

One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) pilot project launched in Solomon Islands

By

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A trial project for the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) initiative was launched with much excitement last week in three schools in Western Province, with Batuna Primary School teachers and all Standard 1 students receiving “OLPC” laptop computers and training. The other two primary schools, Patukae and Sombiro, are also being prepared to join the project.

The project is a partnership between the Ministry of Education and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), in association with the One Laptop Per Child Association, Inc. (OLPC), a US-based NGO set up to oversee the creation of a cheap, affordable educational device for use in the third world. OLPC have gifted 5000 of their laptops to the Pacific, with SPC as implementing partner, who are now conducting a multi-country pilot with respective Ministries/Departments of Education under the auspices of the Pacific Plan Digital Strategy. The pilot has started with three trials schools in PNG deployed in June, and others to follow in the Solomons, Nauru, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Niue, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. A second phase may extend these trials to all Forum member states.

In order to build on earlier demonstrations by the Ministry of Education’s EU-funded Distance Learning Centres Project (DLCP), the three primary schools in Marovo Lagoon were selected for the initial pilot, which is providing laptops for all first year students and teachers. Depending on the trials progress, the Ministry may allocate additional laptops to complete all six grades in these schools, and then extend pilot sites to the other provinces. The initial launching provided 75 laptops between the three schools.

Senior education officers Mr Bernard Rapasia of the Ministry, and Mr Cleaven Ngatulu of the SDA Church representing the Western Province, participated in the project launching at Batuna, which was held over a week. The launching included training for the primary school teachers of Batuna and Patukae, with teachers of Batuna Adventist Vocational School. Training of the students to use the laptops followed. Parents of the students and the community were also briefed during awareness meetings and demonstrations. Follow-up training and extension of the pilot to Patukae and Sombiro will be coordinated by a locally-appointed project officer based at Batuna.

A hand-over ceremony was held on Friday 25th July, presided over by Chairman of Batuna Primary School Board Mr Michael Sonter, where each child was formally handed their laptop computer. Each teacher received a training certificate, and the parents signed a “Parent’s Agreement”, signifying that they understood the principles of the project and agreed to help their child to use and look after the laptop.

Throughout the previous week, the sounds of excited children (and adults) could be heard around the school, as the training took place and the teachers and children got to know how the laptops work.

The OLPC laptop computer, called the “XO”, is a unique design intended for young children. It is not an office computer, but a specially designed learning tool for the world's poorest children. Most observers would agree that OLPC has created the XO laptop to be very low cost, robust and designed explicitly for children of the elementary classes, the first one of its kind.

One of the distinctive features is that the laptops automatically connect to each other, allowing the children to collaborate in all the activities that they find on the laptop. School servers with electronic libraries are also being installed, so that a wide range of curriculum materials as well as

non-formal educational materials can be accessed., plus Internet if available.

OLPC was founded by a core of MIT Media Lab veterans and designed around “constructionist learning” (learning by doing) theories developed by pioneers as far back as the 1960, and made possible through recent advances in technology. The OLPC is based on 5 core principles, (a) Child ownership, (b) Low ages, (c) Saturation, (d) Connection and (e) Open Source. The laptops are also very low cost, comparable to modern school text books, and are very low powered and require almost no maintenance.

For the pilot project, the task ahead is to try the technology and evaluate whether it delivers on its promise. The Ministry of Education in Solomon Islands has therefore developed an evaluation framework to measure the impacts.

Integration of the laptops into classroom activities is a big challenge for teachers. At Batuna, teachers were asked to reflect on how they might incorporate the laptops in their lesson plans. Initial feedback was positive, and increasingly so as they gained skills and confidence with the laptops. Teachers observed how the activities on the laptops helped students to structure sentences, read and write, provided positive feedback and motivation. One teacher commented on the need to encourage better oral skills in English, and how the recording and speech synthesis functions on the laptop could help students practice and provide them with positive feedback. The training also gave the teachers some ideas of how the laptops can enable more group work, allowing the teachers to adopt child-centred approaches.

To summarise, SPC’s OLPC Coordinator David Leeming commented, “This is a very forward looking project and there are some significant challenges. There are those who are quite cynical about the worth of providing laptops to young children, and it is right we evaluate the pilot carefully before committing to any expansion. However, in order to visualise the potential, we should look back at how technology has changed our lives over the years, and then imagine the future from that perspective. In my opinion, in ten years time no-one will think twice about providing every child with a low-cost computer designed to fit in with and assist them with their learning. We will look at these devices in the same way as more traditional learning tools, such as the calculator, text book, pen and ruler.”