



# Experiential Learning in Lao Ricefields

Teachers, monks and students join hands to turn education around

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Nowadays, we often read about South Korean children and their parents protesting against an education system that is too competitive and stressful, often leaving the children with no time to sleep, to play and, most especially, to dream. Korean parents spend a lot of money in after-school lessons in music, taekwondo, math, language, art and other subjects, which are supposed to put their children ahead of their peers.

The current trend among Korean parents is sending their children—as young as the elementary grades—to the best schools in the United States, England, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the Philippines to

study English. Learning English is seen as a tool that will equip children and young students when they go to college and look for work. Parents are willing to invest in the education of their children to give them an edge in securing employment in Korean *chaebols* (giant corporations). Also, learning English is considered as a sure ticket to jobs in multinational corporations and international organisations which often pay high salaries.

Often, business-minded Koreans put up their own English-language schools in the abovementioned countries. The trend, which started with the rise of South Korea as an economic power in the 1980s and



Interaction among ethnic groups promotes mutual understanding.

the country's hosting of the Olympics in 1988, is currently assuming gigantic proportions, urging civil society to lean back and start asking questions.

In recent years, the Korean government and the private sector have joined hands to put up "English villages" in major cities where children are provided with "hands-on" experience in English by foreign teachers and English-trained Korean teachers. The move is to stop the flow of currency outside of the country and to ease the burden of parents and children.

## Glaring disparity

On one hand, we have the "too tough" case of South Korea; on the other, we have

the case of the "too easy" education system of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). Lao children have too much free time on their hands, and it is often due to a weak curriculum, poorly directed learning and absenteeism by teachers.

The disparity between the two countries illustrates the range of education systems across the Asia-Pacific region. The disparity is often caused and shaped by varying levels of investment in education, the prevailing political climate in each country, as well as society's cultural perception of the role of education.

## Human capital

In general, most countries agree that education is a means to develop their human capital to drive up economic progress, secure political integrity and preserve social stability. However, within this broad goal, a vast range of educational strategies exists, depending on each country's development priorities. Such deci-

sions—mostly made by politicians—impact on the lives of children, parents and communities, as well as the future of a country, or of society as a whole.

I believe that one of the fundamental priorities of development is the building of sustainable communities. For me, a sustainable community is one in which people—young or old, male or female, minority or majority—can live lives with dignity: in harmony with nature, at peace with each other, and respectful of each other's social and cultural traditions.

Most importantly, I believe that the role of education is to foster among learners the responsibility and means to build communities that secure the sustainability of society. From this perspective, education and development are complementary; they reinforce and support each other. Education equips the young with values, knowledge and skills needed for building sustainable communities within a development process that optimizes society's economic, cultural, environmental and spiritual well-being.

## Schooling or education?

For education to become the foundation of sustainable development, it should not focus only on theory and content. It must include teaching children relevant skills so that they can live productive lives and secure viable livelihoods in the future. Unfortunately, in many countries across the Asia-Pacific region, what we often see is the practice of "schooling," as opposed to "real education."

There is a big difference between the terms "schooling" and "education." Schooling is mostly theory- and content- driven, examination-centered and top-down. Teachers usually dominate the process, using an approach where they talk while students listen; they write on the blackboard while students copy; and they lecture while students memorize.

## Dumbing down children

No wonder school classes are often boring and stressful. At their worst, lessons lead to the "dumbing down" of children. The dumbing down process does not only take place in schools. It also takes place in



Mr. Sombath Somphone, the author, teaches children how to fish, definitely a basic life skill in Laos, if not everywhere.

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living rooms through the mass media, especially television. The mass media today is mainly a one-way communication tool, constantly bombarding children and the young with values and lifestyles that promote consumerism and even violence.

Most of the time, both the process and content of education (and the mass media) are inappropriate, mostly outdated, and do not adequately equip children with relevant knowledge and skills to prepare them for life.

### Real education

So what can be done? To change the situation, schooling must be transformed into real education. Education is too important to be left only in the hands of teachers and bureaucrats at the Ministry of Education. Educators and teachers need to work hand-in-hand with parents, the community, the private sector, and most especially, children themselves to transform the business of education.

Education has to become more participatory, experiential and stimulating. It has to be more fun. Both the process and content of education have to unleash the potential of every child to solve life problems. Education should be able to integrate information and knowledge into a coherent whole.

The content of education has to respond to the emotional and intellectual development of children, as well as the dreams and aspirations of families and communities. Learning should not be limited to knowledge found in textbooks. It should include prac-

tical life-skills and relevant livelihood experiences that combine modern science with indigenous wisdom, as well as cultural values of the community. By rooting children in their culture, traditions and values, we encourage and help them to respect the past, value the present and protect the future.

### Breaking down walls

Real education should be made available to every one, and it should take place anywhere, at anytime. There should be no walls separating learning in the classroom from learning in the schoolyard. There should be no fence separating learning in school from learning in the community.

Similarly, there should be no roofs and ceilings that block the imagination of children and limit what they can see and hear. For example, part of the semester should be arranged in such a way that children are able to learn and work at the same time. To illustrate, they should be able to go to the rice fields, interacting with farmers, merchants, restaurant owners, transport workers, artisans and other skilled people. In this manner, children experience how rice is grown and appreciate the hard work of farmers, as well as the contribution of all the actors in the production chain.

As they interact with elements of the production chain, students get to learn language, mathematics, the environment, science, nutrition and water systems. In addition, they learn customs, songs, and the arts and crafts associated with rice production. If education uses the environment as a laboratory, learning will not

be boring or stressful, but fun-filled and meaningful.

### Sustainable development: a model

I am proposing a model of education for sustainable development, represented by a house with four pillars. The four pillars stand for economic development, environmental harmony, promotion and preservation of culture, and spiritual well-being, or the development of the “heart.”

In this model, education is considered as the foundation that anchors the four pillars of development. Children and young people are the centre of development. They are involved in the development process and are active in educating themselves, as well as their peers.

Parents and grandparents—as holders and preservers of knowledge about natural resources—are important actors in the education process. They form the link between the past and the present. They transmit indigenous wisdom, as well as cultural and spiritual values to the next generation.

At the base of the model is good governance, which is vital in ensuring a just, equitable and transparent development for all. When all these elements interact in balance, they will form a sturdy roof, or the ultimate goal of “Happiness” or “Sustainability,” a concept of joyful living and active education inspired by the Bhutanese idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

### An ideal state

Such a model of development is an ideal state, and, in reality, does not exist. Currently, few mainstream education systems fully practice such a model. It might be too idealistic to implement this model in real life. However, policy-makers should see it as a vision to aim at. In turn, teachers should consider it as a guide to define their classroom objectives.

The good news is that there are increasingly more examples across the Asia-Pacific region in which more holistic and integrated systems of learning are offered as an alternative.

### Working together

In the last ten years, the Participatory Development Training Centre (PADETC) of Lao PDR has been supporting a holistic and community-based education programme. Making use of the free time available to children and young people, PADETC has trained and mobilized youth volunteers mainly from secondary schools and universities. The aim is to assist teachers to conduct extra-curricular activities to promote experiential and activity-based learning among students.

Youth volunteers, along with teachers and primary school children, have transformed many schoolyards into “learning parks” with organic vegetable gardens, garbage recycling banks, earthworm-raising beds and other ventures. Teachers increasingly use the learning parks to conduct their classes.

To reduce the influence of mass media’s one-way communication, youth volunteers have started their own radio programmes to reclaim the airwaves. They conduct educational sessions with their peers on important issues such as substance abuse, children’s

rights, human trafficking and HIV/AIDS. During weekends and vacation months, teachers and youth leaders organize primary school children to conduct community service in neighboring communities.

### Respecting tradition

Local artists and craftsmen and women—working with community leaders—document examples of indigenous knowledge such as the use of traditional medicine, indigenous methods of fishing, basketry, community forest protection and similar practices.

Both teachers and volunteers produce various kinds of learning materials to teach indigenous knowledge in schools. Such engagement has brought the school and the community closer and given children a stronger sense of their cultural identity and respect for their parents’ occupations and their elders’ traditions.

### Monks are involved



A monk teaches meditation to a group of children in Lao school.

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With support from senior members of the Buddhist Organization, Buddhist monks from the local temples are mobilized to conduct *Dharma Sanchorn* (traveling Dharma) to teach values such as respect, control of greed, love of nature, as well as the practice of meditation to children and members of the community. Dharma Sanchorn is a form of “engaged Buddhism” that enables monks to work for the good of the community, using their moral authority.

Since the introduction of Dharma Sanchorn, teachers have reported a reduction in bullying and violence in the schools. On the other hand, parents have observed that their children have become more respectful of their elders and have acted more responsibly at home.

The closing of ranks among the schools, communities and temples has been beneficial. It has definitely broadened the educational experience of children. In turn, the children have found learning “based on real life” more interesting. Through these efforts, I believe we have begun to chip away at the predominant model of “schooling,” and hopefully, to move towards a process of “real education” for Lao children. 🏠

Note: Most Laotians are Buddhist, and temples are found in many communities. Traditionally the monks are highly respected and venerated by the population as their spiritual leaders.