

REBUILDING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CAMBODIA ONE TEACHER TRAINING AT A TIME

Jo Ann Burkhardt, Ph.D., McMaster Fellow

The McMaster School for Advancing Humanity has sponsored teacher training projects in Cambodia since 2004. More than 300 teachers and principals have participated in McMaster teacher trainings in the urban schools of Phnom Penh and the rural villages of Ba Prey and Prekk Sandak.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The need for teacher training is well documented in the literature and supported by qualitative data collected by this researcher (Ayres, 2000; World Bank, 2005; Sodhy, 2004; MoEYS, 2001, 2004, 2005). The actions of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 through 1979 devastated the education system in Cambodia (World Bank, 2002). In less than four years, the Khmer Rouge and its leader, Pol Pot (Sloth Sar), who was a trained teacher, destroyed the social and physical infrastructure of the country of Cambodia. During this reign 1.7 million people out of about seven million died, including most of the educated population (Tan, 2007).

The nearly decade-long Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia began to rebuild the education system, but civil unrest continued until 1991 when the Paris Peace Accords was signed (Tan, 2007). By this time, lack of trained teachers, teaching materials, and a systematic plan for rebuilding resulted in a struggling school system. After the UN sanctioned elections in 1993, international development assistance became available. Millions of dollars from international donors entered the country to assist with the rebuilding of the education system (Tan, 2007). However, due to political instability, most educational reform was stalled in 1997 until after the 1998 elections. In 2000, the education system was still ranked among the weakest in the world (World Bank, 2002). In 2001, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) developed the first Education Strategic Plan (ESP) which marked the beginning of education reform in Cambodia. Subsequent ESPs were developed in 2004 and 2005 (Tan, 2007).

STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The Kingdom of Cambodia in its 2006-2010 ESP (MoEYS, 2005), describes the strategic plan for the education of Cambodian children and youth. Tan (2007) views the creation of this document as a signal of the MoEYS resolve to reform education within Cambodia. The plan identifies priorities and strategies for continued education reform and maintains equitable access and

high education quality as the highest priorities. When officially introducing the new plan in December 2005, Kol Pheng, Minister of MoEYS, referred to education reform in Cambodia as “still in the long journey” (MoEYS, 2005, foreword).

There have been three Educational Strategic Plans since 2000: ESP 2001-2005, 2004-2008, and 2006-2010 (MoEYS, 2001, 2004, 2005). With the development of each plan, MoEYS considers increased enrollment and decreased drop-out rates as evidence that educational reform in Cambodia is occurring. Although MoEYS has identified positive indicators, the data suggest that MoEYS has not met most of the goals established in ESP 2001-2005 and ESP 2004-2008 (Tan, 2007).

The priorities set forth in ESP 2006-2010 reflect the unmet indicators and targets of educational reform in the two prior plans. Unmet priorities include equitable access to education services, quality and efficiency of educational services, institutional development and capacity building for decentralization, and strategies for addressing crosscutting issues (MoEYS, 2005).

MoEYS defines equitable access as achieving nine years of basic education for all children in Cambodia. The ministry seeks to eliminate gender inequity between rural and urban areas in basic education (grades one through nine) and upper secondary education (grades ten through twelve) (Tan, 2007). In order to address the issue of increased quality and efficiency of educational services, MoEYS has identified target outcomes of increased salary for teachers, improvement of pre-service and in-service teacher training, implementation of curriculum standards, and the public dissemination of results of yearly standardized testing by mid-2008. The third priority addressed in ESP 2006-2010 is capacity building for decentralization of school leadership from the national level to provincial, district, and commune levels. The ministry plans to accomplish decentralization through education, training, and legislation. They propose that the education and training necessary for decentralization be in place by 2008 (MoEYS, 2005).

It is clear in reviewing ESP 2006-2010 that MoEYS is resolved to move the education system forward. This governmental ministry holds firmly to the belief that the economic future of the country depends on the quality of education offered to all school-aged children. MoEYS has established Education for All (EFA) as the public priority by 2015 (SCW, 2006).

Although a clear strategic plan is currently in place for EFA, the Kingdom of Cambodia still faces challenges in meeting the goal of education for all.

These challenges include lack of access to schooling for the poorest children and youth, lack of financial resources for many Cambodia families seeking schooling, and the necessity of young children working to help support families. In addition, a related issue contributes to high drop-out and repetition rates, repetition rates referring to the number of times students must repeat a grade before receiving a passing score on end-of-year tests (Tan, 2007). A widespread practice of teachers charging students for access to parts of the curriculum contributes to high drop-out and repetition rates. Teachers routinely charge a fee to provide content information to students. Without such knowledge, families and students are well aware that students will not be able to pass the end-of-year tests and move to the next grade level. In addition, it is routinely reported that students are able to purchase answers for the end-of-year tests from their teachers (Tan, 2007).

The practice of paying a fee to pass the test or have access to the complete syllabus is attributed to the low pay of teachers in Cambodia. Based on information gathered by this researcher in 2006 and 2007 and confirmed by the World Bank (2005), teachers in Cambodia earn US \$35-40 per month in primary schools and US \$60 in upper secondary schools. According to the World Bank, it is estimated that a teacher needs a minimum salary of US \$150 to support a typical Cambodian family with five members.

RESPONDING TO A COMMUNITY'S NEED

The teacher training projects conducted by McMaster Scholars and Fellows have been of assistance in providing in-service training to under-trained teachers in both urban and rural areas of Cambodia. The need is clearly documented in the national data. Only 36% of all teachers in Cambodia have attended upper secondary school or higher (MoEYS, 2005).

The McMaster School was introduced to the educational needs of teachers in Cambodia by the executive directors of the Southeast Asian Children's Mercy Fund, Sophal and William Stagg. They informed this researcher that teachers in a particular school in Phnom Penh were requesting instruction pertaining to the "how" of teaching. In 2005, a small group of teachers participated in a week-long training conducted by this researcher. The training included an introduction to five reading strategies and three math strategies. In addition, basic learning theory was discussed. Following the formal training, individual interviews were conducted with participating teachers. The teachers indicated that they wanted further training to understand why some students learn and some do not. In addition, they requested training materials in Khmer and in booklet form pertaining to, as one teacher put it, "ways to teach so that students learn." A focus group of teachers evaluated the training.



The following year (2006) this researcher, with assistance from a Defiance College teacher education major and McMaster Scholar, created half-day training sessions for teachers from six schools in the urban area of Phnom Penh. Additional training materials were created as a project within an upper level teacher education class at Defiance College. These training materials, which were translated into Khmer, consisted of a series of lesson plans that were aligned with the teachers' identified curricular needs.

During the following year (2007), in response to specific needs of the teachers

from the previous year, a Southeast Asia geography unit was developed, translated into Khmer, and offered as the focus of the training. Teachers and administrators participated in three days of training that included specific pedagogies for teaching map skills, identifying the natural and human resources within Cambodia, and identifying challenges to commerce, trade, and travel in different regions. In addition, each teacher was provided with maps, globes, and lesson plans in the Khmer language. Following the training, a focus group of teachers and administrators was again the method for evaluative data and determining future needs. This group communicated the need for science content instruction and teaching strategies. In addition, this group requested training and materials to increase teacher understanding of basic algebra skills.

During the most recent teacher training session in Cambodia (2008), both algebra and science skills were addressed with a group of teachers and administrators. In addition to teaching science and math content, the trainers taught the teachers active learning strategies. This researcher interviewed four administrators following the training sessions. They referred to the ESP 2006-2010 and voiced their concern about meeting the targeted goals of this

plan. They requested that the training for the following year focus on the topic of active learning. They wanted definitions and descriptions of active learning, as well as examples and demonstrations of how to apply active learning in their classrooms.

The McMaster School for Advancing Humanity will sponsor a fifth year of teacher training in Cambodia in May 2009. Materials and training will reflect the assessed needs of our community partners and will be aligned with Cambodia's Education for All priority and the Education Strategic Plan 2006-2010.

REFERENCES

- Ayers, D. (2000). Tradition, modernity, and the development of education in Cambodia. *Comparative Education Review*, 44, 440-463.
- MoEYS. (2001). *Education strategic plan 2001-05*. Phnom Penh: Publisher.
- MoEYS. (2004). *Education strategic plan 2004-08*. Phnom Penh: Publisher.
- MoEYS. (2005). *Education strategic plan 2006-2010*. Phnom Penh: Publisher.
- Tan, C. (2007). Education reforms in Cambodia: Issues and concerns, *Educational Research Policy and Practice*. DOI 10.1007/10671-007-9020.3.
- Sodhy, P. (2004). Modernization and Cambodia. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 21, 153-174.
- SWC. (2006). *Atlas of Cambodia: National poverty and environment maps*. Save Cambodia's Wildlife, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
- The World Bank. (2002). *Achieving education for all in post-conflict Cambodia*. Washington: Publisher.
- The World Bank. (2005). *Cambodia: Quality basic education for all*. Washington: Publisher.