from the teacher of the main learning points. The teacher *should* be aiming to assess what the children have learnt during the lesson. If there is homework set from the lesson, it should be purposeful and linked to the lesson and also achievable for all students.

2. Use of Resources. The teacher should have a range of attractive and supportive resources available to support the learning taking place. Evaluators were encouraged to ask: What resources is the teacher using? Are they clearly linked to the lesson aims? Does she use a range of different resources for different purposes? Are ALL children able to access these resources either by being able to see them clearly or actually touch / use them themselves?

Are there specific resources available to support the learning of children with special needs and different abilities?

3. Student groupings. We expected to see a range of groupings and classroom arrangements in use. In the more developed classrooms there should have been examples of practice including the following:

- The teacher arranges the classroom furniture in a variety of styles to suit the particular lesson; sometimes in a U shape, sometimes in groups, sometimes working outside, sometimes faced towards the blackboard.
- The teachers mixes student groupings up – sometimes children of similar ability work together, sometimes in mixed ability groups, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in 3 or more. Students should also be asked to work on their own at times. Is there any indication that the teacher is using the students to support each other's (and thus their own) learning – for example, more able sometimes (not always) working with children with special needs?
- Where the children are working in groups is it evident that
 - They are clear about the purpose of the activity and it is linked to the learning objectives for the lesson
 - The teacher is ensuring that all children are participating and learning
 - Children with special needs are being supported with their learning

4. Questioning styles. There should have been evidence that teachers used a range of questioning styles. In the most inclusive classrooms, the teacher will ask general questions, inviting responses from all children, some examples could be:

- Questions addressed to specific children, linked to their ability and understanding
- Questions which will extend the learning of more able students
- Questions which will support and learning for less able students
- Questions which give the children time to think or discuss in pairs / threes
- Open-ended questions
- Questions which encourage discussion

- Questions with specific answers
- Questions which require one or more students to come and demonstrate answers / responses to the rest of the class

Evaluators also looked for evidence that all children were involved in questions and discussion and were encouraged by the teacher to participate. How is the teacher demonstrating that she has thought about how to engage and support the children with special needs?

5. *Relevance to real life or learners own experiences.* The teacher should be able to demonstrate that she has an awareness of child centred learning. All learning should be linked to children's own experiences and / or real life in order to enable all students to understand the learning concepts. E.g.

- Is the lesson presented to the children so that they connect the learning with their own experiences?
- Or with real life events and routines?
- Is there evidence that confirms that the children sometimes have lessons outside the classroom in order to connect learning with real life?

Interviews with Students, Parents, Teachers, Community and Advisors

One member of the team concentrated on gathering information from parents and students. As noted above, we had learnt from previous evaluation visits to schools (Grimes, Sayarath and Outhaithany, 2007) that it was important to identify someone with responsibility for this area and to attempt to ensure that they covered the same range of questions as other evaluation teams. We also knew from previous experience that questions needed to be phrased carefully in order to elicit truthful responses, particularly from children. We encouraged evaluators to use a range of questioning styles and to

interview respondents in different settings. For example, we knew that it was unlikely that children would give honest answers to questions about corporal punishment if they were asked this in the classroom in front of their teacher. However, some children may be too shy or vulnerable to interview outside the classroom away from their friends. Therefore evaluators had to use their discretion, judgement and experience to decide on the best approach.

Parents

The school were asked to arrange for parents of children with special needs to come to the school at 8am for group and / or (if appropriate) individual interviews. Advice to evaluators asked them to be aware that some parents prefer to talk individually; if a parent is quiet during a group interview, ask them if you can talk to them on their own afterwards. Some parents prefer to be in a group and are supported by the presence of other parents. Questions included:

Does your child enjoy coming to school? Why do you think this is?

What does s/he enjoy?

What does s/he not enjoy?

What subjects / lessons is s/he good at?

What subjects / lessons does s/he find difficult? Why do you think this is?

What is her / his special need / difficulty and how does it affect them at home? How does it affect them in the classroom?

How do you think the school are trying to support your child with their difficulty?

Does your child receive different work from other children?

Does your child bring home homework – if they do is it too hard, too easy or just right for their ability?

Are they being successful at school? How do you know?

Do the school punish your child – how do they do this? How do you feel about this?

Evaluators aimed to gather evidence of how the parents felt the project had had an impact on themselves, their children, the school and the community.

Students

Questions were provided which could be asked during classroom observations and / or in spate interviews with groups of children. Evaluators were reminded that they had an ethical duty not to upset or distress children. And to make sure they assured children of confidentiality if they were asking delicate questions about themselves or their teachers. If they seemed upset or anxious, evaluators should stop the interview and begin again with other children.

Questions that evaluators might ask children:

Do you enjoy coming to school?

What do you enjoy?

What don't you enjoy?

What subjects / lessons are you good at?

What subjects / lessons do you find difficult? Why do you think this is?

If it was felt appropriate they might also ask:

What is your special need / difficulty - and how does it affect you at home? How does it affect you in the classroom?

How do you think the school are trying to help / support you with your difficulty?

Are they being successful in helping you?

Do you have work that is the same as other children? How do you feel about this? Is it too hard, too easy, just right?

Do you have friends at school? Who are they? What games do you play with them?

Are other children unkind to you sometimes? What do they do? If they are, do you tell a teacher – what does the teacher do if you tell them?

Is your teacher ever unkind to you with words or punishments?

Is your teacher ever unkind to other children with words or punishments?

Are there any areas of the school that you find it difficult to access or make use of?

Interviews were conducted with a range of children from different backgrounds, with and without disabilities in order to check the reliability of the impressions that were being formed about the impact of the project on the children. It is important to note that asking parents and children searching questions about the quality of the education experienced in a developing country such as Lao PDR is complex. Our experience is that most children enjoy going to school, even if lessons appear boring and dull. As one elderly grandmother replied in a previous school evaluation visit (Grimes, Sayarath and Outhaithany, 2007) on being asked why her grandchildren enjoyed school ‘Well its better than catching frogs isn’t it?’. For most children, if they didn’t go to school they would be sent into the fields to work or catch food. School – learning, being with other children, playing together at lunchtimes and after school – is much more enjoyable.

Whilst we have found that children in Laos will always reply in the affirmative when asked if they enjoy school, because they do not have other school experiences to compare it to, it is not a very reliable response. It is much more challenging to get them to reflect on the parts they enjoy more than others and to think about why this is, what it is that their teacher does that enables them to participate and learn effectively. Where schools are moving away from teacher centred pedagogy and rote-learning it is more likely that students are

beginning to develop more advanced thinking skills and to be prepared to discuss their learning in school.

Summary of Main Findings

Reliability of the Data Collection

The capacity of the schools / Districts and Provinces to collect reliable data was potentially affected by three key factors: Time, Training and Support, Capacity. The data was collected during a 3 month period before the end of school year 2008 with only a set of guidance notes and telephone advice to support the completion of the forms. There were concerns that schools may have insufficient experience and ineffective systems in place to collect and store data. However, detailed evaluation of a range of schools found that the data was approximately 85% reliable. The main areas of inaccuracy related to:

Definitions of Special Needs / Disability. Schools interpreted definitions in different ways. In one school nearly 20% of the children were identified as having a disability; in another less than 5%. Schools were sometimes confused about the appropriate way to categorise students with multiple or complex needs; in one case study a profoundly deaf student was listed as having physical disabilities because she has limited mobility, but clearly her primary need is her hearing impairment. There is also confusion relating to what constitutes a slow learner. Sometimes schools will identify children as slow learners when in fact they come from poor farming families and have low attendance at school. Whilst this impacts on their learning it does not constitute a learning difficulty.

Classification of Poor families. Schools and communities were often confused about what constituted a poor family. They are supposed to use Ministry definitions but often applied their own variations on this to make judgements about 'families poorer than the average in the community' rather than 'poorer than average in the country as a whole'. This meant

that some areas, designated amongst the poorest Districts in Lao, had a low returns for numbers of poor families. It was also the case that in areas where there was poor collaboration and communication between school and local community the data on poor families was often not submitted because schools could not access the information they needed.

Complete / Incomplete Schools. In Lao PDR many schools are incomplete – that is to say they have only Grades 1 and 2 or possibly 3. They will be administered by a complete school. In some cases where the IE school also administered / supported incomplete schools, Principals were confused about which data they should be including. In one school visited, this meant that the data entered included incomplete schools not in the IE Project.

Ethnicity. In areas where there are complex combinations of ethnic groups, Principals sometimes found it difficult to calculate the numbers of students in the three main categories. This has had the effect of making the overall data for ethnicity appear unreliable. However, the evaluation visits established that for the most part, these inaccuracies were minor within the overall context of the school.

Quality of IE Schools Compared to Other Schools in Lao PDR

Data was analysed and compared with the Ministry of Education's published data for all schools from 2005 (Ministry of Education Lao PDR 2008). The main outcome of this comparison was that the evidence indicates IE schools are outperforming non IE schools by significant margins in all of the following areas:

- Enrolment

Total Number of Children in Primary IE Schools

Primary	Total Children			Total CSN			Total CSN %		
Year	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Total	101,311	103,410	107,493	3,312	3,825	3,933	3%	4%	4%

As the IE project expanded during Phase 3, increasing size to its current total of 539 schools, it is possible to see from this table how numbers of children with special needs and disabilities have increased across the country, from 3,312 in 2004/5, to 3,933 in 2006/7. It is also interesting to note that although the number of children attending IE schools has also risen, there are now proportionately more children with special needs and disabilities in IE schools, rising from 3% to 4%. During this period, enrolment in all IE schools was at or near to 100% of the local school aged population. In many areas of the country non IE schools in the same period were reporting much lower enrolment rates with an overall national rate of 84%.

- Grade Completion

Primary Grade Passing Rates

Primary	Total Grade Passing			Total Grade Passing %			Total Grade Passing CSN			Total Grade Passing CSN %		
Year	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Total	83714	87814	92902	83%	85%	86%	2418	2642	3052	73%	69%	78%

The data for the number of students passing grades in IE schools, shows an increase over the three years with a total grade pass rate in 2005 of 85%. National grade

passing data trends from the same period reveal that in some Grades, the pass rate was as low as 67%.

The data for children with special needs and disabilities also shows an increase from 2418 in 2005, to 3052 in 2007. However, it is important to note that the percentage of children with special needs passing grades is lower than the percentage figure for other children – 78% compared to 86% in 2007.

This raises some important questions. Given the fact that some of our children with special needs will have learning difficulties (categorised in Lao as a slow learner) is it reasonable to expect all children with special needs to pass the grade examination? Additionally we know from international research that Visually Impaired and Hearing Impaired children, although expected to make normal rates of progress when viewed over the course of their school career, will, particularly at the early primary stage, be as much as 2 years behind their peers. Clearly if the grade examination is to have any value it should be a measure of what children have learnt and their academic development across the school year. It is not a useful measure if all children are expected to pass it. However, this is not a satisfactory situation either, as it highlights the one dimensional nature of learning and assessment in Lao classrooms. If schools are to develop Summative as well as Formative forms of assessment there is a clear need to address two issues:

The development of in-class assessment strategies which will demonstrate children's progress based upon their starting points or clear base-line achievement data.

The development of teachers' capacity to carry out a range of assessments which can feed into the planning of lessons designed to meet children's specific learning needs.

- Drop Out rates

	Primary	Total Drop out			Total Drop out			Total Drop out CSN			Total Drop out CSN %		
		2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006
		-05	-06	-07	-05	-06	-07	-05	-06	-07	-05	-06	-07
		1277	1439	1311	1%	1%	1%	42	33	34	1%	1%	1%

Dropout rates across the IE project were very low over the 3 years of the data collection, averaging 1% for both students with special needs and also for other children. If we consider that national survival rates from grade 1 to grade 5 for the years 2001 – 2005 (Ministry of Education 2008), were approximately 60%, the statistics from the IE schools represent a considerable achievement.

Viewed by province there are few variations on these statistics – which encourages the interpretation that they are likely to be reliable. The only province which stands out is Attapu, where the rate is significantly higher in the first two years at 6% and 7%, but improves in the third year to 3%.

If we analyse the drop out data by Phase of the Project, it is interesting to note that in Phase 1 schools, the most experienced, there is no drop out at all in the first two years of data collection and then only 4 in the third year. Although more students appear to drop out from Phase Two schools than Phase One or Three schools, this can be attributed to the fact that there are significantly greater numbers of students with special needs and disabilities in Phase Two schools.

The success of schools in the IE Project compared to non-IE schools is for a number of reasons. The expansion of the IE Project was well planned and schools were supported through key initiatives:

- Strategic training covering key areas of teaching and school management designed to develop school quality
- Monitoring and support through Phase 1 and 2 of the Project was regular, ensuring that every school received 4 visits a year from DIT, who in turn received 2 visits a year from PIT.
- It is also important to recognise that the schools chosen for the expansion of the project tended to be located in or near to towns, or close to roads to enable access to training and support. This meant that most project schools found it relatively easy to attract teachers to work in them. Additionally, as the Project did not engage with schools in very remote or inaccessible areas, it did not face more significant challenges to enrolment and completion of Primary School.
- Findings from school visits indicated that the majority of teachers, approximately 80% of those observed working in IE schools, are motivated and enthusiastic about their work. They were found to be genuinely engaged in trying to support children with disabilities and felt that the IE project had had a very significant and positive impact on their practice, the school and the community as a whole. The evidence from classroom observations indicates that many teachers are actively trying to move from a teacher centred pedagogy to a child centred approach. They were experiencing success with initiatives such as the use of resources to support lessons, organising the students in groups and encouraging discussion, relating lessons to students own experiences and the real world. However there is still a need for more specific support and training.

Evidence of Child Centred Practices.

Where schools are developing a learner friendly environment there tended to be other key factors:

- *Motivated and enthusiastic teachers*, who usually lived in the local community. The attitude of the teachers was fundamental in ensuring that there was a development of good practice in the school. It is interesting to note that this was often more evident in remote areas where teachers are part of the local community. In urban areas and particularly nearer to larger towns and cities such as Vientiane and Luang Prabang, it was more likely to observe teachers who were not engaging with students and appeared to be lacking in motivation and enthusiasm.
- *A Principal with good understanding* of learner friendly practice who offered regular support and monitoring to teachers.
- *Regular monitoring* and support from District Advisory Implementation Teams.
- *Teachers who had received in-service training* in IE / child friendly approaches within the last 3 or 4 years.
- *Good communication / partnership working* with the local community.

The success of children with disabilities.

The overall finding was that children with disabilities are being included in their local schools; their attendance is good and grade repetition has dropped significantly following MoE guidance on this issue. Teachers are actively supporting students mostly through key strategies that they have been taught in IE training:

- Actively giving extra attention in class to children with disabilities
- Ensuring that they are sitting with other children who can support them in their work

- Wherever possible using resources to support their learning; usually comprising of stones or chopsticks for maths, pictures and flashcards for Lao language. The IE Project has provided schools with a small amount of money each year, approximately \$50, to support the production of resources using local materials.
- Collaborating and communicating with parents to encourage them to support and work with children at home.

Teachers are experiencing particular challenges in developing specific approaches to individual difficulties – e.g. providing differentiated activities for children; developing more complex classroom management strategies to keep children engaged and interested in their work. A significant number of children were identified with disabilities by the schools who only needed very basic medical intervention to support them e.g. short-sightedness, squints, minor hearing impairments, minor physical impairments. This indicates the need for health and education services to develop joined-up working practices to ensure these children are identified early and given access to the services they require at a young age.

There is a clear need for the development of specialist services / advisory teachers who can support schools in providing appropriate curriculum activities for children with specific disabilities. This would require the development of highly specialised and trained Advisors , initially at central level, who are skilled in the key areas of HI, VI, Physical Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Emotional Difficulties.

It was interesting to note that the Evaluation team saw little evidence of children with ASD - Autistic Spectrum Disorder, one of the most significant groups of students with disabilities internationally. This may be because team members were not trained to identify the condition, but in the 4 Provinces visited by the Project consultant, only one student was identified who might possibly have this condition.

The success of girls

Girls were found to be achieving as well as boys across all IE schools. Their rates of attendance, enrolment, completion and drop out were all of a similar level to boys. This is likely to be linked to factors already identified and particularly the fact that no project schools were in very remote areas, where the enrolment of girls is a greater challenge.

The success of students from ethnic groups.

Across the IE Project, the main finding in relation to ethnicity was that students from ethnic groups are achieving in school where there was evidence of child centred practices and the associated factors listed are in place. The main challenge to ensuring the participation and achievement of these students was found to be where students did not speak or understand Lao, and there were no arrangements in place to use other students as a resource to support second language acquisition. It was also found that where teachers lived in the local community, they were more likely to speak a range of languages including the local language and Lao. This meant that they were able to support students whose first language was not Lao.

The success of students from Poor families. Findings for this group were similar to that for ethnic groups. The main challenge to ensuring the participation and achievement of these students was found to be where schools were not working in close collaboration with local community to ensure that poor families were encouraged and supported in sending their children to school regularly.

Structural Organisation of the Project.

The Project has a history of careful planning, expansion and support from Donors, NGOs and the Ministry of Education. One of the key elements in its success and longevity has been that it has consistently emphasised the importance of collaborative working practices and

joint decision-making at all levels. Organisational and technical support for the project from both NGO and the Ministry of Education has ensured positive impact in schools and communities. However, it is also clear that the support for schools, District Teams and Provincial teams during Phase 1 and 2 of the project was more effective than during Phase 3. This appears to be because the Project reached a point where resources could not continue to effectively meet the requirements of the Project. During Phase 3, for example it appears that schools and DITs received less monitoring and support visits. However, this is at least partly related to Donor Funding which was reduced for Phase 3 to encourage the MoE to begin funding of the project. This did not take place leading to a strain on the delivery of support mechanisms such as school visits.

Where Next for Inclusive Education in Lao PDR?

The last finding described above is a salient reminder of the challenges faced in Project work of this nature in economically poor country contexts. It is perhaps worth noting the initial challenges faced by the project in 1993 – 1995:

IE Project Challenges

- It had to work on several different levels at the same time so that all children would benefit as well as the group that were the main focus.
- Although it wanted to benefit as many children as possible, with scarce resources the project had to find a balance between providing a high quality program and not spreading itself too thinly by trying to work with too large a group.
- Expansion of the project had to be carefully thought through, so that it was not so fast that the quality of the project began to drop, nor so slow that large numbers of children were omitted altogether. (Holdsworth, 2003)

This led to Janet Holdsworth entitling her book about the early years of the IE project, 'Seeking a Fine Balance' (Holdsworth 2003), because the development of the project was always a case of finding a balance between these competing factors. This is still relevant today. In Lao PDR, donors and NGOs are supporting a Quality Schools initiative where every

school will become a 'child-friendly school'. The theoretical framework behind this is broadly inclusive and shares many similarities with the Inclusive Education Project. However, the real success of the IE project has been sustainable development and capacity building over many years, involving all stakeholders and ensuring that all children are truly included. As Lao PDR moves into a new phase in the development of an education systems that aims to meet the needs and aspirations of all students, the lessons of the IE project between 1993 and 2008, should not be forgotten.

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