

Capturing the voice of children through photos in Lao PDR



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Country context

Lao People's Democratic Republic:

- Land-locked country
- Population largely rural and agricultural
- 49 ethnic communities and many languages
- Long civil war after independence from France in 1949
- Under Communist rule since 1975
- Stable governance, slow development progress
- Increasingly open to tourism & external influences

Education sector context

- Increasing capacity and planning within MOE
- Insufficient Government funding
- Varied quality of education – e.g. teacher training, learning environments, resources
- Enrolment especially low for girls in remote areas
- Many international donors contribute to core education expenses (classrooms, equipment, learning materials) - recently better coordinated

Some images of schools



Schools of Quality

- Concept introduced by UNICEF in 2005 with MOE
- AusAID contributed funds since 2006 for SoQ implementation in 3 Provinces
- Includes capacity development, teacher training, learning resources, infrastructure development, WatSan, combined with WFP school feeding
- By 2009, expanded to 9 provinces with other external support

6 Dimensions of Schools of Quality

- Inclusive of all children
- Effective teaching and learning relevant to children's lives
- Healthy, safe and protective environments
- Gender responsive environments
- Pupils, parents and community participation
- Effective school management and leadership

Evaluation Objectives

- To inform MOE, UNICEF and other stakeholders:
 - what has worked well in policy terms, in schools and for children in relation to SoQ approach;
 - the factors which have contributed to success;
 - strategies to enhance future implementation
- To improve understanding of SoQ implementation and consequences of using a rights based approach

[Key focus: Enhance **learning** and **collaboration**]

Evaluation Approach & Methodology

- Strengths based, case-study approach, structured to enhance collaborative learning
- Evaluation team: 2 Australians, 2 Lao evaluation consultants, 7 researchers from the Faculty of Education at the National University of Laos
- Team accompanied in the field by various representatives from MOE, UNICEF, WFP and AusAID
- Preparatory phase i.e. development of evaluation plan and draft instruments and key document review undertaken by Australian evaluators in Australia

Methodology (cont)

- Lao consultants helped refine process and instruments
- Workshop with Lao researchers re process and tools
- Interviews: MOE, UNICEF, AusAID, WFP, other donors in Vientiane and target provinces
- 4 week field work including one day visits to 21 schools in 5 Provinces, in four sub-teams
- Meetings of evaluation team/s to discuss findings
- Verbal presentation of interim findings to forum of key stakeholders in Vientiane at the end of week 2
- Australian evaluators returned to Oz at end of week 2, data collection completed by Lao team members

Evaluation activities in schools

- Interviews with school directors
- Group interviews with teachers and with Village Education Development Committee members
- School mapping and participant observation
- Games and group work with Grade 5 children and showing them how to use digital cameras, led to:
 - All children (in pairs) took photos of any aspects of their school that they thought showed it was 'good'
 - Class selection of 'best 5 photos' from laptop displays
 - Class preparation of captions to go with best 5 photos

Opportunities to...

- Provide MOE and external donors with verifiable information to further enhance and extend what was already acknowledged to be an effective program
- Increase dialogue and cooperation between key program stakeholders
- Promote children's rights and hear their views
- Facilitate international evaluation team work
- Enhance evaluation skills of Lao researchers

Some of the challenges...

- Convincing some re the efficacy of the methodology
- Evaluators had no control over sample selection
- Geographical isolation of selected case study schools
- Limited time to prepare team for fieldwork:
 - Language barriers, need for translation
 - Over 50% inexperienced using digital cameras
- No electricity in schools
- Child photographers had never seen cameras before
- Logistics of managing a large, extended team
- Demanding schedule limited team meetings
- Reporting interim findings before all data collected

Key findings

Reported under two broad headings:

- Program level findings i.e. management; responsiveness to MoE priorities; approach to capacity development etc
- School and community level findings

1. Improved school leadership

Motivated by the training received about new directions related to the SOQ approach, many school directors are now playing a stronger leadership role within their school communities

School Director explains plans to increase access and improve student outcomes



2. Better collaboration between school and community



Mothers cook snacks provided by WFP



Fences built by village community

School directors, village education committee and community members are more actively involved in a wide range of joint initiatives to improve their school communities, resulting in more systematic and comprehensive school planning, development and rehabilitation

Further photos confirm this finding



What children reported...

“This is our school where we grow vegetables for eating and flowers for events such as parties and New Year celebrations. Our garden is a place for us to learn”.

[Garden established by students, teachers and villagers in a bomb crater]



“This is the playground in our school. We enjoy playing in it every day. The playground was built by the Parents Association, students and teachers.



Students at Wapi Tai School

3. Improved school and classroom environment



Significant physical improvements have occurred in case study schools, including infrastructure development appropriate to the local context, together with classroom reorganisation and enhancement to facilitate participatory, child focused learning

Compare with non SoQ schools



What children reported...



"At our school we have huts for sitting, relaxing, reading books and eating snacks. We can also do school activities in the huts. We will maintain them and keep them clean".

Students at Donxay School



"We love studying in this classroom, where we get knowledge, we can draw and help each other to do exercises. We want to be teachers when we grow up".

Students at Kangmai School

4. Improved teaching practices

New participatory, student focused teaching practices have been established leading to positive impacts for children and their families, as well as the school community more broadly. Pedagogical advisors play a critical role, providing in-service support to help schools to implement the SoQ approach.

Photos reinforce findings

“Teachers now come to school on time and are confident in their role. They are able to convey what they have learned from the teacher training workshops: they can prepare lesson plans; use the new teaching materials; produce their own teaching resources; and find other resources to make the lessons more meaningful”.

Researcher reporting findings

New learning corners set up by teachers



5. Improved student learning outcomes

Schools report improved student enrolment, attendance and learning, particularly for girls. The combined effect of changes in school / classroom environment and the school feeding program are having a positive impact on student achievements. While schools need more support to prepare accurate statistics, there is overwhelming evidence to show children:

- are now more interested in coming to school;
- see the benefit of what they learn; and
- apply their new knowledge and skills to their lives.

What children reported...

"The posters in this photo teach us that we must wash our hands after using the toilet. We also learn about the importance of eating the different types of food shown in the food pyramid and sleeping under a mosquito net to prevent malaria. We now understand that we must boil water before drinking it".

Students at Oudomsouk School



"There are mountains and forest in front of our school. They are very important for us. If we cut trees it will contribute to global warming. Therefore we should not destroy the forest".

Students at Thiew School



6. Improved student health

Children have increased access to information about healthcare and hygiene. This is contributing to a range of benefits for children and their families including better learning outcomes; reduced absenteeism; and parents adopting new practices in cleanliness and sanitation. Additional nutritional benefits are resulting from the school feeding program.

What children reported...



"We are taught to wash our hands at school. We have water and soap outside the classroom to help us to remember to do it".

Students at Samakhxay School



"These toilets are very useful for us. We don't need to go far away. We clean them every day".

Students at Dindark School

Lessons learned re methodology

- Digital camera technology is easy to introduce
- Photos communicate multiple ideas & highlight comparisons
- Photos cross language barriers
- Advance consideration and planning is needed re:
 - systematic management of photos i.e. storage, labeling, transferring, copying, formatting etc.
 - photo ownership, confidentiality and privacy
 - logistics to ensure schools given copies of their own photos
 - access to and use of photos by donors
- Even those skeptical re the methodology can be convinced!
- Incorporating photos changes the nature of reports
- Can't readily email reports – photos are huge attachments

The main lessons...



- Children really enjoyed participating in this evaluation activity
- Children's selection of 'best 5 photos' and their captions were the source of key findings at the school level
- 105 photos was manageable (just!)
- Although the evaluation was extremely demanding, team members and other stakeholders found the experience extremely rewarding

Most importantly it was FUN!

Unexpected outcomes of methodology

Photos now being used for other purposes:

- To promote the program to donors
- To promote the review methodology within the UNICEF Evaluation Team
- To make a DVD for UNICEF HQ to be shown at an international meeting in New York

Acknowledgements



Students participate in evaluation activities



Students select the 'best 5 photos'

We would like to thank :

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