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EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN LAOS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Lao teachers' experiences with school improvement efforts in the context of the classroom, school community, and professional development. The study focuses the subjective experiences of four exemplary teachers in one secondary school and one university in the Champasak Province of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Two of the teachers are high school teachers who are known to be outstanding teachers and leaders among their colleagues. Similarly, the two university-based educators are known to be outstanding teacher educators in their Faculty of Education. While consistent with the literature in recognizing general challenges to improvement and reform, this study demonstrates the complex interplay of diverse challenges within and across the contexts of classroom, school day-to-day practices and the professionalism the teachers have tried to develop; it contributes to knowledge in the field by providing teachers' perspectives and voices about the complexities of educational improvement in schools in the Champasak Province in the southern part of the Lao PDR.

Keywords: School reform, curriculum studies, professional development, school improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The international teacher development literature is beginning to include reports of educational reform and development projects occurring within developing nations, and ideas about improving public school teaching through reform in teacher education are beginning to be implemented worldwide. This study documented Lao teachers' experiences with improvement efforts in the context of the classroom, school community, and professional development. It contributes to knowledge in the field by providing teachers' perspectives and voices about the complexities of educational improvement in schools in the Champasak Province in the southern part of the Lao PDR.

This literature on teacher development is replete with ideas about progressive pedagogies that help to improve students' learning. The design of the present study recognizes that improving classroom teaching is more complex than the effective teaching literature of past decades might suggest; instructional improvement

is not a linear process in which teachers replace traditional practices with new ones. In trying to improve teaching and learning, teachers adopt new ideas and instructional strategies, but at the same time, they also adapt traditional methods in daily teaching. Making the shift from a traditional classroom environment to an interactive one intended to help students become autonomous learners appears to be a prolonged process, particularly in the presence of traditional examinations, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of resources found in the schools of Laos.

The literature emphasizes the importance of building a shared vision of pedagogy, norms, values, collaboration and reflective practice in any effort to change the classroom practice of teachers. It clearly emphasizes the extent to which the school can promote collaboration among teachers and engage them in ongoing professional growth through collegial and professional interactions involving collaborative inquiry, action research, mentoring, reflection, and cooperative curriculum development (Beattie, 2004, 2007; Little, 1982, 1993, 1995; Hargreaves, 1992, 1994, 2003; Rosenholtz, 1989; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993, 1996). However, few authors have discussed the

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various forms of informal interaction or opportunities for productive professional interaction on a day-to-day basis that teachers create for themselves without stimulation or help from external agents. This study adds to the discussion on how and why teachers become instrumental in promoting qualities required for a proactive approach in initiating relationships, improved knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, emotional maturity and sincerity.

Moreover, this study contributes perspectives on the multi-layered nature of teacher-initiated improvement. Teachers' desire for fundamental improvement in what and how students learn in the classroom is complex because of the numerous factors embedded in different situations within and beyond the classroom. For example, teachers find it difficult to promote teaching for understanding and students find it difficult to take part in the interactive activities because they require certain attitudes and skills such as being open-minded, curious and critical. Especially in Asian contexts, these difficulties can be related to large class sizes, lack of resources, and centralized control over curriculum, testing and school administration.

Learning is a highly complex and dynamic process. Besides students' own efforts, other factors, such as materials, instructional strategies, learning activities, and classroom emotional climate powerfully influence how well they learn. These aspects are deeply connected to the beliefs, motivation, competence, and circumstance of the teacher who controls them. Some students lack academic support at home and some have economic problems. How students utilize out-of school time, what educational support they get from home, and what influences they experience outside school play an important role in determining their ability to cope with learning. Tensions and perplexities that complicate the school environment also arise with colleagues (e.g., isolation, pessimism) and parents (e.g., lacking interest in their children's education).

This study documents the subjective experiences of four exemplary teachers in one secondary school and one university in the Champasak Province of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Two of the teachers are high school teachers who are known to be outstanding teachers and leaders among their colleagues. Similarly, the two university-based educators are known to be outstanding teacher educators in their Faculty of Education.

Confronted with interconnected obstacles to fundamental change in the classroom, the teachers in this study try to engage in improvement efforts in a variety of ways with different activities. In the classroom they help students cope with conceptual difficulties, encourage them to learn from other students and other resources and motivate them to incorporate their learning into their lives to make their school experiences more relevant. Some of these teachers promote change in how teachers work together as a team to help each other improve their practice and their professional knowledge, to improve their schools by removing obstacles to continuous improvement. This study recognizes some overarching principles or values that guide how these four teachers approach challenges, including learning through cooperation, sharing and mutual interaction, pursuing common goals through collaboration, reflection, mutual support, building consensus, and sharing an understanding of the agenda for and approach to development efforts.

This study also focused on the moral dimensions of the teachers' lives, which play a significant role in shaping their professional responsibilities and development. The teachers in this study put their best efforts forward to enhance their students' learning and to seize opportunities for continual growth and improvement by being actively involved in a variety of professional development activities. Their systemic awareness of improvement processes is the manifest result of their quest for continuous improvement. Their efforts demonstrate a high degree of moral commitment to engage in constant improvement and dedication to the process of improvement and development, for themselves and for others—their students, colleagues, and their society—within the classroom and throughout the school community.

A COUNTRY IN TRANSITION

Champasak Province is in southwestern Laos, sharing borders with Thailand and Cambodia and the Lao provinces of Attapeu and Salavanh. It has an area of about 15,415 square kilometers and a population of around 600,000 people including the Lao Loum and Lao Theung who live in the Bolaven region. The capital city is Pakse, which is the educational center of the southern provinces in Laos. There are 121 creches kindergartens, 876 public schools (758 primary schools and 118 secondary schools), 15 vocational schools, a teachers

training college, and one university. Today, Lao society and its educational system is a product of the heritage of colonialism, socialist revolution, and the movement towards a market economy and privatization. In the last decade, Laos has made advances in several areas, including economic and educational growth. Many communities are significantly involved in school affairs, contributing funds and labor for the construction of schools. The educational bureaucracy is considered to be composed of hardworking staff and a number of highly talented civil servants can be found there.

The Ministry of Education and the Provincial Education Authority share responsibilities in managing teacher education for the general education schools. Whereas the Ministry has the sole responsibility for national policy guidelines for teacher education, all aspects of upper and secondary teacher education, and curriculum and instructional material for all levels of teacher education, the Provincial Education Authority has the prime responsibility for managing primary and preschool teacher education. The teachers' colleges for each level of general education offer alternate teacher education programs.

The curriculum of the education programs, including teacher education, consists of a large number of subjects and topics with a major emphasis on theory and very little opportunity for classroom interaction or the development of the essential capabilities of problem solving, learning to learn, practical research skills, or work orientation for teachers. In the absence of laboratories (e.g., for natural science subjects) and workshops, teacher trainees attend lectures except for a period of six to eight weeks at the *end* of their training that is devoted to teaching practice. In addition, teacher education provides as much codified knowledge as possible for teachers so that they will have the conceptual, methodological, and curricular instructional knowledge that is thought to be the foundation of good teaching. Lao teacher education, however, fails to recognize that "enhancing independent thought and analysis, based on the assumption that best strategies have not yet been discovered or that they are too situation-specific to be prescribed, [and] thus [that] practitioners must learn to create solutions for themselves" (Grimmett, 1995).

By and large, the culture of teaching in most educational institutions is predominantly individualistic. Teachers have limited opportunities to engage in social

interaction during breaks or free periods. Academic interactions (e.g., sharing, discussing professional ideas, planning together, co-teaching, peer observation, etc.) among teachers are also limited. In addition, school-based formal or informal professional development is not usual in the teachers' culture. Often teachers are pulled out of school individually to participate in center-based in-service training (workshops, refresher courses on general pedagogy, and subject-specific course for content knowledge enhancement) in centrally organized programs.

Teachers' lives inside and outside schools are inseparable. Teaching is considered a noble profession; a teacher is believed to know more than those whom he or she teaches. As models of good character, teachers are expected to preach and practice all the noble virtues, such as honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, justice, fidelity, and fairness. Teachers are active and influential members of their communities; in remote areas, they assume leadership responsibilities and have a great deal of influence on the socio-political landscape.

Despite this positive image of teaching and these expectations about teachers, school teachers do not enjoy the kind of status or public respect attached to other professionals or authorities such as doctors, engineers, police, army officers, and so on. Factors such as low salaries, minimal power or authority, and lack of recognition for teaching as a fully-fledged profession contribute to teaching's low status. No strict policies and procedures govern teachers' recruitment. Under these circumstances, becoming a schoolteacher is not always the first, second, or even third choice for the majority of educated youths.

CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION AND TEACHER EDUCATION

The Ministry of Education and other Ministries of the Lao PDR government are responsible for policy and strategy formation, planning, managing, controlling, and enhancing the quality of education. They have limited staff with a broad understanding of the principles and practices of the various education sub-sectors from both the theoretical and the applied perspective. They lack the necessary qualifications, experience, and capabilities to perform the tasks listed above effectively. The situation is no different at provincial and district education authority levels, which also have limited trained staff for needs assessment, planning and

allocation of resources, information management, and monitoring progress and quality control.

Although the expansion in primary and teacher training sectors has been impressive, the output in terms of quality and efficiency leaves much room for improvement. In its present state, the education sector has limited capacity and capability to respond to modern socioeconomic and skilled manpower needs. This shortfall is expected to become acute with the change from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. The transition will have a direct effect on education planning.

At the institute level, there are few administrators who have been educated in planning and management, information management, effective utilization, or generation and management of resources. A large percentage of teachers are under-qualified, when measured against the standards of the Western world. This situation is no different in vocational and post-secondary institutes except for the universities where, due to increasing international projects sponsored by developed nations, more teachers are now undertaking graduate education. There are many teachers' colleges for primary school and elementary teacher education, however, the quality of teacher education programs is poor and suffers from many weaknesses and inadequacies in the curriculum, techniques of training, institutional facilities, and the quality of teacher educators (Asian Development Bank, 1993; Evans, 1998).

Moreover, over the last 10 years there has been curriculum and material development and rapid progress internationally in education, science, and technology, meaning the teacher education curriculum requires continual revision. Recently, the curriculum has been substantially revised to make it more relevant to the current situation. These changes will require further revision to make the teacher education curriculum more holistic and flexible enough to reinforce the integration of new and important world issues and appropriate educational topics, such as teaching increasingly diverse student populations, developing inclusive practices that take into account gender issues, fostering reproductive health and life skills, dealing with information technology, to name a few.

At present, there are still many permanent primary teachers (excluding contracted teachers and village-

employed teachers) who were not trained in teacher education institutions. In addition, many teachers trained as primary teachers are teaching in lower and upper secondary schools without degrees in their subject area. These teachers face difficulties in performing their duties. There is therefore a need for upgrading programs in order to help the teachers gain knowledge and skills relevant to their work. Primary and secondary school teachers have not had the opportunity to upgrade their professional competencies continuously and systematically. It is difficult for them to assimilate new techniques and methods in teaching and to develop beyond a minimal understanding of their subject areas.

Most teachers do not have opportunities for in-service training. When they do have the chance to attend a course, there is no mechanism for keeping and certifying their training records. In particular, there is no credit system used for in-service training programs that would allow for the accumulation of credit points for additional award bearing programs.

EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN LAOS

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) has an education system very much influenced by its colonial heritage. The country is now in transition from an agricultural economy to an industrialized economy, moving toward a market economy and privatization. Education and training are very important for preparing citizens for this transition. In 1986, the government introduced a program of socioeconomic reforms and began to implement an "Open Door" policy to the outside world (Western countries). The Lao government began the process of transforming the economy from a centrally planned one to a market economy through a measure called the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) and extended the relationship of the country to the Western world.

The immediate educational policy in Lao PDR is to develop quality human resources to meet the needs of the socioeconomic development of the nation. The government has begun to reform the education system, with the goals of linking educational development more closely to the socioeconomic situation in each locality, improving science training, expanding networks to remote mountainous regions, and recruiting minority teachers. The plan includes making education more relevant to daily realities and building increased cooperation in educational activities among the various

ministries, mass organizations, and the community. Not only has human resource development been recognized as a way to equip personnel with knowledge and skills, but also it helps to develop their capability to adapt themselves to the fast-changing world for existence, survival, and development.

The need for alternative teaching and assessment approaches and methods highlights the importance of teachers reforming their instructional methods in order to improve students' achievement in school. Educational reform also includes revising the curriculum and training teachers and teacher educators through professional development programs focusing on both pedagogy and curriculum. Many study tours have been conducted for staff, educators, and key personnel in the Ministry of Education, Teacher Training Department, and higher education institutions to observe and study educational systems in other countries. Many teachers have also been offered short- and long-term training scholarships provided by other countries, notably Australia, Japan, and Canada.

The idea of a learner-centered interactive approach to teaching typically involves problem-solving, inquiry-oriented activities, finding information, seeking reasons, constructing arguments – tasks that are interdisciplinary and related to students' lives outside school and their cooperative work with other students (Beattie, 2004; Perkins, 1993). The focus of the classroom becomes the students' construction of knowledge; teachers shift away from a teacher-centered classroom to a more student-centered environment. The student-centered classroom involves opportunities for social interaction, independent investigations and study, and the expression of creativity, as well as making provision for different learning styles. The role of teachers should become much more of a coordinator of learning resources than that of a source of knowledge and preferences; teachers should become facilitators of knowledge, helping to engender the knowledge and preferences that their students acquire (Usher & Edwards, 1994). Therefore, teaching should not be the transmission of ready-made knowledge.

Such training in how students learn has engendered teachers' new interpretations of what it means to prepare competent and generative teaching professionals for challenging futures. The teachers who have engaged in professional development programs are enthusiastic in adopting and applying the more

interactive approach to teaching and learning in schools, including teacher education programs. However these early successes apply mostly to the main urban areas of Laos and there remain significant challenges and tensions throughout the majority of the country.

TEACHERS' CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS

Western educators have emphasized that the teacher's command of subject matter in the context of interactive, learner-centered teaching rests on students' activities such as problem-solving, inquiry, experiment, and hands-on activities. In these kinds of activities, teachers need both to be familiar with the principles underlying a topic and to be prepared for the variety of ways in which learners can explore these principles. Teaching and learning are conducted in a way that encourages students' in-depth understanding of subject knowledge. To foster students in gaining such in-depth understanding, teachers need to reinforce learning and development not only by using an interactive approach but also through adapting curricular material and applying alternative assessment techniques. However, in Laos, covering the syllabus for the exams is the mainstay of traditional classroom instruction; in-depth understanding of the syllabus content receives little attention. As a result, students have little understanding of primary concepts and are unable to grasp advanced information in the given subject.

As mentioned, this pedagogy has been introduced and applied by some teachers in schools in urban areas. Even so, teachers who have tried to shift from teacher-dominated instruction to learner-centered teaching are faced by different challenges and tensions. These include isolation, lack of collaboration, and limited support from administrators; the constraints of the official syllabus or curriculum and examinations that test memory instead of understanding; lack of time and resources, among others. These challenges and factors influence teachers' choices about instruction, curriculum, and assessment practices. Teachers trying to implement change have always faced competing demands from organizations, students, parents, and their own personal values. As teachers face these challenges and tensions, they find they cannot concentrate on professional development both in content and pedagogical knowledge; and so some of them turn back to their traditional styles of teaching. Therefore, in most educational institutions, including

primary and secondary levels, teaching is still conducted largely through the lecture method with limited classroom interaction.

Moreover, teachers are isolated. Not only do senior teachers and administrators not support them, but also their culture of work is mostly individualized. Teachers hardly ever work in collaborative teams in order to support one another, to learn from each other, to share their experience, beliefs, interests, or problems, to reflect on their teaching, and to find solutions to any problems they have faced. If teachers work together, they are less isolated (Erb, 1995), and they are also able to converse knowledgably about theories, methods, and processes of teaching and learning. In this way they can improve their instruction (Hausman & Goldring, 2001). In addition, apart from not being supported, the provision of feedback or evaluation to improve teachers' instructional practice is very limited. Some schools have gathered students' feedback at the end of the semester aimed at evaluating teachers' punctuality, habits, and characteristics and to check whether teachers have covered the assigned syllabus, but such evaluation fails to foster or encourage instructional improvements. Teachers themselves also do not have a regular self-reflection or self-assessment mechanism for facilitating professional growth. In other words, they are not reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983, 1987). Fullan (1999) argues that it is only through reflection at the personal, group, and organizational level that teachers will begin to question their practice and think differently about their classroom practice. With little reflection, it is difficult for teachers to be aware of professional developments and instructional improvements. If they fail in some activities they practice, teachers often talk of their students' low abilities and blame the students for not caring about their learning.

Schools are embedded in their social context, and these contexts influence teachers' classroom practices and schools functioning. The dilemmas, issues, tensions, and challenges that confront teachers in their attempts to improve their practice and the strategies they use to handle those challenges likewise cannot be judged in isolation. The interconnectedness of the classroom and school community – and the particular challenges Laotian teachers face – necessitates understanding how teachers' improvement efforts in one area relate to their actions in the others. Numerous studies

worldwide have investigated school teachers on various dimensions, but most of them have investigated approaches used in Western and developed countries. Very little research has documented the education and the experience of teachers in Lao People's Democratic Republic, especially the Champasak Province context, in terms of the issues, problems, and challenges that people face on a day-to-day basis and how they respond to them. Therefore, in the international context, this study offers a modest yet significant contribution to the existing knowledge on teachers' experiences as frontline actors in improvement efforts. We hope this research will generate qualitative insights into teachers' experiences and help explain how these teachers improve their practice, what strategies they adopt, what innovations they attempt, what activities they lead, what challenges they meet, and how they address these challenges. Knowledge of the challenges these teachers face, how they act and react differently under these circumstances, what meaning(s) of improvement they believe, what underlies their choice of responses of practices and response to particular situations, and how they sustain their own professional development in the context of improvement efforts is crucial for improving school practices and teacher development in Champasak Province.

This study explored four teachers' professional life experiences and daily practices by using a qualitative case study methodology to capture in depth their conceptions of, core beliefs about, and approaches to improvement efforts for their individual growth and development and for their schools as a whole. Their stories illustrate their efforts in classroom and school community improvement and their professional development, individually, with others, or with key stakeholders; the challenges they face, and the strategies they adopt to address these challenges.

THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

In this research, the four participating teachers are considered as 'good-experienced teachers,' with reputations for being on the frontline of improvement efforts for themselves individually, for their classroom, and for their schools as whole, widely recognized by peers, administrators, and the school community. They stand out, work hard, and persist, sometimes with little institutional or collegial support, to enhance their own knowledge and capacities in order to improve and pursue improvements in the context of the classroom

and school community. These teachers as agents of pedagogical, institutional, and social improvement may be characterized in terms of important improvements in their practices (e.g. actions, approaches, strategies, and responses to challenges) both inside and outside the classroom and the beliefs and values that underlie their professional knowledge and capacities and put improvements into practice.

The teachers' improvement efforts in the classroom are motivated by their conceptions of their role as teachers, their sense of commitment to their students, their willingness to try something new, and their interest in doing things differently in order to improve their practice inside and outside their classroom. They take risks in attempting pedagogical changes that transform their practice based mainly on transmissive teaching methods, hierarchical teacher-student relationships, and teachers' working in isolation. They believe that with appropriate help, support, and opportunity for learning, their students can succeed in learning beyond the boundaries of the prescribed syllabus and that they can make a difference in their students' lives.

The teachers' instructional goals emphasize conceptual learning and social and moral development by trying to develop students' problem-solving and critical-thinking skills and to connect students' prior knowledge to the topic under consideration. Their teaching reflects complexity and diversity; they do not rely on only one method but use a variety of methods and pedagogical techniques – for example, teacher-led whole class instruction followed by individual work or group work activities and whole-class interaction –to promote in-depth student learning. In their effort to promote teaching for understanding in the face of varied difficulties in the classroom, the teachers play many different roles—facilitator, enabler, helper, problem solver, counselor, advisor, guide, observer, decision-maker, instructor, resource manager, informant, and supplier of information—which reflect elements of both progressive and traditional pedagogies. Their understanding of multidisciplinary subject knowledge (in Mathematics, Lao Language, and Lao Literature); of general pedagogical knowledge (building relationships, dealing with classroom management, knowledge of curriculum, assessing learning); and of pedagogical content knowledge all help them teach for understanding. They bring skills to their classroom work, including an extensive selection of teaching

strategies and the ability to experiment with their own practice. These skills include problem-solving, deductive methods, cooperative learning, relating students' experience to the outside, question-answer and other techniques to adapt curriculum knowledge to suit students' needs, interests, daily activities, and personal situations.

The teachers believe that they cannot produce wide-reaching effects on structures and teaching culture in the school, generate and sustain widespread changes in classroom practices through individual efforts, or cope with the complex mixture of factors in the school's internal and external environments that hinder pedagogical and institutional changes unless they attend to these challenges by simultaneously improving their professionalism, working with the students, the other teachers, and the leaders and administrators both within the school and the district or province and within the community. They emphasize the importance of all staff members' becoming professionals who possess the motivation, enthusiasm, and confidence to make informal professional decisions in their classrooms in order to provide better learning opportunities for the students. In their view, the bottom line of teachers collaboration is to create a supportive school environment that encourages teachers to do things together (e.g., learning, planning teaching, adapting materials), to talk and listen to each other with the aims to learn from each other, to reflect on each others' practices and improvement efforts and to encourage each other to take risks and to solve problems. Only by working in such a supportive school environment can they engage in continuous improvements and address the challenges to these changes.

The teachers strongly believe that a school leader is in a critical position to establish a support system and a climate that generate motivation for teachers to take risks and experiment with any ideas that they believe will improve their practice and, as a consequence, improve students' academic achievement in their classrooms. In their view, when leaders and teachers support each other in a spirit of teamwork and collegiality, a positive emotional and psychological climate develops that pervades the atmosphere of the entire school and has effects even beyond the classroom. Good communication and the teachers' personal qualities such as trustworthiness, professional

competence, and being proactive are appropriate to change have served as keys to creating such working relationships with their leaders.

The teachers appear committed to pedagogical, institutional, and social improvement or reform. Their commitment to reform efforts in the classroom and school community is reflected in their core beliefs about improving their practice in these contexts and the efforts they make to translate these beliefs into practice. Their motivation and positive attitudes towards reform, combined with their confidence in their subject and understanding of pedagogy, enhance their ability to take risks, engage in improvement activities in their own classrooms, and build relationships and lead improvement activities in the school community. The pedagogical reform in the classroom and their development of a supportive environment in the school through teachers' collaboration and reflections both seek to improve students' learning, understanding, and development.

The teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, the school environment, and the improvement they pursue in line with these core beliefs make them agents of pedagogical, institutional, and social reform in the classroom and school community. For this reason, they continually improve themselves through many formal and informal professional development activities inside and outside their schools.

FINDINGS AND SIGNIFICANCE

This study sought to find out the teachers' experiences, ideas, and perspectives with improvement initiatives or activities in the classroom and school community linked to their professional development; the challenges they face; and the strategies they utilize to deal with challenges.

The kinds of improvement the teachers' experience inside and outside the classroom and their efforts to develop their professionalism are interrelated. In the classroom, even though the teachers utilize traditional approaches (teacher-led whole-class instruction), they also try to encourage active learning, individual responsibility, participation in collaborative efforts, problem-solving, mutual support, and cooperation in constructing shared understanding of subject matter. These features of improvement are fundamental in trying to create an interactive and learner-centered climate in the classroom and in building a supportive school environment in which the teachers individually

and collaboratively become involved in this continuous improvement. They also are involved in many professional development activities to enhance their knowledge and ability for such classroom and school improvement.

The kinds of improvements the teachers want in the their school community, especially in the ways which teachers and leaders or educational officials interact, also emphasize the principles of meaningful interaction, mutual support, cooperation, shared understanding of opportunities and issues, and the development of mutual respect and trust. They believe that a supportive school climate inspires and facilitates the development of the value and practices, such as shared understanding of learning, opportunities for dialogue or interaction, mutual support, and the will to improve. Thus the teachers' approaches to improving their classroom, their schools, and their professional development are all premised on the principles of exchanging ideas, seeking and implementing new ideas and improvement, encouraging and exchanging with each other, engaging in increased communication, and fostering collaboration and reflection.

The teachers' approaches to professional development are based on the same premises of cooperation, mutual support, interaction, collaboration, and partnership to share knowledge and ideas to reflect on their practice and to improve their professionalism. The teachers use their involvement in professional development to engender change in relationship with and among teachers in order to create positive, productive relationships in which different teachers can support each other to enhance learning opportunities, build the school's capacity for continuous improvement, and deal effectively with the many challenges to educational change inside and outside school that are predominantly cultural, political, and social in nature.

In the context of school improvement and educational reform, changes and challenges co-exist. Change often brings new challenges that require teachers to reflect on their own practices, devise new strategies, and invest additional energy and effort. The teachers' stories about classroom improvement suggest that they constantly battle challenges in their efforts to make improvements. The challenges vary in their nature, gravity, and sources. Nevertheless, the teachers are faced with a complex interplay between these challenges because most of the important challenges

are intricately interconnected; they cut across all these improvement efforts.

The main classroom challenges are those related to the participants' efforts to include the implementation of or adaptation of a new approach to teaching and learning – interactive learner-centered pedagogies that emphasize the learner's central role in the educational process. The aim is to help students understand what knowledge is and how it is acquired, reframe the teachers' and learners' roles in the learning process, and reorient the hierarchical teacher-student relationship to reduce teacher control and authority and thus empower students to become active participants in their learning. The teachers' experiences in trying to improve their classroom practice make it evident that adapting by including the implementation of interactive learning in their teaching is easier said than done. These teachers and their students come across a variety of interconnected challenges that arise not only from situations in the classroom but also from circumstances in the school community. For example, the participants place importance on teaching for understanding, which involves students' conceptual understanding of curriculum topics. In-depth understanding requires the students' deep cognitive engagement with the subject matter involved. It is often difficult because students do not spontaneously engage in higher cognitive activities. In fact, the demands of conceptual learning are complex. Deeper understanding of subject matter is contingent on different factors, such as the quality of the material available, the relevance of activities or tasks that support or reinforce learning, the students' motivation and prior knowledge, the students' familiarity with the various ways in which to interact with the subject matter (e.g., how to connect ideas, construct mental structures, recall memory), and the teacher's ability to comprehend and represent the conceptual difficulties facing individual students and to find effective ways to remedy them. If these conditions are not met, students might be unable to gain a deeper understanding of subject matter. Pressure to engage in cognitive learning without adequate support and cognitive stimulation then leads to frustration among the students, which can manifest itself in apparent resistance to the improvement.

From the teachers' view, the challenges facing students in their efforts to engage in-depth learning are also intricately linked to the conditions inside and outside

the classroom and the school environments that shape students as individual learners. For example, in the classroom, the students learn from different teachers who have their own ways of organizing teaching and treating students. Some teachers just teach through lectures, encouraging students to learn by rote from textbooks and discouraging them from thinking critically and learning collaboratively. The teachers believe that the differences in teachers' philosophies of and approaches to instruction leave students confused about what kind of education they are receiving in different subjects from different teachers. This problem underscores the need for guiding individual teachers' instructional practices in their school by a shared philosophy of teaching and learning, which can only be developed through professional interaction or development activities. Moreover, the students resist learning experiences intended to develop them as autonomous learners because their experiences do not conform to their deeply entrenched belief about teaching and their self-concept as learners. Students may wish to be lectured to, and they may not respond to teachers' attempts to encourage active participation; they may lack the self-esteem to ask questions when they have difficulties; they may be accustomed to a culture of silence; and they may misinterpret the teachers' attempts to provide a friendly interactive environment in the classroom.

Moreover, the tension originating from the pressure to cover the syllabus together with an exam system that emphasizes memory recall questions has a significant adverse effect on the teachers' efforts to promote conceptual learning and the students' inclination to accept it. Syllabus coverage is further compounded by factors such as excessive holidays or long vacations that considerably reduce the actual instructional time.

Likewise, the participants reported that teachers in the local school are strongly individualistic. They rarely interact with each other, exchange ideas, or have a common motivation and determination to change their practices. Individual teachers' commitment to change in classroom practices and willingness to participate in school-wide improvement activities are affected by a large number of factors, including personal dispositions, values and beliefs, knowledge, abilities, personal histories from their past and present lives, organizational factors such as a supportive environment (provision of resources, positive

emotional and psychological climate, support from leaders and colleagues, provision of rewards and acknowledgement), and organizational policies (e.g., system of accountability, curriculum, assessment practices, and remuneration and other service benefits). In addition, many parents do not have the necessary capacity (skills, awareness, and resources) to help their children in learning and socialization. Often, parents themselves have not had any schooling; therefore, they are not familiar with how they can support their children's success in education. Many of the students hail from families belonging to lower socioeconomic strata (poverty and lack of education in the family).

PEDAGOGICAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL REFORM

Theoretically and practically, the teachers present themselves as progressive or reflective practitioners. Their approach to pedagogical improvement or reform emphasizes both 'academic' and 'cultural' aspects of the classroom and school life. In the academic aspect of their approach, they emphasize students' in-depth learning of academic knowledge. The learning activities they organize, instructional strategies they adopt and adapt, pedagogical decisions they make during lessons, and the remedial actions they take to help students cope with conceptual learning together frame their role as a facilitator, an innovator, a helper, a problem solver, a counselor, an advisor, a guide, an observer, a decision-maker, an instructor, a resource manager, and a supplier of information. Acting in line with these roles, they make appropriate changes in everyday lessons depending on the pedagogical techniques or strategies they decide to apply to each lesson. Sometimes they try out new pedagogical ideas, techniques, and strategies to promote interactive learning. Sometimes, they adapt existing practices by making changes in how students interact with the material. Sometimes, they make necessary adjustments in the lesson to balance interactive learning activities with traditional models of teaching by providing additional information and relating subject matter to the local environment or student's real-life experiences with appropriate techniques for specific situations.

The other pedagogical reform in the classroom also relates to cultural alteration, including the relationship between teachers and students, opportunities for interactions among students, mutual expectations, and rules and regulations. They try to reform their

relationship with students by adopting less controlling authoritative attitudes. They believe that a positive socio-moral climate can provide a non-threatening atmosphere in which students' strengths and successes are celebrated, their weaknesses receive special attention, their difficulties are accepted as part of learning process, their self-regulation is valued, and generally they are viewed as responsible, capable, and active participants in learning. The teachers also motivate students and create opportunities for students' mutual interactions by encouraging them to speak out and celebrating their participation by using rewards. Moreover, they provide students with opportunities to observe and appreciate positive social and moral behaviors (e.g., cleanliness, punctuality, sense of responsibility, self-regulation, confidence, motivation, self-esteem, and the virtues of respect, fairness, forgiveness, sympathy, and honesty).

The teachers' approach to institutional change in the school also encompasses both structural and cultural reform. They use an approach similar to the one they adopt in making changes or dealing with challenges in the classroom. Reforming the cultural aspect of school mainly involves changing working relationships with other teachers so that teachers engage in professional interaction, sharing ideas and resources, interacting to reduce isolation and learn from each others' experience, supporting each other in pedagogical improvements, and cooperating in decisions and activities as strategies for professional and institutional development. They believe that these professional development activities help foster collaborative learning and teamwork, which are necessary for building a school's capacity to engage in continuous improvement and deal with challenges that inhibit improvement. They emphasize professional shared understanding of important practices in order to ensure better learning opportunities for students.

Seeking structural and cultural changes individually and in partnership with the leaders and other teachers, the teachers play a "support" role. The teachers' function as supporter involves different activities and roles (e.g., initiator, motivator, helper, critical friend, and group leader). These roles and the working strategies aligned with them evolve in response to changing situations and overlap on occasions. Their efforts to improve classroom practice by making a shift from one tradition of instruction to another or by combining different approaches to teaching involves

teachers' reflective critique of their effective and ineffective pedagogical practices and the theories underlying them. The teachers not only criticize weak aspects of their own and their colleagues' pedagogical practices but also highlight the alternatives that might help produce better results. Being critical friends or partners in the practice, they offer their reflections on practices that they consider inappropriate, for example, the inflexible use of curricular material and traditional ways of testing. In doing so, for example, they encourage teachers to visit each others' classroom in order to promote collective responsibility for students and enable more in-depth discussion or reflection around students' needs and their practices.

Such activities suggest that teachers can create, reproduce and transform institutional and social practices and conditions through their activities or experiences in the classroom and school. At the heart of this reform, teachers are the key reformers who engage in both restructuring and re-culturing the classroom and school.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM

This study has attempted to understand the phenomenology of improvement or reform efforts from the participants' perspective as active agents of pedagogical, institutional, and social reform in order to improve understanding of how educational change occurs, how it can be facilitated, what inhibits it, and how teachers as reform agents deal with constraints (Fullan, 1992, 1999, 2007; Russell, 1988; Munby, 1988; Stafford & Johnson, 1988). The important lessons learned suggest, first, that any improvement efforts involving changes in the classroom to improve what and how students learn is complicated not only by classroom-based factors but also by a large variety of influences from the outside world. Second, individually and in collaboration with other teachers and the head teachers, these change-oriented teachers try to address the challenges they face. Third, educational stakeholders (e.g. parents, community members, educators, supervisors, and policy makers) need to gain a better appreciation of the complex interplay of multi-layered challenges that confound the fundamental change teachers attempt in the classroom. They also need to provide support to schools and teachers either directly (e.g., providing needed resources, removing hurdles) or indirectly (e.g., creating conditions or

providing other supports to help teachers deal with the challenges). Thus, the insights this study contributes to the understanding of the change process can significantly inform decisions and practices in facilitating educational reform in the secondary schools in Chamapasak Province and elsewhere in the country. Central to improvement and reform are teachers. Teachers' continuous professional development is necessary; teachers' collaboration is essential; and teachers' reflection is important.

Plans for reforming education come from many sources. However, only teachers can provide the insights that emerge from intensive, direct experience in the classroom itself. They bring to the task of reform knowledge of students, craft, and school culture that others cannot. Moreover, reform cannot be imposed on teachers from the top down or the outside in. If teachers are not convinced of the merit of proposed changes, they are unlikely to implement them energetically. If they do not understand fully what is called for or have not been sufficiently well prepared to introduce content and ways of teaching, reform measures will founder. In either case, the more teachers share in shaping reform measures and the more help they are given in implementing agreed-upon changes, the greater the probability that they will be able to make those improvements stick.

Although teachers are central to reform, they cannot be held solely responsible for achieving it. Teachers alone cannot change the textbooks, install more sensible testing policies than are now in place, create administrative support systems, educate the public to understand where reform is headed and why it takes time to get there, and raise the funds needed to pay for reform. Thus, school administrators and education policymakers need to support teachers. Teachers also need academic colleagues—scholars who are experts on relevant subject matter, student development, and learning.

The educational system in Chamapasak Province needs to consider or redefine the teachers' place in educational improvement and wider social change as well as the teacher's role in changing the complex world of school in Chamapasak Province. The system must also recognize the teachers' expertise in and understanding of their unique teaching context. The educational system should place greater trust in the teachers and provide the support teachers need in implementing

changes and dealing with emerging challenges. Systems can empower teachers by recognizing their role as change agent in the classroom and school community and moving them to center stage to play a leading role in shaping improvements and staff development programs within and outside the school.

These suggestions are made in line with the literature's emphasis on the strategy of specifying directions for educational innovations, formulating new standards of practices, and designing school improvement programs by drawing on the existing valuable practices and knowledge embedded in the teachers' day-to-day work. The educational systems in Champasak province and elsewhere can certainly benefit from the inclusion of teachers' voices in deliberation, decision making, active planning, and implementation of change. Also, teachers' involvement in policy dialogue should be legitimized by according recognition to the perspectives on change and improvement that are embedded in their experiences. The teachers expressed their desire to get involved in these types of activities; they believed that teachers' input into the development of programs would not only be a mutually productive experience but also produce greater gains for students because they have firsthand knowledge of what helps teachers become more effective in the classroom. Moreover, the teachers' participation in research was a professional development experience for them because it provided them with an opportunity to review their own core beliefs about practice.

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The literature contains a great deal of discussion on how teachers' in-service professional development can be restructured or reformed to make teachers' learning more responsive to their role as active agents in the frontline of pedagogical, institutional and social reform. Most importantly, the growing recognition that treating teachers as lifelong learners is positively related to improvement in students learning underscores the importance for supporting teachers in Champasak Province and elsewhere in the developing world through various professional development opportunities inside and outside their schools. No matter how professionally competent they are, teachers always need to expand the horizon of their professionalism by renewing their commitment, deepening their understanding of the change process, learning about new ways, exploring innovative

strategies, and enhancing their capacity to deal effectively with the complex and multi-layered challenges facing them in their efforts to improve what they do in the classroom and school community. The participants in this study considered the lack of in-service professional development opportunity as a great disadvantage. It is thus incumbent upon the educational system in Champasak Province to create more opportunities for teachers to energize and reorient themselves in response to the demands of continuous improvement, to become familiar with new developments in pedagogical knowledge, to update their knowledge and skills and develop a reflective mind in order to improve their professionalism as well as to handle changes and respond to emerging challenges effectively.

This study supports the literature' general view that professional development for teachers as improvement agents needs to focus not just on technical teaching skills but also on aspects specific to their change agent roles, which require them to respond flexibly to changes and challenges through innovation, creation, experimentation, inquiry, reflection, adoption, adaptation, and modification. To function as improvement agents in a complicated world of pedagogical, institutional, and social change, teachers need skills, knowledge, and values that apply to diverse situations both inside and outside classroom practice and challenges that lie within and across them.

As improvement or reform agents, teachers must gain competence in areas such as interactive, progressive pedagogies (skill in teaching for understanding) and relationship building (interpersonal leadership and communicative skills). The relationship skills they can apply to situations include facilitating cooperative learning in the classroom, supporting collaborative work with colleagues, and leading groups and professional development activities (workshops, mentoring, observation, reflection). These various reflections suggest that to play their change agent roles effectively in varied contexts, to make informed professional choices in their day-to-day work, and to become more reflective, teachers need both formal and in formal learning opportunities inside and outside the school. The formal ones can include professional development programs, training, workshops, and participation in seminars and conferences; informal means may be school-based, but they can encompass a

wide variety of opportunities such as time allowed for visiting each other's classrooms, team teaching, mentoring or coaching each other, collegial work in school in aspects such as planning, resource development, or cooperative problem solving through action research. These activities may not be carried out within the existing structures (e.g., schedules and resources), which need corresponding changes. School officials need to review existing policies to make them friendly to teacher-initiated changes; they need to provide additional resources and allow schools to adjust their timetables to provide for these activities. These provisions are worth considering because they approach improvement or change by integrating teacher development with school improvement.

The educational systems in Champasak, the educational officials or stakeholders, the teachers, the educators, and the teacher professional education programs can certainly benefit and learn from the inclusion of teachers' experiences in deliberation, decision-making, and active implementation of improvements and reforms. The study provided the participants with the opportunity to have their voices heard. It presented them with a forum to share their experiences, concerns, and practical knowledge of dealing with problems and enhancing students' understanding of subject matter within the wider teacher community, locally and internationally. They also had the opportunity to reflect on the interrelationships between personal and professional development and school reform and to articulate their understanding of the ways and the situations in which they learned, developed, and contributed to the change process inside and outside their schools.

The participants' reflections delineate the extent and the ways in which they have benefited from participating in the study. The study was planned as a qualitative case study based on interview questions and classroom observations. However, given the research participants' interest in the study, it became more of a collaborative venture in which the participants' frank, independent, and voluntary interactions provided access to new dimensions of the research problem that might have remained unexplored otherwise. The teachers' reflection on their learning in the research indicated that the interactive form of research was a professional development experience for them.

It is recommended, therefore, that teachers in Laos be given the opportunities to take responsibility and control of their own personal and professional development. Accordingly, teachers must (1) actively determine what they need to improve; (2) have access to obtain information and models of good practice; (3) be given the chance to analyze and apply new information and skills; (4) focus on different components of the curriculum in different circumstances; (5) be given opportunities to develop professionally based on their personalities, concerns, and needs; (6) be provided chances to collaborate with others; (7) have opportunities for reflection and awareness and for innovation; and (8) be made responsible for their own learning by selecting activities such as workshops, seminars, training, or self-directed studies that enable them to improve their knowledge and skills.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) is the central body of the program, but it is recommended that the Provincial Education Department liaise with MOE to provide professional development resources, for example, up-to-date textbooks, computers that schools can utilize, and professional development activities such as workshops, seminars, conferences, and activities that provide formal opportunity to collaborate so teachers are able to participate for their professional growth and development. The training content must be oriented to specific situations and be based on learners' prior knowledge and experience. The District Educational Departments and schools must be empowered to create and implement training plans at a local level that effectively utilize existing resources and those made available by the Provincial Education Department. They should also empower teachers' professional development at different levels or stages. Leaders should encourage teachers in self-directed learning and serve as facilitators who provide guidance and structuring activities.

The policy-makers, educational managers, and donors need to listen to teachers. We need a better representation of teachers' voices – inclusion of representative teachers who are committed to, interested in, and knowledgeable about the change process in secondary schools. These teachers can be mediators between educational systems and their schools, and they are the best-placed stakeholders to provide the authorities with well-informed views on the

efficacy of new policies, programs, and projects. Their input will not only facilitate designing programs and innovations relevant to school change but also help to reduce the gap between teachers and educational managers, thereby enhancing the school's capacity to engage in continuous improvement. Educators, planners, or program developers can seek teachers' input into pre-service and in-service teacher development, school management and change, and designing programs or interventions for school-community partnerships.

Organizing a training-activity program is still preferable in the Lao context. However, a case can be made for self-directed learning where individual teachers identify, plan, and pursue activities for their own learning. Teachers can identify and collect, analyze, and interpret data in an area of their interest and then apply it to their own practice. This process will help teachers increase their self-reliance in decision-making and change from being dependent on external sources to solve the problems for their personal and professional growth.

It can be argued that effective teacher professional development should involve more than occasional large-group sessions; it should include activities such as study teams, collaboration between teachers, and peer coaching in which teachers can continuously and cooperatively examine and reflect on their assumptions and practices. Collaborative activities should be used in professional development for teachers. Interest groups of teachers within and beyond school should learn together based on their needs. This bottom-up rather than top-down approach to professional development would empower teachers, and they would become lifelong learners and self-managers. Reflective practice should be included in professional development initiatives or strategies both for pre- and in-service teachers. It underlies classroom assessment of student learning, effective differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, and team-based school improvement efforts. Even more, it is a way of thinking that fosters personal learning, behavioral change, and improved performance. Teachers or student teachers would have a deeper understanding of their own learning and teaching style and, ultimately, greater effectiveness as teachers.

CONCLUSION

This study developed a detailed sketch of the teachers'

professional life experiences and daily practices. Their stories illustrate their efforts in classroom and school community improvement and their professional development, individually, with others, and with key stakeholders; the challenges they face; and the strategies they adopt to address these challenges. These diverse multi-layered challenges to the pedagogical, institutional, and social changes the teachers pursue in classroom and school community and the strategies they adopt to address these challenges were generated by in-depth interviews, classroom observations, post-lesson reflections, and field notes. The improvement efforts and challenges that the participants cited are academic, social, structural, and institutional. These are interconnected, located in the context of the classroom teaching environment, school structure, and social environment.

While consistent with the literature in recognizing these general challenges to improvement and reform, this study has shown the complex interplay of diverse challenges within and across the contexts of classroom, school day-to-day practices and the professionalism the teachers have tried to develop. The classroom practice they teachers are attempting to improve and reform is complex because it is integrally connected to the wider environment of the school. The school does not function in isolation because it is located in the wider socio-cultural environment and controlled by forces external to it. This interconnectedness requires the teachers to engage in appropriate strategies or approaches to reform (classroom-based and out-of-school) that are mutually dependent and have important features in common, such as emphasizing relationships, interaction, reflection, collaboration, mutual support, and innovation.

Teachers' improvement and reform involve efforts to promote in-depth student learning, reflection, collaboration, and effective working relationships among teachers inside and outside their schools. Their efforts in the classroom primarily involve enhancing opportunities for interactive learning, addressing challenges that inhibit students' in-depth learning, and reorienting teacher-student relationships. In schools, the teachers have tried to create or renew the culture, structures, and the system's practices of relationships and to seek improvement in the ways the school is organized. To improve their professional skills, they engage in many different professionalism development

activities including observation, reflection, interaction, collaboration, and training programs for their professional growth and development. Their beliefs about pedagogical, institutional, and social reform and their commitment to their own continuous growth and improvement and that of the people with whom they work and live in the face of many complex difficulties, show them to be dedicated, thoughtful, responsive, reflective, optimistic, and hardworking practitioners in their own right. The professional development and the improvement the teachers pursue inside and outside the classroom are mainly inspired by their commitment to their students, as manifest in the concern they show toward student learning and development, their emphasis on promoting deeper understanding of subject matter and making students self-directed learners, and their efforts to foster positive social and moral behavior. This commitment to students is grounded in their personal morality.

Overall, the teachers are motivated, talented, knowledgeable, competent, and committed to their profession, which is a powerful influence on the people with whom they work. They are models of good practitioners, sustained and enlivened by a creative commitment to the profession and the well-being of society.

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