

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CAMBODIAN EDUCATOR

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I traveled with the McMaster School to Cambodia in December 2006 to conduct teacher training. While there, I found that I wanted to understand more about Cambodian schools and the lives of educators. I knew that if we had more insight into these areas, the McMaster School could strengthen partnerships with schools in Cambodia, so I applied to return to Cambodia in December 2007.

My 2007 project included the creation of science content materials and personal education about the difficulties that rural and urban teachers face on a daily basis. The questions that informed my research and project were: 1) What is the state of education in Cambodia? 2) What is the government's plan to improve education? 3) What is the average standard of living of Cambodian educators?

THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

At this writing, the latest data that Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) had published on the state of education in Cambodia is from 2005. MoEYS wrote the Education Sector Performance Report (ESPR) for 2005 in order to complete the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) that was in effect from 2001-2005 (MoEYS, 2005b). The following Education Strategic Plan is in effect from 2006-2010 (MoEYS, 2005a). The details of that plan will be discussed further in the next section.

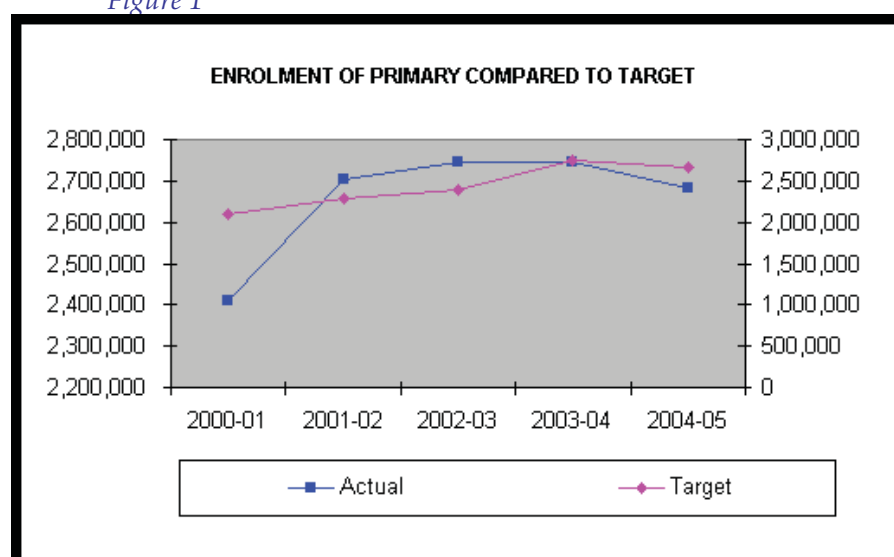
Part of the ESP included ensuring equitable access to education. In order to achieve this goal, MoEYS called for the following changes:

- ◆ Abolishing unofficial contributions from parents
- ◆ Providing school operational budgets
- ◆ Strengthening teaching and learning management
- ◆ Providing core textbooks to students free of charge
- ◆ Redeploying resources to provide performance-based incentives for teachers
- ◆ Creating a program for on-going teacher training
- ◆ Awarding scholarships to poor students, especially girls, which could be combined with re-entry and equivalency programs for drop-out students (MoEYS, 2005a).

When MoEYS compared the gender of students in primary schools, they found that 47% of the students in 2005 were girls, which indicates that in primary schools female students appear to have almost equal access to

education (MoEYS, 2005b). The enrollment of students in primary education grew from 2001-2003, and then began to decline (see Figure 1). MoEYS attributes this decline to the decline in population growth (MoEYS, 2005a).

Figure 1



MoEYS, 2005b

Cambodia met its net enrollment goal of 92% for primary schools in 2004-2005. Net enrollment rates in rural areas rose by 8% and in remote areas by 20% (MoEYS, 2005a). However, the Education Sector Report did not attribute this increase to any specific cause.

CAMBODIAN EDUCATORS

Pact Cambodia reports that Cambodian teachers are underpaid and most are unable to support themselves (Knight, 2004). Average teacher salaries are as follows: beginning primary school, 66,000 Riel (US\$ 16.29/month); beginning lower secondary school, 75,600 Riel (US\$ 18.66/month); and beginning upper secondary school, 92,400 Riel (US\$ 22.81/month). Pact Cambodia also states that there are relatively few female teachers in rural Cambodia. Urban Cambodia has 19,027 teachers, 9,861 of whom are female. Of 50,508 rural educators, 16,814 are female. In remote areas there are only 245 female teachers out of 1,063 total faculty. Pact Cambodia also notes that approximately 2,274 teachers work in disadvantaged schools (Knight, 2004). MoEYS is developing strategies to recruit new teachers and to staff remote areas. Teachers assigned to remote areas will get special allowances for working in those areas. MoEYS is also recruiting new teachers from remote

areas with the intentions of assigning those teachers back to the areas where they are currently living (MoEYS, 2005a).

KHMER LANGUAGE LITERACY AND CULTURE

Following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, many Cambodians immigrated to the United States and began to access public services, such as education. Ellen Rintell, a teacher in Lowell, Massachusetts, interviewed Cambodian families to learn more about their expectations of public schools. Lowell is home to the second largest Cambodian community in the U.S. following Long Beach, California (Rintell, 2005). Rintell found that many Cambodian parents wanted Cambodian teachers in U.S. schools to teach their children English and Khmer, as well as an understanding of Cambodian culture. A parent explained that teachers need to teach children the proper way to speak and behave to show respect to elders and others of higher social standing. Rintell asked one of the Cambodian educators how they teach culture. The teacher replied:

The Cambodian parent expect [sic] the children learn everything from the teacher. And the Cambodian teacher will give the children a good education and help the children in the future.... The parents expect the teacher will help the behavior, too, because most children listen to the teacher.... Cambodian parent [sic] hope we will teach values, like the polite ways children should use in the family. (Rintell, 2005)

Rintell's research shows the importance that Cambodian parents place on teaching culture in the classroom. Cambodian parents rely on teachers in schools to teach Cambodian social structure and behavior. Although these interviews were conducted with Cambodians living in the U.S. in the early 1980s, Rintell's research provides insight into what Cambodians expect of education.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

Cambodian students face many barriers to obtaining an education. Judy Ledgerwood (n.d.) reports that many teachers are forced to supplement their salaries with other jobs that often cut into class time. She also reports that teachers sometimes charge students to attend their classes or offer additional instruction for an extra fee. The poorest students often miss out on this additional instruction where much of the learning takes place. MoEYS recognizes this problem and has taken a stance against it, although interviews with teachers often revealed that it continues to occur (MoEYS, 2005b). Ledgerwood (n.d.) cites Mark Bray's study on the financial burden

parents assume for their children's education. He found that families and communities pay 74.8% of the cost of primary education and the government pays for 12.9% (Ledgerwood, n.d.). Ledgerwood notes that many families surviving on subsistence farming indicate that education costs are their highest expense.

Families often have to choose which children they will send to school; parents usually select male children over female. Female children often have to help with the home and family. In addition, if a girl has to travel any distance to attend school, issues of personal safety may limit educational opportunities (Ledgerwood, n.d.). MoEYS does track enrollment rates based on gender and has a goal to decrease any gender gap, but the strategies to reduce this gap are unclear. The Kingdom of Cambodia does offer scholarships to some of the poorest children. The school, community, or village council can decide what students should receive scholarships (MoEYS, 2005b). MoEYS reports that they try to choose students that have the most need financially, as well as females and minorities. Over 20,000 students benefited from these scholarships (MoEYS, 2005b).

EDUCATION FOR ALL

Cambodia is among 150 countries that participate in the Education for All (EFA) initiative, which focuses on creating a comprehensive system of education for the countries involved (Knight, 2004). At the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, the countries involved set up the "Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments." EFA countries set a target date of 2015 to meet the following goals as quoted in Karen Knight (2004).

Dakar Goals

1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs.
4. Achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.

5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills. (Knight, 2004)

By participating in the EFA initiative, it is clear that Cambodia recognizes that it needs to work on improving its education system and Cambodians' access to it. From my research it appears that the government has begun to make progress toward the 2015 goals.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

My project consisted of two parts. One part was to stay with a Cambodian educator in order to experience the daily life of an educator and observe the teaching methods that educators use. The second part was to provide training materials and to lead an in-service on science education for rural teachers and principals.



I was able to stay with a Cambodian vice-principal in Phnom Penh for three days. I attended school with her each day and observed nine different teachers as they conducted their daily lessons. The in-service training consisted of training 60 principals in different methods of relaying complicated ideas about disease and wellness to young children through a variety of creative, hands-on means.

THE LIFE OF AN EDUCATOR

The vice-principal, Pol Saroeun, is married and has four children, all of whom were living with her at the time. Saroeun's oldest son attended law school; her other son had graduated from high school but was currently unemployed. Her 17-year-old attended high school and her ten-year-old daughter attended primary school. Her husband is a journalist for the second largest newspaper in Cambodia. The family lives in a house in Phnom Penh, which is owned by the newspaper. The family has a decent standard of living compared to what I observed of others in Cambodia. They own a car and a motor bike, and the family could survive without the older children working to contribute to the household income.

Monday through Saturday, Saroeun would get up around 6 a.m. and prepare breakfast for the family. She would then have one of her sons drive her to the school. At 11 a.m., one of the sons would come and pick her up for the noon break. He would then drop her off at the local market where she purchased food for lunch. She would walk from the market to the house. With the help of her oldest daughter, she made lunch for the whole family. One of the sons would take lunch to their father at work, and the rest of the family ate together. Saroeun would wash the dishes following the meal and be taken back to the school. She worked in the office the remainder of the school day until she was picked up again. If she needed more food for dinner, she was again taken to the market. When she returned home, she immediately began cooking dinner. The family then ate together between 7:00 and 8:00 p.m.

I observed the activities of grades 1-6 in primary school. The school day was divided into day and evening shifts. Students attended one shift six days a week. The teachers would usually teach one shift per day. The morning shift ran from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. There was a break between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., and then the evening shift would begin at 1:00 p.m. The principal, vice-principal, and sewing teacher were the only employees that were at the school for both shifts. Classes received several breaks during the day, which were the only times students were allowed to leave the classroom. Before the morning shift, students would gather around the flag pole located in the middle of the courtyard, raise the national flag, and sing the national anthem. The evening shift would do the same while lowering the flag.

Saroeun described a structured five-part format for lessons. Teachers should review what was taught on the previous day then introduce new material. This was then followed by cooperative group work to answer a common question, which was followed by a session in which students copied or rewrote the lesson on the board. Teachers concluded by reminding the students to study the assignment with their parents, help them at home, and act properly. The role of Cambodian schools in teaching proper behavior supports Rintell's (2005) findings about Cambodian-American parental expectations of teachers. Saroeun, as well as the rural teachers, mentioned that the government encourages them to have students work together in groups.

Throughout my interviews, I learned that teachers made about US \$45 a month. The pay for a vice-principal was US \$50, although they worked the whole day. They explained that a teacher's salary barely provides enough for one person to live on; it certainly cannot support a family. Urban schools tend to pay higher salaries than rural schools. The US \$16.29 monthly salary reported by Pact Cambodia is the national average (Knight, 2004).

IN-SERVICE TRAINING

The teacher training took place at a rural school; sixty teachers and principals attended. The in-service focused on science instruction and demonstrated how to teach abstract ideas about disease and illness to concrete learners. Several lessons were demonstrated in order to show a variety of ways to relay abstract ideas. The lessons ranged from beginner to intermediate levels.

The first lesson focused on teaching young children how germs spread quickly from person to person. I demonstrated how to use glitter or a similar visual aid on hands to show how germs are spread. The second lesson used different measurements of string to demonstrate the difference in sizes between a human hair, red blood cells, bacteria, and viruses. This lesson emphasized the microscopic size of the agents that cause disease. The third lesson showed teachers a way to understand and assess student knowledge. The idea was for a teacher to read different statements in which students had to decide if they agreed or disagreed with the statement. I chose to use statements about Avian Influenza. Through the activity, we were able to inform the educators about certain causes of the virus, as well as preventative measures. The last lesson was an immune system role play, a visual/kinesthetic demonstration of how a person's immune system protects them from disease.

RESULTS

While staying with the vice-principal, I learned that the Cambodian government encourages cooperative learning techniques. This can help to guide future projects as we now know that the teachers may want to learn more about cooperative learning.

The teachers and the principals that participated in the in-service training seemed to be very interested in the topic of disease. Their questions indicated that we were presenting new information to them. We were able to dispel misconceptions about the bird flu, which I hope they will convey to their students in order to prevent more people from contracting it.

After traveling twice to Cambodia and conducting two projects, I was able to develop a guide for future McMaster Scholars who have an education focus. I believe that this guide will help to direct future education projects in Cambodia.

REFLECTION

Although cooperative learning is a new concept for Cambodian educators, I believe that there is strong interest in learning how to use it more effectively in the classroom. While observing different classrooms, I gathered that most teachers adhere to the five-step teaching method in place at the school. If teachers received more training on other options to use in the classroom, it is likely that they would try those methods. Educators have few resources to extend or improve upon their teaching methods, and interviews with both urban and rural teachers indicated that they want to know more about teaching methods.

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