

WORKING PAPER

The impact of psychosocial challenges at home on primary school performance: the case of Cambodia

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Abstract

International research shows that children who face problems at home have difficulties concentrating in school, affecting their school performance. Based on qualitative interviews with 86 students, parents/caregivers, and school officers in Battambang and Kampong Cham province, this study aims to gain a better understanding of the challenges primary school learners in Cambodia face at home and how those affect their school performance, if at all. Results show that learners face severe psychosocial challenges, such as financial distress, family separation, domestic violence, and/or child abuse. In result, they fail to concentrate at school, affecting their academic performance. More generally, low school performance is related to a lack of parental involvement and to the overall low quality of teaching.

Dedication & Acknowledgments

This report is dedicated to the 21 students, 30 caregivers, 23 teachers, 4 school directors, and 8 officers who participated in the research and shared their experiences and views with us. Their contributions help us to better understand children's learning difficulties and psychosocial challenges in primary schools in Cambodia, especially in rural communities.

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1. Introduction

The concept of 'learning difficulties' is often interchangeably used with 'learning disabilities' to refer to neurological disorders that make it difficult to acquire certain skills, notably in reading and mathematics (Penney, 2018) – such as dyslexia and dyscalculia. Although they should not constitute a barrier to learning as such, learners across the world are also facing difficulties to learn because of physical impairments, including visual, hearing or speaking impairments. The World Report on Disability (2011) found that on average approximately 5 students out of 50 deal with a form of learning difficulty. In Cambodia, over 10 % of children between age 2 and 9 would face a cognitive impairment, hearing or speech problem according to a nationwide survey (MoEYS, 2010). Yet, learners can face other obstacles to learning too. Low-performing students can, for instance, suffer from anxiety or low self-esteem. Family factors such as domestic violence, or socio-economic status are often reasons for which students are not learning in school (UNICEF, 2019).

Research shows that the quality of teaching is key to overcoming learning barriers. Nevertheless, many teachers in Cambodia lack the required knowledge on different learning difficulties and have little understanding of the different strategies to overcome barriers. Nor do they have access to adjusted learning materials. More generally, teachers require a strong and effective national supporting system to identify learning difficulties – which they currently lack in Cambodia. By consequence, most children facing barriers remain under the radar and cannot fulfil their potential. While different NGO's (e.g. Rabbit school, ADEPASE, Save the Children) provide small-scale support, these projects focus mainly on students who have visual or hearing impairments or who face profound mental challenges and therefore are not able to attend a mainstream school. Little support is available for students with learning difficulties in regular schools.

This study aims to better understand primary school children's learning difficulties in Cambodia and their relation to psychosocial challenges experienced at home. The findings are based on qualitative in-depth interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students, parents, teachers, and school principals. Through our findings, we hope to inform relevant ministries and decision makers on how to effectively address the effect of the home environment on learning performance.

In the first section, we describe some relevant literature on the education system in Cambodia, followed by a brief review of the relevant literature on the impact of home environment on schooling. In the second section, we present our methodology and continue with an analysis of learning difficulties in Cambodia. To conclude, we examine ways forward to improve current interventions or practices implemented by teachers, school directors, and education authorities in overcoming children's learning difficulties.

1.1. Cambodia's education system

Between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia's education system was destroyed under the Khmer Rouge regime and most, if not all, education specialists, teacher trainers and teachers were killed (World Bank 2004). After the regime fell in 1979, it took the country almost four decades to reopen public schools. Yet, since its reestablishment, the education sector has been developing at a fast pace. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) focused particularly on providing quality primary education, introducing new curricula, publishing updated textbooks, and developing manuals for teachers. It also revised teaching strategies and learning approaches, introducing a 'student-centred' approach (Song, 2015). MoEYS (2014) also invested heavily in increasing enrolment rates (MoEYS, 2014, p. 22). As a result, the number of students enrolled in primary schools has increased from 94.8 % in the school year 2008-2009 to 97,8% in the school year 2017-2018 (MoEYS, 2018). In line with the enrolment rates, completion rates have increased significantly too. By 2017, the completion rate in primary education was only a little under 90% - with boys having a higher chance of staying in school than girls (Keng, 2004). Despite the upward trend in primary school enrolment and completion rates, the quality of education in Cambodia remains poor nevertheless (Tandon & Fukao, 2015; CDRI, 2014 as cited in World Economic Forum, 2014). According to rankings, it is still amongst the lowest in South East Asia (World Economic Forum, 2014 and Beyond Borders, 2017).

Transition to secondary education remains a challenge as well. Only few students complete lower secondary education (grade 9). Many learners drop out because of socio-economic factors, family migration, and discrimination toward children with a disability (UNICEF, 2015). To address the various challenges, MoEYS recently initiated a pilot program 'New Generation Schools', to ensure "high standards of governance, transparency, accountability, and participation" (MoEYS, 2016, p. 7). Local and international NGOs are also active in the sector to ensure no students are left behind, including Krousa Thmey, PSE, SIDA, UNICEF, VVOB – education for development (VVOB), and CARE.

1.2. The impact of the home environment on school performance

Parents or caregivers play a fundamental role in children's academic achievement (Chohan & Qadir, 2013). A research study conducted in 2005 by the Academy of Educational Planning and Management, Ministry of Education, Islamabad, Pakistan (AEPAM) found that almost 83% teachers agreed that, in public primary schools, students repeated classes due to the lack of appropriate guidance at home (AEPAM, 2005). Similarly, a study by Fan and Chen (2001) found that teachers of students who were slower to learn complained about the apparent lack of parental awareness of how important family support was for their child to succeed at school (Fan & Chen, 2001). Conversely, a study among 159 families in rural Cambodia showed that parental involvement in the process of their children's schooling positively affected children's educational participation (Keng, 2004). In Cambodia, parental involvement is higher among parents who have few children, greater family wealth, and higher levels of education. Parents who are involved in the schooling of their child are also likely to have higher academic aspirations and to contact their child's teacher more frequently (Eng, Szmodis, & Muslow, 2014; Soeung, No, Ang, & Hirakawa, 2011).

The relationship between parent and child also significantly affects children's wellbeing and, in turn, their scholarly achievement (Chohan & Qadir, 2013). Hence, to foster children's academic achievement, teachers and educational administrators should invest in involving parents in their children's education (Khajehpour & Ghazvini, 2011). When reaching out to parents, educators are recommended to identify what resources parents have available and to take parental attitudes towards education into consideration to maximize their involvement (Eng, Szmodis, & Muslow, 2014).

Beside parental involvement in children's learning performance, other family characteristics have been found to affect children's psychological wellbeing, and thus learning performance. Children who are exposed to domestic violence, for instance, are found to report feelings of loneliness and having more conflict with close friends (McCloskey & Stuewig, 2001). In Cambodia too, children raised in a family where a parent/ caregiver was physically hurt by another family member show symptoms of depression – what is more, they are likely to internalize and externalize violent behaviour in adolescence (Ong, et al, 2017). At times, children themselves are victim of domestic violence. In Cambodia, violence against children remains pervasive with over 50 percent of children reporting to have experienced a violent incident before the age of 18, and over one third of children age 13 to 17 reporting to have witnessed physical violence in their home within the last twelve months (UNICEF, 2014). Another study conducted with 993 male and 950 female junior high school students in urban and rural Cambodia revealed that 27.9 % of male students and 21.5% of female students have been victim at least once of domestic violence, while 18.0 % of male and 5.8 % of female students have suffered violence within their community (Yi, Poudel, & Jimba, 2012).

Anxiety and depression, and other forms of psychological distress, caused by traumatic experiences such as domestic violence have a great impact on students' ability to learn (Marshall, 1996; Chohan & Qadir, 2013). In turn, school failure may reinforce or anew their distress (Marshall, 1999). Such problems grow in complexity when these students' needs are ignored or when their failures are met with disapproval by teachers, peers, and/or parents. Disapproval can take many forms, such as negative labelling of a child as 'slow', 'lazy', or 'dumb', or rejection by peers. Clearly, learning difficulties and social difficulties are often intertwined (Marshall, 1999).

2. Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature, building upon in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observations conducted in four primary schools in Battambang and Kampong Cham province. The provinces were selected based on their demographic and socio-economic status and accessibility. To collect information on the challenges learners face at home and to examine their impact on their school performance, two researchers from the Royal University of Phnom Penh conducted 46 IDIs with students, parents/guardians, teachers, school directors, and administration officers at selected offices of education department in these two provinces. The students who were part of this study were identified by their teachers as low-performing learners. Their parents were then contacted for the interview. In addition, 6 FGDs were conducted with 8 to 12 teachers and parents per group. The IDIs and FGDs took place in the school library or a classroom. The former lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, whereas the latter had a duration of 60 to 90 minutes. Classroom observations were done to discover repeating patterns of behaviour and identify characteristics of learning difficulties. In total, 21 students, 30 caregivers, 23 teachers, 4 school directors, and 8 school officers participated (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of participants by categories (n = 86)

Types of Participant	Number of Participants by type of interview		Number of participants by location				Total number of participants	
	IDI	FGD	Battambang		Kampong Cham		Total	Female
			urban	rural	urban	rural		
Primary school students	21		4	5	4	8	21	5
Parents/guardians	12	18	2	13	13	2	30	24
Primary school teachers	7	16	10	2	2	9	23	18
Primary school directors	4		1	1	1	1	4	2
District officers	2	6	1	1	2	4	8	5

The interviewers made use of semi-structured questionnaires with open-ended questions. The students were asked whether they experienced any difficulties at home and how they performed in school. Parents or guardians were asked to reflect on their parenting style and their involvement in their children’s education. The questions for teachers focused on identifying and overcoming children’s learning difficulties; whereas those for school leaders and district officers zoomed in on professional development needs.

Because of the qualitative nature, the generalizability of the study is limited. Furthermore, this study could not reliably compare differences between students. We recommend future studies to analyse gender dynamics when children’s learning challenges.

3. Results

This section illustrates the key findings of the study. In a first step, we examine what difficulties learners face at home, and how this impacts school performance. Next, we examine how teachers support learners in overcoming these challenges, if at all.

3.1. Experienced challenges in the home environment

A quarter of the students in this study reported having experienced unpleasant life experiences in their home environment including family poverty, family separation or divorce, domestic violence, alcohol

abuse by (a) parent(s), and child abuse. Such experiences affect children's academic performance as they cannot attend school regularly (see below). They also impact children's psychosocial wellbeing. Approximately half of the children in this study experienced anxiety, stress and depressive feelings.

I cry alone at night because I miss my mother when I face difficulties. I don't have money and clothes. I skip class so often to play football because only football can help me forget everything (13-year-old boy, grade 6, Battambang province)

Although I think Khmer study and Mathematics are easy to learn, I cannot remember the lesson I have learned from school. Most of the time, I feel worried about my family. (11-year-old boy, grade 4, Kampong Cham province)

3.1.1. Poverty

As the vast majority of children in this study were from low-income families, it was not uncommon for children to partake in ensuring family income. One third of the parents stated that they send their children out to work to help support the family. Hence, some children were regularly absent from class because they were collecting waste or finding food in the rice field. Other children were required to do household chores due to the absence of their parents/guardians for work. Clearly, poverty is a barrier to children's school performance.

Sometimes I cannot go to school because I need to go to collect waste such as beer cans or sell water bottles during wedding ceremonies so I can get some money support the family, especially my mother. After school I sometimes go fishing in the rice field. (11-year-old boy, grade 3, Battambang province)

Parental economic migration also occurred regularly. Some children accompany their parents, others are left behind with their relatives such as grandparents in their home village. Often, children are left without anyone to closely monitor their school attendance and school performance.

I have no idea why he could not do well at school. His mother is working in Rattanakiri with his stepfather. Last time, he followed his mother there for more than one month and then he came back to school. He rarely told me anything about what is going on with him, so I don't know much about him and what he thinks. (51-year-old grandmother, Kampong Cham province)

I cannot remember what I have learned from school after class. I often worry about my family problems, my parents, and everyone at home. My parents are working in Thailand and my grandma is often sick. (11-year-old girl, grade 4, Battambang province)

Many of the learners in the study also lacked the required school materials and/or school uniform. Their parents do not have the financial means to support their education, let alone pay for extra classes to catch up. Because of this, some of the children are discriminated by their peers:

Sometimes I go to school without money. My family is poor while my other classmates are rich. I only play with those classmates that don't discriminate me. Most of the time, I am playing or sitting alone during the recess. (13-year-old boy, grade 6, Battambang province)

3.1.2. Domestic violence

Worryingly, almost half of the children interviewed shared they witnessed domestic violence. Almost all incidents of domestic violence occurred when the father, or occasionally the mother, got drunk. Overwhelmed by their family issues, these children experienced difficulties to concentrate at school.

I am living at my grandparents' home with my parents, aunts, uncle, cousins and my siblings. We are 18 people. Sometimes my parents fight. Sometimes, I see my aunt and her husband fight each other and insult each other, almost every day. I go to school every day with my two brothers and my sister, but I cannot study well. At school, sometimes, I felt anxious and angry when I played with other children at school. (9-year-old boy, grade 3, Kampong Cham province)

Some children even reported experiencing physical abuse by their parents. Violence exerted on children has a damaging impact on their physical and mental wellbeing and may result in constant feelings of anger and fear.

I am scared of my mother. She beats me very often, even though I follow her advice all the time. She is always drunk and beats me. (9-year-old girl, grade 2, Battambang province)

While the majority of parents do not fully understand whether and if so, why, their child experiences difficulties at school, others are aware that their home environment affects their child's performance. A 37-year-old mother in focus group discussion in Kampong Cham province stated that:

My husband beats me when he is drunk. He drinks every day. Although he behaves violently to me, I could not divorce him because I prioritize my children's future and schooling. I believe that the family problem affects my children's study. Let's say my daughter who is in grade 4, she was so scared once she saw her father beat me. As a result, she cannot concentrate on her study.

3.1.3. Parental involvement

More generally, the results of the study revealed that there is lack of parental involvement in their children's learning process. Many parents appeared not to check on their children's schoolwork or school attendance. Some had never contacted the teacher or school director. Some parents reported being too busy with their business or work, others shared that they did not know how to help their children at home because of their low level of education:

I never check my child's book or help teaching him at home because I don't know how to. I never went to school in my life, so I can't read and write. My husband is the same. (Mother of a 12-year-old boy in grade 5, Kampong Cham province)

According to almost half of the parents, schools have the responsibility to ensure their child's attendance. Parents also blame school, rather than themselves, for their children's academic failure. Teachers and school authorities, on the other hand, lament the lack of effective communication between educators and parents. They explained that children do not get enough support from the parents in their learning process. They believe that if the parents would contribute to children's learning at home, it would be easier for the school to help children learning at school.

If parents or guardians can help their children learn at home, we could easily help them at school. We need to work with parents and explain to them why their children have learning problems. But, most of them, especially for those who have children with learning difficulty, do not collaborate well with us. (Teacher, Kampong Cham province).

3.2. The role of teachers in overcoming psychosocial challenges

It soon emerged from the interviews and classroom observations that many learners in the selected schools perform below their age-congruent level. Whereas teachers and school management staff can help these learners to perform better, they seemed not to make the link between psychosocial challenges and school performance. This is not surprising as teachers have few supporting materials at their disposition. The large class sizes in Cambodia, furthermore, also constitute an important obstacle to supporting low-performing learners.

3.2.1. Impact on school performance

Learning difficulties among primary school children manifested themselves in the form of difficulties in reading, writing, and mathematics. Nearly two thirds of children in this study reported difficulties to perform simple calculations including additions and subtractions. Multiplications and divisions were perceived even more challenging. In addition, learners reported experiencing challenges in reading, writing, and dictation of Khmer. In particular, they had difficulties to distinguish Khmer consonants and

vowels, resulting in spelling and writing errors. As a consequence, many learners were deeply concerned about having to repeat a grade, others wished to quit school altogether:

I am inferior in mathematics, especially in the multiplication and division. I try my best to study math, but I can't do it! I got 4, of the total score (10) in grade 6, so I am repeating the grade. (13-year-old boy, grade 6, Battambang province)

I feel ashamed in the class because I can't read or write. I am scared of my teacher and I never look at him. I am afraid he would point at me and ask to read. At times, I did not want to go to school I wanted to stop studying. (8-year-old girl, grade 2, Kampong Cham province)

Many of the children facing such family challenges were also reported to misbehave and fail to follow teacher's instructions or rules. They would not complete homework, skip class, and have difficult relations with their peers.

He misbehaves. He is very hyperactive. He does not respect the school's regulations and sometimes he does not respect me and does not listen to me when I discipline him. He always disturbs others in class. Sometimes he pretends to be sick (headache or stomachache) because he wants to skip class and play outside. (Teacher, Battambang province)

Behavioural problems, in teachers' definition, consist of lack of participation, hyperactivity and impulsive and disturbing behaviours such as often leaving their seats, climbing up and down, or moving around in the classroom; fidgeting with their legs, stretching their bodies, or frequently dropping things on the floor while in class; refusing to follow instructions or rules; and often arguing with others or disturbing other classmates.

3.2.2. Teachers' knowledge and skills to identify psychosocial challenges

According to the FGDs, students who experience challenges at home are more quiet than others, often lack confidence, and do not want to participate in class activities.

We identify students who are slow learners during our daily teaching through observation. These students are not brave enough to answer the question and they are quiet. (Teacher, Kampong Cham province)

While recognizing this, they did not seem to be aware of such behaviours being potentially linked to children's psychosocial challenges faced in the home environment. More generally, teachers expressed little knowledge of such challenges.

We don't have knowledge on psychosocial challenges or mental health problem. We never got training on this topic. So, I don't understand when we talk about this subject. (Teacher, Kampong Cham province)

Lacking such knowledge, teachers do not know how to overcome learners' psychosocial challenges, leaving many of them feeling stressed and overwhelmed in dealing with these students. School directors and education authorities are aware of this challenge and believe that to better support or teach the students with learning challenges, teachers must acquire the required skills.

From my experience of more than 30 years in teaching, a child with learning difficulties faces problems in either Khmer language or Mathematics. Sometimes they have problems to behave well. Teachers need to be trained on how to handle these students. At this moment, this kind of training is not available. (57-year-old School Director, Battambang province)

Teachers have, however, few professional development opportunities once on the job - only 15 percent of lower secondary school teachers report having attended an in-service training session (Benventiste, Marshall, & Araujo, 2008). Teachers also lament the lack of supportive materials, such as a tool that can help them to identify psychosocial challenges. Whereas such a tool is available according to school directors and education authorities, they also disclosed that many teachers were not trained to administer this assessment tool due to limited budgets and time constraints. More generally, most of the teachers indicated a lack of proper documents on pedagogical training or

counselling to support and teach students with learning difficulties. Clearly, they expressed a need for guidelines on how to address barriers. During the FGDs, a majority of teachers did refer to the book from MoEYS on “Methods of helping the slow learner” – unfortunately, however, it was not perceived very helpful.

Teachers can get the book ‘Methods of helping the slow learner’ granted by the MoEYS for additional help. However, this book is not really helpful. What is written in the book is what teachers already know and practice during their daily teaching. (Teacher, Battambang province)

Another major obstacle to identifying and supporting children who face psychosocial challenges is class size. In Cambodia, classes are very large. Notably, Cambodia has the largest student-teacher ratio in East Asia at 51:1 in the primary level and 32:1 at the lower secondary level. Rural primary schools tend to have higher concentration of students per classroom than urban schools (Benventiste, Marshall, & Araujo, 2008). Both educators and education authorities mentioned that it is hard to manage the class and ensure the quality of teaching when classes are overcrowded.

The ideal number of students per class should be below 30. Sometimes teachers cannot monitor all the students because of the large numbers. They are so noisy and do not listen to us. (Teacher, Kampong Cham province)

3.2.3. Current interventions

In order to support students, some teachers and school directors have identified strategies and implemented various actions including the provision of additional classes, set up of peer- or self-learning clubs, improved teacher-parent communication and establishment of a referral service for serious cases.

Additional classes

Some schools offer two months of extra courses during the school vacation to students performing poorly at school.

Peer learning club

Most of the teachers mentioned that they have discussed their challenges with the school leader and other experienced teachers. In class, teachers encourage peer learning too through groupwork whereby students who perform well on a certain subject explain and teach their peers.

Teacher-parent communication

All teachers and school authorities believed that working together with the parents or guardians of learners with learning difficulties would be more effective in helping them learn better.

Referral service for serious case

In case of domestic violence or other forms of physical or sexual abuse, teachers report the case to the local authorities (village or commune chief, police...). They also try to encourage and explain their students how to protect themselves from being physically or sexually abused by an adult.

4. Discussion & conclusion

The current study showed that many primary school learners in Cambodia face various adversities at home, causing feelings of anxiety, depression, and other psychological distress, that in turn affect their learning progress. Unpleasant life experiences in the home environment include financial distress, family separation either through divorce or parental migration, domestic violence, and child abuse. Some children directly witnessed domestic violence in the household, others even reported to be the victim of physical violence. Living and growing up in an environment where children are continuously exposed to repeated trauma, they are at risk of suffering psychological distress (McCloskey & Stuewig, 2001; Ong, et al, 2017; and Yi, Poudel, & Jimba, 2012). Psychosocial challenges in turn affect children’s learning performance and achievement as they can no longer focus in school

(Scheider & Lee, 1990; Marshall, 1996; Fan & Chen, 2001; Chohan & Qadir, 2013; Alesi, Rappo & Pepi, 2014; Mahuro & Hungi, 2016).

Parental involvement in their child's school performance, moreover, appeared very low. At home, only few parents' or guardians involved in their children's schooling. Overall, parent-teacher collaboration is lacking. Such collaboration is nevertheless crucial in addressing children's learning difficulties.

Whereas teachers are aware of learners learning difficulties – of which poor performance in Khmer literacy study, mathematics, and other learning activities are usually the indicator – only few teachers could make the link between low learning performance and psychosocial challenges. With the vast majority of teachers lacking the knowledge and skills to identify and overcome psychosocial problems, teachers pointed to the need of support materials, such as a tool to identify psychosocial challenges.

5. Recommendation

The current study pointed out the link among students' psychosocial challenges faced in the home environment (financial distress, family separation either through divorce or parental migration, domestic violence, and child abuse) and children's school performance. Currently, teachers lack the capacity and knowledge to identify and support children suffering from psychosocial problems. Therefore, it is crucial to develop a tool to identify psychosocial challenges in order to assist school leaders and teachers in responding more effectively to children's needs.

The study also showed that only few parents are actually involved in the learning trajectory of their children. Hence, parent-teacher collaboration should be reinforced and be part of the school development plan and agenda. Research clearly shows the positive effect of parental involvement on children's schooling both through support in children's learning process at home and regular connection with school and teachers. Thus, school leaders and teachers should encourage parent-teacher communication and collaboration.

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