Education in Cambodia: Students' Perspectives toward Education and Active Learning Activities

Endear Van[1], Kimsru Duth[2], Phasy Res[3], Ney Sométa[4], Samouy Hour[5+], Sorya Seang[6],

Sreymom Eng[7] and Sreymom Pol[8]

[5]Asian University for Women, Bangladesh

Abstract. This paper is a case-study report on the project *Shaping New Ways to Approach Education in Cambodia,* which surveyed over 1200 secondary students in 8 schools from 3 provinces and one capital city in Cambodia to find out students' perspectives toward education, as well as implementing innovative activities to introduce active learning strategies. The project has had an empirical component and an action research component. The empirical component has been survey based to explore students' attitudes towards education. We conducted our first survey in 2010 and found that students value education; however, they had difficulties regarding low self-esteem, lack of inspiration, worst of all, they perceive that cheating during exam is acceptable. To verify the first survey's findings, we re-conducted the survey in 2011. Similar to the first survey results, the second survey showed that students valued education since 96% of students believe that education is important and more than 83% want to pursue higher education regardless of their social-economic backgrounds. Our findings also shows that family problems and poverty are the most common factors discouraging students to continue education and teachers are seen as the main actor encouraging students to continue education. During the second survey, we also conducted educational workshops designed in response to the first survey finding. For this action-research component, we had 200 secondary students in two schools to join our workshops regarding improving their leadership, communication, and creativity skills through a range of active learning activities, including diary writing, presenting, creating cards, reading about the life stories of successful individuals as well as showing them drama. We found that students were enthusiastic to learn and participate in our workshops; they tried to share ideas in their dairies, demonstrated enormous creativity in the cards making, and applied their limited knowledge to solve their community problems. According to our findings in the surveys and activities of our workshops, we hope that the Cambodian government should provide incentive to teachers and poor students as well as include new active learning activities in the educational system that would improve the quality of education in Cambodia.

Keywords: Cambodia, Students' perspective, Education, Leadership, Active learning.

1. Introduction

Cambodian education was improving rapidly after independence from being a French Colony (Cambodia Cultural Profile). However in 1975, almost all the schools were destroyed under the Khmer Rouge regime and 90% of 20,000 teachers were killed (Ross, 1987). Since the revolution came to an end, there have been many national and international organizations which have helped to rebuild educational institutions and have trained thousands of teachers (Tan, 2007). Other than these, education for poor children, orphans and trafficked children were subsidized by the Royal Government of Cambodia with the assistance of NGOs (Volunteer Services Oversea (VSO), 2008). Consequently, the enrolment of students in primary and in secondary schools has shown some degree of improvement (World Food Programme, 2012). However, from 2005 to 2010, there were less student enrollments in primary school (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport). In addition, there is a significant drop-out of school rate in secondary general education, 21.4% in 2005-2006, which is higher than the 11.4 % drop-out rate in primary school and the 17.8% drop-out rate in high school (AsianViews, 2010). Some of the main reasons that cause students to drop out of schools are poverty, poor teaching (including taking money from students since teachers get low salary) (Launey, 2007), family migration, and transportation (World Food Programme, 2012).

Overall, education system in Cambodia remains at a low-standard (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005) because the budget of the government spent on the education project in 2009 was only 17% of GDP (UNESCO, 2010). The low budget on education leads to low teachers' salary, about $50 to 100$ per month (VSO, 2008).

According to Surveys from VSO, 93% of teachers needed the supplementary jobs to survive (VSO, 2008). This is one of the reasons that the teachers lack time and inspiration to enthuse students to have varieties of successful leaning outcomes (VSO, 2008) such as responsibility toward education and morality. Another reason that causes the low quality of education is that the government tries to improve educational fields by providing free education and constructing less difficult exams in order to increase the numbers of graduated students from at least high schools (CCPR, 2011-2012). According to the observation in daily life, many students in urban and rural areas misbehave inside and outside of schools. Many of them do not have respects toward their teachers, parents, and older people. Having stated that, we believe that those students need to change their attitude and behavior since they are the future of the nation.

These problems led us to create a project that focus on how to motivate Cambodian students to understand the value of education and to improve their morality, leadership, creativity and their motivation to study. In order to reach the goal of the project, we have conducted a survey to explore whether students value education or not. Based on the high drop-out rates, especially secondary schools, and tendency of students to engage in delinquent acts-in and outside of classes, our research started out with the hypothesize that students do not value education. However, the survey in 2010 refuted our hypotheses, most of the students value their education; but, we found that students did not have access to activities and educational content that would nurture leadership and communication skills, and creativities. As a result, we designed and conducted workshops to respond to the first survey and modified the second survey from the first one in 2011.

2. Methodology

Our project had 3 phases: 2010 survey and interview, 2011 survey, and workshop. The surveys were conducted with 1200 secondary school students (grade7-9) from eight schools in the capital city and three provinces (Kompong Thom, Kompong Cham and Battambang). In each school, 50 students from each grade were randomly chosen for the survey. In 2011, we conducted a follow up survey with edited version of the previous survey questions with the students from the same places. There were 34 questions covering demographic and socioeconomic background, school facilities, communications, and teachers' attendance, cheating during exam, students' perspectives toward education and their educational performance and, also, the factors that encourage or discourage them to come to school. The data was analyzed through Microsoft excel and SPSS software program.

The workshop aimed to improve their creativity, leadership and communication skills as well as encouraging them to not support copying from each other during exam. It was a three-day workshop conducted in two schools in Kompong Cham and Kompong Thom provinces. We chose two rural schools in the two provinces because the schools' principals are cooperative, kind and they want their students to gain new experience in learning engagement. Considering the type of activities in the workshops, about 200 students from grades 7-9 from those two schools were randomly selected. Three programs of our workshop were ***Leadership Program:*** giving lecture about the characteristic of leaders, introducing role model of famous people, solving community problems; ***Creative Activities:*** introducing the importance of writing diary, composing songs, drawing ideal communities, writing short stories based on pictures; ***Drama Performance***: conveying the negative consequences of copying and introducing the importance of group work. Mostly, we included activities such as presentations, discussions and group works in the workshops in order to encourage students to pursue higher education, build students' confidence in networking and communicating skills, create friendly learning environment, change students learning habit, and motivate students to change their cheating behavior during exam.

In order to conduct the survey and workshop in the selected schools, for all the 3 phases, we needed to ask permissions from the school principals and the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport. For the survey, we did not required personal identification from students. For the interviews, we only selected those students who agreed to participate in the interview and completed consent forms to maintain ethical standards.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, we present our findings in two parts: the quantitative finding from the survey and the qualitative findings from workshops. The results of the data in 2010 and 2011 are almost the same, except on the part of cheating during exam. In 2010, the data has shown that 70% of the students responded that copying during exam should *not* be eliminated from school, 72% of students disagreed cheating would have

negative impact on their studying, and 69% of students disagreed that cheating was embarrassing. Unlike the surveys in 2010, the survey in 2011 has shown that 80% of students responded that cheating should be eliminated from school, it had negative impact on the future and cheating is embarrassing. The reasons of contradictory findings can be students may not have understand the first survey questions or students had not paid attention to these questions. Since the results of both surveys are very similar, we are going to focus only on 2011 survey data.

The survey data in 2011 showed that 86.2% of students responded that they want to pursue higher education. 96% of students think that education is important, the first most important reason given regarding the value of education is to find good jobs, followed by the reason to have better knowledge in dealing with problems; understanding oneself and the society was ranked less important. Moreover, we also examined different factors such as gender, parents' level of education, occupation, school distance, mode of transportation, family status, family size, and category of students that influence students' perspective toward pursuing higher education.

Factors	Category	Low Education(%)	High Education(%)	Asymp.Sig (2-sided)
School Distance	Near	13.20	86.80	0.808
	Far	12.60	87.40	
Transportation	Walk	15.00	85.00	0.004***
	Bike	15.00	85.00	
	Motorbike	4.10	95.90	
	Car	3.30	96.70	
	Other	16.70	84.00	
Family Status	Rich	6.70	93.30	0.368
	Middle	12.90	87.10	
	Poor	18.00	82.00	
Family Size	Small	12.40	87.60	0.540
	Large	13.60	86.40	
Father's Education	Low	16.90	83.10	0.000***
	High	4.00	96.00	
Mother's Education	Low	15.60	84.40	0.000***
	High	3.00	97.00	
Students categorize themselves	Excellent	9.10	90.90	0.025**
	Medium	14.30	85.70	
	Poor	21.40	78.60	

Source: Authors' calculation using the educational survey of students, through statistical Chi-square Test * for 10%, ** for 5%, *** for 1%significance

Fig. 1: Factors that Influence Students to Pursue Higher Education.

According to the Figure 1, the data shows that school distance, family status, and family size are not statistically significant in relation to students' perspective in pursuing higher or lower education. However, there is statistically significant difference in parents' education, self-categorizations of students and mode of students' transportation regarding students' perspective in pursuing higher or lower education. For instance, students who come to school by cars and motorbikes want to pursue higher education than students who come to school by bike and walk. Students with high educated parents want to pursue higher education than students with low educated parents. As well, students who categorized themselves as excellent students want to pursue higher education than the students who categorized themselves as poor student. Although these above factors are significantly different, we see that the percentage of students wanting to pursue higher education among those with transportation issues (walking and bike), with low level of parents' education, students who categorized themselves as poor student were high, were all 80% and higher. Therefore, these above mentioned factors do not seem to be the main determinants that influence students' motivation to pursue higher education. Basically, students value their education and they are interested in pursuing higher education.

However, according to the World Bank, the number of students dropping out of school shapely increase during the transition period from primary to secondary level and the highest rate of dropout of school is in grade 9 (World Food Programme, 2012). Therefore, we cannot deny the fact that students are still facing

problems that can discourage them to continue their education even if they are interested in pursuing higher education. Figure 2 indicates the factors that encourage and discourage students to come to school.

Factors	Encourage (%)	Discourage (%)
Family Problems	12.98	30.40
Poverty	11.96	17.60
School Distance	3.29	16.30
Less Job Opportunity	8.97	10.10
Friends	14.11	5.50
School Environment	9.87	1.60
Insecurity	1.73	10.60
Teachers	37.08	8.00

Source: Authors' calculation using the educational survey of students

Fig. 2: Factors that Encourage and Discourage Students to Come to School.

According to Figure 2, the data shows that family's problem is the most common discouraging factor. Other than that, poverty, school distance, less job opportunity, school environment, insecurity, friends and teachers are the factors that least discourage students to come to school. Next, students respond that teachers are the actors that most encourage them to come to school and followed by friends. Teachers is seen as the highest responses from students that encourages them to come to school, so teachers can play very important roles in changing students behavior toward education. However, teachers seem not to have enough time for students because of their second job. Teachers are paid on the range of $50 to 100$ per month and the salary are not enough for them to afford for their basic necessities of food, housing, clothes, medicines, and rent as well as to support children and elderly relatives (CITA, 2010-2012) and 93% of teachers need second jobs in order to survive (VSO, 2008). Therefore, teachers do not have incentive to teach students energetically and comprehensively.

Beside the quantitative findings, our qualitative findings show that in the creativity workshop, students have come up with amazing writing short stories and lyrics in composing song and mostly students drew their ideal communities that had schools and hospitals; others came up with forests and mountains. In leadership workshop, we provided some common problems that related to health, economic and education and asked them to pick one of those listed problems. We asked them to come up with their own solution as a group. Also, when we asked them if they became leaders of their communities which problems they would prioritize. Most students wanted to build schools, hospital and roads in order to solve these problems; they come with ideas of gathering villagers in their community to help in building roads. For schools and hospitals, they would contact NGOs or private donors. Additionally, after the drama performance, students discuss the consequences of cheating during exam. Most students responded that cheating during exams would have negative impacts in future such as hamper the quality of their knowledge. Overall, students were very enthusiastic with workshops by actively participating in it. Moreover, the students' evaluation about workshop reflected that they found that this workshop is very useful and they hoped to have that this kind of workshop will be offered again in the future.

According to these findings in the workshop, we can realize that students have significant potentials regarding creativity and leadership. They focused on improving schools, hospitals and roads in their communities thus reflecting their primary concerns was based on their own experiences. Moreover, their approach to solutions and improvement are participatory based on mobilizing community resources and skills. Their enthusiasm for these kinds of problem-solving and creative activities suggests that building these elements into their education will be productive for their communities.

4. Limitations and Challenges

This project has some limitations regarding collecting the data. Since we were conducting surveys with grade 7-9 students, about 20% of survey questions were not clear to students in term of sentence structures or some words, we explained during the survey. Moreover, about 3% of the responds were missing and about 1% of responds were not applicable. Furthermore, we faced time constraints with asking permission from the ministry of education since our survey was administered before the national final exam and national holiday. For the workshop, we faced time constraints to manage our workshop. Additionally, one of our leadership

activities was very difficult for grade 7 students to understand therefore requiring us to take a lot of time to explain.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Overall, educational system in Cambodia has been significantly improved after 1979 since the number of schools and student enrollment has increased; however, quality of the education remains low due to some problems such as lack teaching skills, and materials. Although students value their education and they want to pursue higher education; however, their obstacles are family problems, poverty, school distance and less job opportunity. According to our findings, teachers have significant roles in encouraging students to continue their education. Therefore, government programs providing incentives to poor students and teachers would help to increase the quality of education. Additionally, due to the accomplishment of our workshop, integrating leadership, communication and creativities into the current educational system are going to be important in allowing education to transform Cambodian society.

6. Acknowledgement

7. References

[1] B. Cat, and R. Sam. Corruption and Poverty Get School Dropout Blame. *AsianViews,* Edition, 2010: Phnom Penh Post, 15/15, 2006.

[2] Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. Education. Cambodia *Cultural Profile.* Visiting arts, 2005.

[3] Cambodia Independent Teachers Association (CITA). *Teachers' Salary and Term & Conditions Position Paper.* 2010-2012, pp. 1 – 25

[4] L. Guy. Cambodia Facing Uneducated Future. *BBC News*, 2007.

[5] Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo HUN SEN, Prime   Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Closing *Ceremony of Annual Education Congress*, 2012.

[6] MoEYS & UNICEF. *Expanded Basic* Education *Programme* (EBEP), 2005.

[7] R, Russell. Cambodia: A Country Study. *U.S. Library of Congress*, 1987.

[8] S. Dara. In Cambodia's National Exams, Cheating Makes Its Way to the Head of the Class.   *JakartaGlobe*, 2010.

[9] S. Ear. Cambodia's Economic Development in Historical Perspective: A Contribution to the Study of Cambodia's Economy. University *of California, Berkeley: Department of Economics.* 1995, pp 1 – 101.

[10] T. Charlene. Education Reforms in Cambodia: Issues and Concerns. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, Springer. 2007, V6, n1, pp15 – 24.

[11] The Cambodian Center for the Protection of Children's Right. *Primary and Community Education*, 2012.

[12] UNESCO National Education Support Strategy. Cambodia. *UNESCO Phnom Penh Office.* 2010, pp 1 – 63.

[13] V. Chhorn. *Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Cheating Exams will face disciplinary action.* Cambodian, 2010.

[14] VSO. Teaching Matters: A policy report on the Morale of Teachers in Cambodia. 2008*,* pp23.

[15] World Food Program. *Primary education*, 2012.