

**LEARNING THROUGH PLAY:
A NEW PHILOSOPHY FOR THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN
IN LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC.**

**Valerie Emblen,
Senior Lecturer, School of Teaching Studies,
University of North London, U.K.**

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BACKGROUND.

Lao People's Democratic Republic is a country in South East Asia, bordering on Thailand, Cambodia, China, Myanmar and Vietnam, dependent until the recent world upheavals on the support of the friendly communist governments of the Soviet Union and Eastern Block countries.

The Lao Government is undertaking a renewal of its whole education system, to be completed by the year 2000. This is being financed by loans of some 60 million \$US from the World Bank and Asian Development, which are being used to upgrade their primary, secondary and tertiary education. Pre-school is being developed from Lao's own resources, with help from the Save the Children Fund.

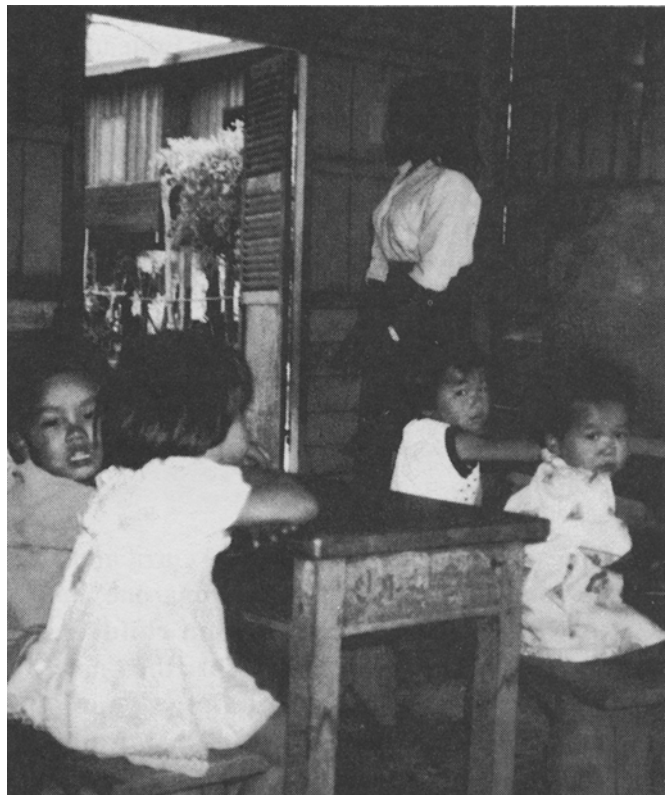
After the War of Liberation in 1975, when the Communist Pathet Lao came to power, the pre-school system was developed widely with two very clear objectives -
- to release women to take part in the economic development of the country and
- to educate children to become 'Socialist man'.

(Quoted from a speech of the Minister of Education in Vientiane 1988).

The pre-school system caters for children from the age of a few months to six years, the start of primary school, and is run by the Ministry of Education which provides a learning curriculum for the three to six year olds. Some 4%-6% of Lao children

attend nursery (0-3 years) and kindergarten (3-6 years).

Until now methods have been very formal, the children sitting for long hours at desks; the only learning aid the teacher's blackboard and chalk and learning almost entirely by rote.



An old style Kindergarten in Lao.

A typical kindergarten is a small thatched building near the primary school. Often the

buildings are in poor repair because the village community is responsible for their upkeep and find it difficult to find sufficient resources; schools are frequently without clean water supply or toilet facilities. Attendance is free but in many, teachers cook a midday meal of rice, meat and vegetables for the children. This costs the parents 1,000 kip a month (£1.25). The Ministry of Education pays nursery and kindergarten teachers salaries of between 10,000 and 15000 kip a month (£9-12), a small wage which means that almost all must have another source of income to make ends meet, and, since all kindergarten teachers are women, they go home to face home and family responsibilities as well.

The impetus to modernise the education system is coming from the highest levels of Government; to quote from another recent speech of the Minister of Education (in 1990) *'since the Liberation we have improved the quantity of our education system, now we must work to develop quality'*.

The New Kindergarten Curriculum.

In 1990 a group of Ministry officials and teachers got together to write and trial a new kindergarten curriculum for the three to six year olds; it is based on the new (for them) philosophy of **'learning through playing'**

The main objectives of the new curriculum are the same as for the previous one; **to provide child care and to train children for a socialist society**, but the new objectives include **stimulating young children's development and transmitting simple health messages**.

The work is planned in weekly units, that is, the work of each week is based on a theme - typical themes are fruit, the National flag, the mosquito. Documentation

lays out daily plans with activities based on four forms of play:

** corner play - play in the home corner, hospital, brick area or shop;*

** free play - undirected time*

** educational games - sorting and matching games, jigsaws and similar activities, when children work in groups*

** circle play - teacher organised activities, so called because the children and teacher sit on the floor together in a circle for songs, stories and discussion; drawing, craft activities and simple observations are all circle activities.*

Sitting on the floor together indicates that a major change in attitude has taken place. Sitting, eating and sleeping on the floor is usual in a Lao house and in school it creates a much more relaxed and informal relationship between the teacher and the children. Quite surprisingly very few teachers have objected to this major change in their role. Meetings and discussions, which are part of monitoring procedures, have shown that while most teachers are a little anxious about their abilities to implement the new methods, they almost unanimously welcome them and feel that the children are better and happier. Mme Mone, the head teacher of the Dong Dok Kindergarten, which has nearly 500 children on role, was reviewing the progress of her school - 'I suppose it's not bad' she said, 'We've only been doing it for two years and we've come a long way already'.

Parental involvement.

Parents whose children attend the new style kindergartens have approved the changes. They feel happy with the more relaxed methods - a father said 'I am happy that my daughter wants to go to school in the morning'

But, how do you make 'Learning through

Playing 'a reality when materials are as scarce as they are in Lao? Where even scrap is not readily available? Looking at a video of children making a cardboard box into a doll's house, a teacher next to me said 'If we had a box like that in my village, we would keep clothes in it'.

The old style kindergarten can run with only a piece of chalk for the teacher. Now, the introduction of a play based system with little or no budget is being considered. So much of the literature of pre-school education presumes a level of resourcing that is not possible at the present time in Lao. Parents and teachers need to feel confident that children can have good developmental experiences without jigsaws or even crayon and paper. Lao PDR does have a number of advantages.

** Children have not yet come to expect mass produced toys and so are very creative with things around them.*

** Older children make toys from tin cans and wood for the younger ones.*

** In the evenings, the younger children watch and gradually join in, elaborate games, played by the older children.*

** Mixed age groups spend long times playing imaginative games with nothing more than sand, leaves and a coconut shell.*

** The kindergartens have space- in both town and country they are set in fields which double up as playgrounds and space for cows and goats to graze.*

The support of parents, families and community is vital. Communities in Lao PDR are close knit and the Socialist system emphasises the duty of working together. One Vientiane kindergarten arranged a work day when children, teachers and parents joined together to create gardens and a playground; each family gave a plant or two from their own garden, people worked together to build a

fence to keep out the goats and to make stepping stones and other simple play equipment; the long day's work ended with a party of singing and dancing.

Parents collect bottle tops and empty bottles and boxes. Regular meetings are held at which practical issues are discussed - is the food value for money? How to keep goats out of the garden? Curriculum content is not discussed - that is seen to be the province of the central government.

Teacher training.

Each of the 17 provinces, before the restructuring, was responsible for its own teacher training, and therefore there were a number of one two and three year courses. Pre-school teacher training has now been centralised into just one course at Dong Dok, a Higher Education campus just outside Vientiane, the country's capital.

Students must have completed lower secondary schooling, that is, have had 5 years of primary schooling and 3 of secondary - so that at the start of their course, girls are between the ages of 15 and 18. They come from all over the country, about 100 per year, and spend three years living and training at Dong Dok.

The teacher training curriculum is being revised by the Dong Dok teachers at the present time; they are training teachers in the new methodology, making training more practical, with regular practice in kindergartens, spending more time in the practical aspects of health care, toy making and organising play. Three years also gives time for the girls to improve their level of general education. As well as a heavy programme of study, the students are responsible for tending the gardens in which they grow most of their food.

The ability of the country to implement the new methods successfully will also depend on good quality Inservice training. The country's poor infrastructure makes collecting teachers together difficult and expensive. Pre-school teachers, who seldom leave their own district, may travel for three or four days on foot, by bus and by boat to attend the courses. It is a special time for them; they meet new ideas, learn new methods, meet old study fellows and make new friends and have a respite from family chores for a few weeks. It remains to be seen whether the present three week courses give the teachers the support they need to make major changes in their work.

The future.

Huge changes are taking place in education in Lao PDR. Of course many problems still exist; there is a lot of enthusiasm, but the momentum must be maintained and as

in so many other countries, the day to day work will fall largely on the shoulders of already overworked women.

Books, materials, training courses are all needed. All these things are expensive and demand a big input of time, energy and resources. There is a thirst for knowledge but there are many difficulties in getting enough learning materials in the Lao language. Access to current international thinking in the field of Early Childhood education is important, and many educationalists are studying an international language to give them access to information about current developments, but these are busy people, whose time for study is limited.

In the field of pre-school education, Lao has enthusiasm and a clear idea of what it wants to achieve. What has been achieved so far is a remarkable tribute to the openmindedness, dedication and flexibility of those involved.

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Children playing with Pink Tower

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