

Ways To Move From Mass Schooling to ESD

By Sombath Somphone

Mainstreaming, or scaling up holistic education, often faces difficulties and challenges, especially from traditional educators and parents. However, there are ways to scale up the concept of alternative education, or education for sustainable development. It can be made more acceptable by the mainstream education system through well thought out strategic interventions, which must gain the support of teachers, local education authorities, parents, communities, and religious leaders.

The Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC) based in Vientiane, Lao PDR, has been introducing concepts and practices of more holistic, integrative, and sustainable education approaches into the Lao education system for over 10 years. PADETC used methodologies to promote a more holistic approach to education, initially in 10 schools for

two years, and now expanded to more than 100 schools, falling in line with the government's policy to improve the quality of education. Initial results in the 10 piloted primary schools are as follows:

Quality education and holistic learning can be an important entry point in changing the mindsets of the next generation to value sustainable development and wellbeing.

- A significant improvement in academic performance of students in all 10 schools (an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent increase) with much of the success due to the introduction of well designed standard lesson plans which guide teachers to be activity-based and child-focused;
- Increased motivation of teachers

and school principles to adopt new approaches, and participation of community members, including local religious leaders in fundraising activities;

- An increased self-confidence of students.

PADETC has drawn on their experience with public schools, and from lessons learned from the Roong Aroon School, located just outside Bangkok, Thailand, to develop a general strategy for implementing ESD in formal education. The General Strategy is as follows (to be implemented in any order):

1. No shock therapies - use terminologies that are child-friendly, empowering and non-threatening.
2. Introduce activity-based and holistic learning, starting within classrooms, and build experience to move out to the school yards and then eventually, to encompass the community.
3. Consulting and involving members



Learning from farmers how organic rice is grown © PADETC



Students learn how to cook different ethnic foods in a camp © PADETC



Leadership training game © PADETC

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- of the community to identify important indigenous knowledge (or livelihood skills) to be topics of activity based learning.
4. Bring in members of the community to be volunteer teachers on the subject of their specialty.
 5. Use of student volunteers to assist teachers in carrying out activities - really encourage peer-to-peer education, not in specific issues, but as a regular practice;
 6. Balance the head and the heart: competencies, ethics, and social responsibility
 7. Identify important development issues as study topics for students to work on, including fieldwork in the community (real-life evidence-based learning).
 8. At the onset of each school year, bring together teachers who teach the same grades to agree on topics for teaching their different subjects.
 9. Encourage students and teachers to produce their own books as much as possible to avoid total dependency

- on official textbooks as the sole learning tool.
10. Setting up manufacturing of products which not only have economic significance but also have an associated value the school can identify with and be proud of, as a part of experiential learning.
 11. Production of teaching tools of various formats, such as print and video films, can add much more value to the work performed by students and teachers. A forum to share and show these tools will promote a holistic culture of learning.
 12. Start with a small group of schools which have open minded teachers and principals. Use their experience to show and train others.
 13. Establish a learning park or learning corner at the school and then slowly use the community real life setting to expand the "learning park". Eventually move towards communities of learning centres/ parks.

14. A school committee is preferred over the parents association, as it includes a wider representation of stakeholders. Parents' participation should be made mandatory at the onset, prior to accepting their children into the school.
 15. Connect the dots of good practices and sharing of resources locally, regionally, and globally.
- Quality education and holistic learning can be an important entry point in changing the mindsets of the next generation to value sustainable development and wellbeing. The present generation of adults has a moral responsibility to set this future generation in the right direction, or to put them on a path different to the one we're on today.

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