From Pakse to Perth: an eye opener for Sivilay



By Minh Lam

In Sivilay Phommachanh's country teachers earn a weekly wage of $88 and instruct up to 70 students in one class.

Blackboards are old and dirty, there are not enough textbooks or paper and in rural areas parents contribute to buy items such as classroom chairs for their children.

There are few resources to create teaching aids but in city schools the internet has proven to be an invaluable tool for teachers.

Such conditions and pay could justifiably be cause for outcry in the western world but the teacher from the southern city of Pakse in Laos just smiles and looks forward to the improving conditions for educators in her country.

"In the past teachers were very low (in society) but now the government is trying to increase the status of teaching," Ms Phommachanh said.

"We can survive by doing many other things around (the lack)."

Pakse is a long way from Perth but that's where Ms Phommachanh found herself in July, having attended the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA) conference in Darwin.

She came to Australian to present a paper on training methods for beginning teachers and has stayed on to observe, taking by invaluable tips on improving teacher education in her country, along with resources she planned on modifying for local use.

Her trip was coordinated by Union Aid Abroad – Australian People for Health, Education and Development (APHEDA), the overseas aid agency of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

Ms Phommachanh said schooling in Laos was compulsory, with about 80 per cent of school-aged children attending.

In rural areas many students attended school for a term before helping their families during harvest season.

Teachers worked eight hours a day but were heavily involved in administration work and did a lot of community work with

parents.

Ms Phommachanh is a secondary English language teacher by qualification, but has spent the past 17 years at Pakse Teacher Training College in Laos preparing primary and secondary English language teachers for the classroom.

She said many trainee teachers were themselves learning English for the first time.

English as an Additional Language (EAL) material Ms Phommachanh was shown at Highgate Primary School by associate principal Natalie Tarr (pictured) would be useful for her students.

“These activities are suitable for them in the classroom and I would like to try them – of course it will be very hard without equipment like this, but I would like to use local materials,” she said.

“I would like to say thank you to the union here for supporting Laos’ teachers, because this is the only time they have the opportunity to learn and improve their profession.”

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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