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—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.

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...
Special Column

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 on 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

With support from senior members of the Buddhist Organization, Buddhist monks from the local temple are mobilized to conduct Dharmic Sanchhorns (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. Dharmic Sanchhorn 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 Dharmic Sanchhorns, 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 Laoans are Buddhist, and temples are found in many communities. Traditionally the monks are highly respected and venerated by the population as their spiritual leaders.