

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 and improvement process, based on the Index for Inclusion, as a tool to promote inclusive practices. The Ministry of Education in Lao PDR in collaboration with Save the Children Norway have been working to adapt the Index for use in Lao Primary Schools. One aim is to support Primary Schools in developing innovative practice in order to increase participation and engagement in the curriculum for all students. The paper discusses the work undertaken so far and highlights areas for possible future development.

The Development of the Lao PDR School Self Evaluation Tool

The Ministry of Education in Lao PDR in collaboration with Save the Children Norway and Canterbury Christchurch University, UK, have been working to develop a school Self Assessment or self evaluation tool for use in Lao schools. The development of the tool has been based on the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002), a process which has been undertaken in many countries since 2002. This paper sets out to explain the background and rationale for the development of the tool, the aims and expected outcomes of the project. It will also present a brief outline of the work undertaken so far and areas for future development. It should also be noted that due to the limits of this paper, we are unable to describe in as much detail as we would wish, some of the processes undergone nor reflect on some of the questions that have been raised. We hope to do this in future papers.

In order to understand the context we have been working within, it may be useful to present a brief overview of Lao PDR. It is a landlocked country in South East Asia, bordering 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. Lao 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.

The education system is grade based with a primary national curriculum which relies on set text books. The country currently has 867 Pre-Schools, 8,529 Primary Schools and 926 Secondary Schools. There are approximately 33,000 teachers, whose average monthly salary is between \$40 to \$50. 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 1990) although it is acknowledged that there may be serious challenges in achieving these by 2015.

The beginnings of the self evaluation process in Lao are rooted in the country's 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 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, 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 pre-schools. Each year since then, with SIDA becoming the major donor, expansion to new schools, provinces, and districts has taken place. There are currently 481 Inclusive Education schools covering all Districts of the country.

It is important to note the importance of clarifying the term ‘inclusive’ education since it provides an important backdrop to our work on the self evaluation project. The meaning of Inclusive education as a concept has evolved considerably. It has been noted recently that there has been a marked increase in the use of the phrases ‘inclusion’, ‘inclusive education’ and ‘inclusive schools’ in international literature, policy and rhetoric (Singal 2005, Peters 2003, Corbett 2001). This would seem in part to be due to the impact of the Salamanca statement (UNESCO 1994) and the argument that:

‘...regular schools with an inclusive orientation are ...the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.’ (UNESCO, 2005)

Although ‘inclusion’ has become a subject of debate internationally (Dyson 2002), the concept has acquired what has been referred to as ‘jet lag’ (Slee, 2004). That is to say, the phrase has become tired and confused and lost its clarity, meaning different things to different people.

It has been suggested that a typology of different ways of thinking about inclusion may include six or more different kinds of definition (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, p10 – 19, 2006). The link between inclusion and special educational needs is a common perspective (Holdsworth and Deng 2005). For some (e.g. Hegarty and Alur, 2002), inclusion is interpreted as an attempt to move away from segregated provision for students with disabilities to creating mainstream placements for them. 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), demanding radical changes within schools (Barton, 1997).

In 2002, a literature review was published which attempted to clarify some of the confusion caused by these different perceptions and definitions ‘by identifying and evaluating the empirical evidence around the question of what schools can do to become more inclusive’ (Dyson, Howes and Roberts, 2002). The findings of the review identified some possible features of ‘inclusive’ schools through a focus on a small number of key studies. The review described these findings as being related to ‘the relationship between school action and student participation’ (Dyson, Howes, Roberts, p56, 2002), which is, in itself, a specific definition of inclusion which conflicts with, for example, definitions limited to the inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream settings. The features identified were:

- An inclusive culture.
- Aspects of the culture were inherently participatory.

- Likely to have leaders committed to inclusive values and evidence of aspects of distributed forms of leadership
- Good links with parents and communities

These features also reflect the approach to inclusion which underpins the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). The Index describes an approach which is underpinned by a set of key inclusive values:

‘These values are concerned with equity or fairness, participation, community, respect for diversity, compassion, integrity, sustainability and rights.’ (Booth and Black-Hawkins, p.3 2001, 2005)

Whilst the Index encourages school communities to develop their own approaches to inclusion, there is a clear definition of inclusion as being concerned with the rights of learners to attend local schools, to fully participate and achieve and also the right not to be excluded in any way from the school itself or any activity within it. This view partly reflects the views of those who argue that disabled students have the right to mainstream education in the same way as any other student (Peters 2003, Rieser and Mason, 1992) but also displaces the concept of special educational needs, reflecting a medical model of disability, with that of ‘barriers’ to participation and achievement (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). The right of all learners to participate and achieve in local schools encourages the extension of the term inclusion to cover all students, but with a particular focus on those who may be more vulnerable to experiencing exclusionary barriers¹.

The Index for Inclusion encourages schools to consider the curriculum, culture, policy and practice of their school community and to focus on school development initiatives which embrace student diversity. The implication of this view is that inclusive schools are ones which focus on good quality teaching and learning experiences for all students (Corbett 2001, Kugelmass, 2004) but do not focus on the achievement of particular groups in any way that risks increasing their social exclusion by offering segregated differentiated support (Doreman, Deppeler and Harvey, 2005).

The Lao Inclusive Education project has developed from one that was essentially concerned with the placement of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools to a project that is trying to support schools in embracing student diversity through identifying and removing all barriers to participation and achievement. The remaining sections of this paper will aim to describe the process of developing the Lao School Self Evaluation tool from 2004 onwards and some of the main findings from the initial piloting of the tool between 2005 and 2006.

The mid term review of the Inclusive Education Project in May 2002, recommended the development of an assessment tool in schools which could also be used to improve the quality of educational provision. It was decided that the most useful approach would be to develop quality indicators of inclusive practice in schools, so that the developments in school practice

¹ The UK Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) has issued clear guidance on monitoring the achievement of specific groups vulnerable to underachievement (Ofsted 2004, 2006). These groups may include a range of different categories in addition to children categorised as having special educational needs, such as children from ethnic minority groups, refugees, asylum seekers, gifted and talented children, and looked after children. In countries of the South groups of vulnerable children may include significantly different groups, for example, students affected by rural poverty (UNESCO UNICEF, 2005), students affected by HIV/AIDS (Grimes, Sayarath and Outhaithany, 2006).

and the impact of the project could be measured. These could then be used as the basis for school self assessment and external assessment in order to set priorities for future school improvement. A central co-ordination team was formed, comprising the three authors of this paper, as representatives of the Ministry of education, Save the children Norway, the NGO which has facilitated the Inclusive Education project and Canterbury Christchurch university, UK, providing external consultant support and advice.

Nine Primary Schools in three districts, from three provinces, were chosen to develop the materials and trial them. The teachers and advisors from these selected provinces worked collaboratively to develop the tool which 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 assessment tool.

Although the original aim of the project was to design materials that could be used in Inclusive Education Schools, to measure the quality and impact of the project, it soon became clear that the concept of Inclusive Education needed to be enlarged, as described above, and that the tool should reflect the ongoing work in Lao on Education for All and the Convention of the Rights of the child.

Therefore, the aims of the programme were:

- To produce materials, relevant to the Lao context which could be used by schools as a self-evaluation tool for assessing the quality of their provision for all students.
- To develop school improvement action plans in each school with priorities based on analysis of consultation with all stakeholders in the school community.
- To develop the capacity of district advisory teams to support and monitor the school improvement process.
- To develop the capacity of clusters of schools to work collaboratively to develop quality educational provision in their respective schools.
- To prepare the schools / advisors for the implementation of the self assessment process in schools
- To model the delivery of the workshop materials to enable advisors and teachers to repeat the process in other provinces and schools
- To introduce the UNESCO Embracing Diversity Toolkit as a tool which will support school development after the initial self-evaluation process
- To begin a phased roll out of the materials through clusters of schools, using the capacity developed within the original 9 project schools and local advisors to support the process.

One of the central issues that shaped the development of these aims was capacity building at local level. It was important that one outcome of the project was to develop expertise and collaborative working practices at Ministry, Provincial and District Advisory level, as well as in schools. The benefits of developing collaborative networking practices are well noted in school improvement literature (Stoll and Fink, 1989, Ainscow, West and Nicolaidou, 2005, Durrant and Holden, 2006). The Ministry of Education In Lao had already introduced the idea of clusters of schools working together and we wanted to incorporate this into the project. The idea was that the 3 schools in each district would be able to collaborate together throughout the piloting process, supporting each other and perhaps beginning to work as ‘critical friends’ (Macbeath, 1998). This also relates to the development of the role of the district advisors. We saw the self evaluation project as an opportunity to shift the advisory role from one of monitoring local schools to one based on collaborative working partnerships and ‘critical friendship’.

The materials were to be developed with the aim of rolling them out through a staged process to schools across the country. The teachers, principles and advisors who were invited to be a part of the development process were seen as full partners in the writing of the materials. Their role was crucial to the projects success. If the materials were to be credible and applicable in Lao schools they needed to be developed by practitioners who understood the practical context within which they would be used. Therefore, once the trialling process began there were two evaluations taking place: the self evaluation process in the schools themselves and the evaluation of the materials themselves.

The three districts in three provinces chosen were Kham in Xiengkhouang, Thoulakhom in Vientiane and Phonthong in Champasack province. The provinces were chosen to provide a broad sample of the geographical regions of Lao: Kham in the North East, more mountainous with a diversity of ethnic groups and rural communities; Thoulakhom in the middle of the country close to the Capital city Vientiane, with a local community comprising business people as well as rural farmers; Phonthong in the south close to the Thai and Cambodian borders, a community made up of rural, business people and also government workers. Each district was asked to choose three IE schools with the criteria that there should be a ‘stronger, a weaker and an average’ school. It was left to the District team to select the schools and they interpreted the criteria in different ways. In one district, weaker meant a school with weak practice, poor leadership from the principle and low grade results. In another district, weak was interpreted as a school in the economically poorest area of the district with few community resources to support the school. In the third district, weak was interpreted as a school that was new to the Inclusive education project. In retrospect, this variation in the way the criteria for selection was interpreted, gave the project a peculiar strength, in that the 9 schools chosen had many different features which allowed for greater depth to the evaluation of the project materials in practice.

Each school had created a coordinating team who attended the workshops and were able to coordinate the work in school. In most schools this team comprised the principle and two teachers. The school coordinating team were supported by two district education advisors and two provincial education service advisors who also attended the workshops. As we have noted above, the project offered the opportunity to develop the capacity of local advisors in supporting school improvement. By engaging with this process of self assessment in schools, advisors would be able to develop their understanding of the role of a critical friend in order to support their monitoring and advisory work in schools as well as using their experience in supporting the development of collaborative networking between the three schools as a basis to develop similar approaches with other clusters within the district.

Between February and November 2005, the project team attended a series of workshops to prepare 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 assessment reports
- Templates for advisors assessment reports

The Indicators

- All pupils feel welcome in the school
- All students support each other in their learning
- All students are well supported by school staff
- Teachers and parents cooperate well.
- All students are treated equally as valued members of the school
- All students feel that their opinions and views are valued.
- All students can access learning in all lessons.
- All students can access all parts of the school building.
- All students attend school every day.
- All students enjoy lessons
- All students are engaged in all lesson activities.
- All students achieve their learning in all subjects according to their individual ability
- All students learn together.
- All students have appropriate access to health services as necessary

The Indicators were developed over several months with a wider team than those who took part in the final project. In order to incorporate the perspectives of as wide a group as possible, advisors from all 17 provinces in Lao attended the first workshops in July and September 2004 to begin work on creating the indicators. Readers familiar with the Index for Inclusion will note the similarities between many of the indicators and the originals in the Index. It may be asked why the decision was not taken to simply translate the Index for Inclusion into Lao and use this as the basis for the Lao tool. This has been the case in several other countries, most recently in Latvia, However, as we have noted above, one aim was to produce a tool that was relevant to the Lao context whilst another was to produce a tool that was practical and usable in this context. The Index was produced for use in British schools, operating in a particular context, much of which is not applicable to Lao. Booth has argued that this must be recognised when adapting the Index for use in different cultures and country contexts (Booth and Black-Hawkins, 2001, 2005). The indicators that were finally developed, after much discussion, were written in the language, without the original Index indicators being used as a model, and then translated back into English. From this perspective it is interesting to note again the similarities between the two sets. It would seem to indicate that teachers in different cultural contexts have some similar notions regarding the challenges that face them in developing more inclusive practice in their classrooms.

In relation to the practicalities of working in Lao schools, we would argue that there are professional development and cultural challenges when introducing concepts such as ‘self evaluation’, ‘school improvement’ and complex materials such as the Index to teachers who may have had little initial training, and have to work in 2 or 3 different jobs in order to earn enough money to support their families. The original Index has 44 indicators – the Lao version has 14. In the original index, each indicator has between 8 and 17 clarifying questions to support their use and stimulate discussion and enquiry – the Lao version has 3 questions for each indicator. The teachers and advisors felt it was important that the tool that was produced was ‘manageable’. It had to be diverse enough that it covered the issues relevant in Lao schools but compact enough for schools to feel that they could manage it. The concepts behind the tool had to be clear enough that their meaning transferred across cultures and the participants being introduced to the materials in their schools had to be clear about the purpose of the evaluation (Ebbutt, p.419, 1998). – that this was a *self* evaluation and not an external one. The project team, all 57 advisors and teachers, made these decisions about the

adaptation of the Index and the development of the tool together. As one participant said: ‘We can only do our best - we work together on this and that makes it strong. Sure we will make some mistakes but we hope it is going to work in the schools.’

Although the materials were designed to support the inclusion of all students, the project team was aware of the diverse groups of students in Lao who are particularly vulnerable to experiencing barriers to participation and learning. These groups include:

- 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

National data indicates that some districts experience very high drop out rates, above average levels of grade repeating, low enrolment rates and low take up of secondary places. A metaphor developed during the course of the project whereby the participants began to refer to the process of self evaluation as ‘looking below the surface of the lake’. This referred to teachers and advisors growing realisation that in order to investigate the reasons for this data, they needed to focus on the vulnerable groups of students and ask searching questions about their experiences of school and home life. This was more evident during the action planning and development stages of the project than during the initial data collection as the participants became more familiar with the process. The results of this collaborative enquiry based approach can be seen in the project outcomes below.

In November 2005, the project coordination team began visiting the three districts and nine pilot schools to launch the self evaluation process. In each district there was a workshop for the three school coordinating teams, two district advisors, two provincial advisors to discuss the use of the materials in schools and to prepare for the school visits by the coordination team. This was followed by a days visit to each school. The school visits aimed to introduce the self assessment 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.

It was clear from the visits that the capacity of the school teams and the district advisory teams to engage with the self evaluation process varied greatly. Generally, the three schools which had been identified as strongest in their districts appeared to be clearest about the process and the ways in which they would approach the activities. The three weakest schools were less clear and would probably need a lot of support from advisors and other schools in the project. Of the three advisory teams, two appeared to be clear about the project activities with a plan for supporting the schools, whilst the third team were less confident. It was felt that they would need extra support from the Ministry.

The schools engaged in data collection and analysis of their schools for the next eight weeks. Towards the end of January 2006, they began to identify areas where the data from different stakeholder groups differed over certain questions, offering opportunities for further

exploration and enquiry. During this time they would begin to identify the strengths of the school and also areas they wanted to prioritise for development and improvement.

At the end of February 2006, we brought all the schools and advisors together for a 7 day workshop. During this time there was an opportunity to visit the schools in the project in Vientiane province and each school and local team made a presentation to share what they had found out about their schools and also the lessons they had learnt in using the materials. For the Project coordination team this was a fascinating period as we heard from the schools and advisors about their different experiences. From the schools' presentations on the data they had collected and their analysis of the findings, it was clear to us that more work needed to be done on data collection and analysis. Most of the schools presented sets of data that relied heavily on results from the questionnaires that had been given to students, teachers and parents. There was little evidence that the school coordination teams had explored views of stakeholders through interviews or focus group discussions; nor was it evident that they had analysed the data at a deep enough level to explore some of the contradictions in response. However, most schools appeared clear about the areas that needed to be developed in the school and they all reported that the process had been useful and stimulating.

One district had approached the data collection in a completely different way to the other two districts. They had organised staff from each of the three schools to collect the data from stakeholder groups in each of the other schools in order to try and ensure that there was no suggestion of bias. The data that these three schools collected differed significantly from that presented by the other schools. Whereas other schools presented data where there was perhaps 85 – 90% agreement amongst stakeholder groups in response to questions, in the schools from the third district the response tended to be 60 – 75% agreement. This suggests either that the data from other schools was a little unreliable or that the stakeholder groups in these three schools disagreed with each other more than in the first two districts. Our interpretation, having visited all nine schools and worked with all the different groups in those schools, was that it was more likely to be an issue around the way in which the data was collected.

One of the nine schools had experienced real difficulties in collecting and analysing the data. They were unable to present their findings at the same time as the other schools and on investigation the principle appeared confused. This raised questions about the way in which this particular school had been supported by the local district advisors and they in turn by the Ministry. This school had been identified as the weakest of the nine schools and it was in the district where the advisory team was perceived by ourselves as the weakest of the three teams. It was clear that not only had the local advisors not been monitoring and supporting the project in this school closely enough, but that the Ministry advisors, aware of the situation, had also failed to monitor and support the district team. This was a valuable lesson for the project – how do advisors support the development and improvement of the weakest schools? This is a question that has been addressed by many writers in the school effectiveness field (Gray et al 1999, Hopkins 2001, Macbeath et al 2006) and it is clear that there are no easy answers. However, from the outcomes of this project and much of the research in this area, it seems clear that a collaborative and supportive relationship between local advisors and schools can be very beneficial. In this case it was not collaborative or supportive enough.

The workshops also focused on evaluating the materials in practice. Many important questions needed to be asked, including: 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 reworded? This process enabled us to modify the materials ready for use with other schools. It is likely that this modification will be an ongoing process. When different schools and districts begin to use the materials, different issues or challenges will be encountered. Clearly more work needed to be done with schools on taking a more sophisticated approach to both data collection and analysis. The schools also identified a range of examples where the language used was not clear and needed to be modified. However, this was also complicated by the fact that the dialects in the different parts of the country sometimes affected interpretation of key words.

The final part of the workshop was given over to supporting the schools and their local advisors in developing action plans. This was a complex process because action planning of this nature was unfamiliar to them. However, each school was able to produce an action plan with three key areas for development, related to the original indicators in the self evaluation tool. The only stipulation that we made, was that at least one of their three areas had to concern the development of more inclusive teaching and learning practices. The schools also began to engage with the crucial question of '*what would improvement look like?*'. This was a very important point for us as a national project team because we wanted the process of improvement to be driven by the schools themselves. However, at the same time it was also important to build into the process collaboration with the local advisors who would need to be engaged in monitoring and supporting the improvement process. Therefore, we wanted as far as possible to encourage the schools to identify the potential evidence for improvement so that when advisors worked with them, the schools could demonstrate clearly what progress had been made.

The schools and advisors were also introduced to the UNESCO Embracing Diversity toolkit (2005), and given translated copies to take away with them. The toolkit was developed by UNESCO (Asia region) to support the development of inclusive practices in schools. We hoped that the toolkit might support the schools in developing their practice over the coming months, but were conscious of the fact that we had not been able to offer the participants more than a short introduction to some of the materials.

The final phase of the pilot project is due to complete in March 2007. It has involved:

1. Advisors working with schools to support the implementation of the action plan priorities in order to raise the quality of educational provision in schools.
2. School visits and workshops in each province by the National Project Coordination Team, in November 2006.
3. A national evaluation workshop attended by all project participants in February 2007.
4. Evaluation report and planning for the national strategic development and application of the Self Evaluation tool and UNESCO Embracing Diversity Toolkit (UNESCO 2005).
5. Dissemination of the evaluation report through
 - a. published articles
 - b. Presentation at ICSEI 2007, The International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement in Slovenia, January 2007.

The evaluation visits in November 2006 were undertaken by a national evaluation team, which, depending on the district, usually comprised 10 – 12 people. The individual make up of the team differed in each province, but the structure was always the same:

External consultant / technical advisor
 Programme staff from Save the Children Norway

Members of the Ministry of Education National Implementation team

Provincial advisors

District advisors

The role of the team was to evaluate the self evaluation project, *not* to evaluate the schools themselves. The methodology included:

- Presentation of action plan and evidence of school improvements by school team
- lesson observations, interviews with teachers, students, parents and local community
- Analysis of data on grade progression, grade repetition, student drop out rate, enrolment rates, progression to secondary rates.

On the visits to the districts the schedule for the visits was:

Day 1 was a full day workshop with provincial and district team, members of NIT, and school co-ordination teams. During this workshop, District / provincial teams presented feedback from the work they had been doing with schools during the last 8 months since the February 2006 workshop.

They were asked to address the following questions in their presentation:

- How have the schools been making progress towards their action plans? (the district teams should refer to the action plans to make sure their presentations are clear)
- How have the district and provincial teams been supporting the schools as they work on their action plans?
- When the national evaluation team visits the schools, how will they know that the schools have made progress? - what evidence of progress can the school direct the evaluation team to look for?

The presentations by the District teams indicated some developments in practice since the beginning of the project. The weakest District team had improved greatly and presented a very clear overview of the ways in which they had engaged with, collaborated with and supported the three schools in an organised and strategic approach. One of the other District teams, which we had regarded as possibly the strongest presented a very disorganised overview of the work that had been undertaken in the three schools. It was not clear how they had collaborated or supported the three schools in their District. The Senior Advisor for the District, who had been a key member of the project since its inception had been ill since the workshops in February 2006. Clearly the rest of the local team had found it difficult to function without him. This was another interesting lesson for the project and raised the importance of leadership at local level (Ainscow, Howes and Tweddle, 2006, in Ainscow and West 2006).

Days 2-4 comprised full day visits to the three district schools. During these days the national evaluation team met with:

School co-ordination team

parents

teachers

students

and asked the schools to demonstrate clearly:

- How they had been working on their action plans,
- What progress had been made,
- How the school had improved,
- What evidence could they show of the improvements that had been made in the school (How would advisors / evaluators know the school has improved?)

Over 3 weeks the national evaluation team visited all 9 schools in the pilot project. The main findings were:

- All 9 schools had action plans in place with 3 clear priorities for development, each of which was clearly related to indicators from the self evaluation tool.
- In each school, at least one of the priorities related to teachers classroom practice and the quality of teaching and learning.
- There was clear evidence in each school that they had been working to improve their practice in the priority areas.
- The greatest improvements occurred in schools where there had been close collaboration between the school co-ordination team and the rest of the staff, so that a sense of ownership of the school improvement process had developed. In most schools this was supported by local district pedagogical advisors working closely along side the teachers.
- In the strongest schools there was clear evidence that the school coordination team had engaged in detailed analysis of data such as grade results, drop out rates, enrolment, etc and had used this to identify those students most vulnerable to underachievement. The schools had then strategically planned interventions in order to counteract the identified barriers to participation. For example, in one school where achievement in grade 3 was a cause for concern, detailed data analysis indicated that a substantial number of those performing at levels below average, came from a particular village. A strategic plan was drawn up with the local community to pilot the development of study groups at home supported by local teachers and community members. This pilot has led to improved performance by all students taking part and the school is now planning to extend the scheme to other villages.
- Where schools had aimed to improve aspects of their relationship with the local community, the greatest improvements occurred where school staff worked in collaboration with local community groups and parent representatives.
- In several schools the self evaluation project had acted as a tool to coordinate and maximize the impact from a variety of different projects or types of support which the school had been receiving.
- The greatest improvement occurred in the school which was originally identified as the weakest school in the project. The project had acted as a lever for change in the school enabling stronger more experienced staff to focus on developing more effective classroom practice throughout the school by supporting weaker or less experienced colleagues.
- In 3 schools the project had led to teachers developing their practice through peer observations on a monthly or twice monthly basis.
- In all 9 schools there was clear evidence that staff were focusing their attention on the participation and achievement of all students rather than specific groups.
- There was variation in the extent to which district teams had worked to support the schools. In 2 of the 3 districts the support was judged to be good or excellent, whilst in the 3rd district the evaluation of the team was that the quality of the support for schools had reduced. An important factor in this was the experience and quality of the district advisors. Illness meant that a key member of the 3rd district team had been absent from the project for much of 2006, clearly impacting on the quality of support for the schools.
- In one of the 3 districts, schools within the cluster had already been introduced to the self evaluation materials and invited to attend a workshop to learn from the experience of the 3 project schools. In the remaining 2 provinces, 1 has clear planning in place to begin introducing the materials to new schools in 2007. The 3rd district, judged the weakest of the 3 following the evaluation visits, will need further support from provincial and national teams in order to roll out the materials to new schools in 2007.

- In 6 of the 9 schools there was clear evidence of corporal punishment and a low awareness amongst the staff of the Convention of the Rights of the Child.
- The team found clear evidence that local capacity for the rolling out of materials in 2 of the 3 districts has been developed. It is envisaged that roll out can take place in the 3rd district but with the support of provincial and national advisors.
- The process of data collection in schools and consultation with the local community and students is an area that needs further development. Most schools collected data methodically using the prepared questionnaires. There was some evidence of further discussion to clarify views and perspectives but most participants lacked confidence in this aspect of the self evaluation process. It was, however, interesting to note that as the school teams engaged with the work of improving their priority areas, they developed greater confidence in consultation and collaboration with teachers, students and community.

These findings raise many issues worthy of further reflection. It is our intention to discuss these in a future paper.

The strategic plan for 2007 and beyond begins with a National Evaluation Workshop in February 2007. All the participants of the pilot will attend a final evaluation workshop in Pakse, Champasak to review and evaluate the project materials, share experiences of the school improvement process since 2004 and to make recommendations for the future roll out of the materials to other schools. The final evaluation report on the pilot phase will be completed by March 2007.

The national expansion of the self evaluation project begins in September 2007 and has the following aims:

- To introduce the materials and school improvement process to 18 new schools, 3 new districts in 23 new provinces, between September 2007 and January 2008.
- To use the capacity developed in existing project participants to support the roll out process.
- To use the self evaluation materials and school improvement process to improve monitoring of the quality of education in schools in line with Lao PDR's EFA targets.
- To use the self evaluation materials and school improvement process to support and provide a clear strategic development focus to all projects and initiatives currently underway in the roll out schools.
- To incorporate the UNESCO Embracing Diversity toolkit into the training programme so that it can be introduced at the same time as the self evaluation materials.

Phase 1 and 2 of the roll out will be supported by staff from the National Implementation Team and the external consultant / technical advisor, although it should be emphasised that as the process develops the capacity of local staff to support the roll out should increase and the involvement of national / external staff should decrease. The first phase of the roll out of the self evaluation materials will take place in September 2007. The three existing districts will introduce the materials and process to 3 new schools who will be partnered with the original pilot schools. It is envisaged that these new schools would not be Inclusive Education Project schools. Local advisors and staff from the pilot schools will work alongside the new schools to support the self evaluation process according to the following structure:

The second phase of the roll out of the self evaluation materials will take place in January 2008. The materials will be introduced to 9 schools in 3 new provinces. It is envisaged that the capacity developed in existing project participants will be used to support the training of

new schools and advisory teams in the use of the materials. Phase 2 will be organised and supported by National advisors with the support of Provincial and District Advisors from the Pilot Project. The role of the external consultant will be to support the initial workshops and then to offer strategic planning advice and monitoring of the roll out process. In September 2008 it is planned to introduce the materials to all schools in the clusters of the original 3 districts and to introduce the materials to 9 new partner schools in the 3 new provinces who began work in January 2008. In January 2009, work will begin with 9 schools in 3 new provinces. It is envisaged that an external evaluation of the project should then take place in November 2009.

At this point in time the Lao Self Evaluation Project appears to have made a successful entry into the Lao education system. It is early to predict how it may develop but initial indicators would suggest that it is possible to use a self evaluation process in order to support school improvement in a country that has as many social and economic challenges as Lao. The commitment of the participants at school and advisory level to trying to make the project 'work' at a practical and also a theoretical level has been impressive. Perhaps it is best to finish with the words of one of the participants, a deputy principal:

'We had to acknowledge in our school that there were some things we had to improve. We know things aren't perfect – some things we can't change, like the buildings; but we could think about our teaching and how we work with the children and the parents. We know it's not always good enough. We have really made a difference this year – the school is a different place; a better place for children and teachers to learn in together.'

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