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*Article*

**Towards Effective School Leadership and Management Practices in the Primary Education Level in Cambodia: A Review of Selected Cases**

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**Abstract**

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) continues strengthening the decentralized governance system and school leadership and management practices to achieve national education goals, especially to enhance students' learning achievement. Outstanding cases were identified for award winning. This research was conducted to identify mechanisms to that help schools ensuring effective leadership and management practices. The research was based upon an in-depth multiple-cases study using qualitative methods to explore key stakeholders' perspectives and experiences on working strategies and strategic directions to ensure effective school leadership and management practices at the primary education level. A triangulated data collection method of interviews and focus group discussion, document reviews and observations were used to build evidences of those successful cases. The results reveal that strengthening school leadership and management at school level was the key to success. Furthermore, governance from the national to sub-national and school levels were the main and inseparable

mechanisms to achieve the reform goal in effectively managing primary education and schools.

## Introduction

In many countries including Cambodia, effectiveness of leadership and management has been practically and widely identified as an important mechanism for mass educational reform and for enhancing educational attainment (MoEYS, 2014; OECD, 2009; Hargreaves, Halasz & Pont, 2007). In achieving a long-term and national vision "developing human resources of the very high quality and ethically sound in order to develop a knowledge-based society within Cambodia", the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) continues reforming all levels of education from pre-school to higher education (MoEYS, 2014, p.12). Accordingly, the latest Education Strategic Plan (2014-2018) has three priorities: (1) to ensure equitable access to education services for all, (2) to improve the quality and relevance of learning; and (3) to strengthen effective leadership and management of education staff at all levels" (Hang-Chuon, 2017; MoEYS, 2014). Moreover, the current landscapes of education reform cover a broad area of: administration and general management, academic management, education finance management and personal management (Hang-Chuon, 2017, p.7). The effectiveness of leadership and management are considered as the heart of the current reform and educational development in Cambodia.

In Cambodia, school-based management is gradually recognized as a strategic policy and has interpreted into action since 1998 (Shoraku, 2009). Initially, school-based management was carried out as an attempt to achieve Mellenium Development Golas (MDG); the goal was set to achieve the universal 'Education For All' policy. The development agenda was to reduce the gap of inequal access to the quality education for all children in different socio-economic situation. However, the overall

achievement reveals that the policy formulated and the actual results were almost completely contradictory (Shoraku, 2009). It is the fact that school-based management could not be fully achieved and sustained due to lacks of policies and regulation framework. School-based management were constrained by limited support, effective school governance, and leadership and management capacities (MoEYS, 2018).

World Bank (2007) refers the framework of school-based management and decentralization is a transfer of authority in the decision-making from the national to the institutional level and from the institutional level to responsible division). In the context of Cambodia, however, the level of autonomy at school remained very limited, especially in managing school resources (i.e. financial and human resources (Shoraku, 2009). In particular, self-management were not capable to function schools well. On the other hand, key stakeholders of schools including board of directors, directors, teachers, parents, and community were unable to catch up with educational changes and development trends to effectively implement the existing policies (Shoraku, 2009).

Further, participations of the communities in school management and development were not so active. School community members are assigned to take part in all forms of decision making related to operation and to enhance engagement from the state and the civil society for promoting both quality and equity of education (Collins 1998). In reality, decision making was only made by selected numbers within power and authority position, which contradicts to administrative procedures (Shoraku, 2009). Parents, for example, are important contributors to promote both equity and quality of education; most of them, especially in rural and remote areas, considered children's learning are the responsibilities of teachers and are less involved in activities related to educating children at inside and outside schools. In addition, the possibilities of parental involvement and other members in decision making in school management and academic affairs were relatively low.

One of the three priority areas in the previous educational reform agenda was to strengthen decentralized management system by providing autonomy to schools (MoEYS, 2014). Up to date, although effective school leadership and management remain as a key challenge in the education system, the award-for-best performance mechanism has identified best cases.Thus, this research aims to identify appropriate mechanisms which help to improve effective leadership and management practices of those primary schools. In addition, Tithe findings of this paper

contributes significantly to relevant education policy development on improving school leadership and management in the primary education level.

## Conceptualizing School Effective Leadership and Management Practice

In principle, effective school leadership and management influence on students' learning achievement, school performance and achievement (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012; Morefeild, 2007; Foskett & Lumby, 2003). The implementation of school leadership and management help ensure that all children are accessible to quality of education equally and to improve students learning achievement (Caldwell, cited in Foskett & Lumby, 2003). Moreover, school leadership and management are applied to achieve national and institutional educational goals. Importantly, school leadership and management primarily focused upon students' academic achievement, school infrastructure and human resource management at school level (Foskett & Lumby, 2003). School leadership and management are responding to community needs and to guarantee that schools provide social and economic benefits to the communities (Shoraku, 2009). For example, a rate of educational return is to directly beneficial to students, parents and the community as a whole.

Another main goal of school leadership and management is to support student learning either directly and indirectly (Foskett & Lumby, 2003). Hence, as a common practice, school strategic plans must be clearly demonstrated in the stated goals and activities to improving student's learning performance and achievement. In relation to this, the decision making on resource allocations and activities such as staff recruitment, professional development, school monitoring and evaluation are conducted to promote teaching and learning activities and achievement.

The effective approach on school leadership and management practice in schools include: decentralization, participatory school leadership and management, self- school management and monitoring and evaluation (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012; World Bank, 2007). An effective shelf-school management is also based on the implementation of decentralization system by distributing certain degree of authority and responsibility school in term of decision making, developing and implanting school strategic planning, and allocating schools under the framework of education policy and school accountability (Spinks cited in Foskett & Lumby, 2003). Thus, a precise guideline for practices through

is gone the development of policies and legal frameworks on school leadership and management systems.

The function of leadership and management are to ensure workable governance and management system for day-to-day school operations, development and sustainability. In relation to this, school directors or management team's roles involve in two main aspects: enhancing autonomy through legislative and policy implementation; and, shared authority and responsibilities in decision making with the community members such as teachers, parents, and students (Foskett & Lumby, 2003).

As a formal practice, school directors are officially appointed to provide leadership and management in schools. The effectiveness of school leadership and management largely depends on capacities, commitment, and education core values of school directors or management team and teachers. At school level, the director plays an important role in leading and managing schools which is an integral part in determining the success of the schools, staff and students as in the word of Nath, "in schools, the quality of education is the heart of students. Good teacher is at the heart of the classroom. Good director is at the heart of the school" (Morefield, 2007, p. 1). Moreover, leadership has a tremendous impact on the school culture, students' learning and supporting system (Morefield, 2007).

Furthermore, in leadership position, school directors play an important role in leading the school to achieve vision-mission for school development, sustainability and transformation (Senge, et al, 2012; Hargreaves, Halasz & Pont, 2007). Also, school directors play important roles in creating learning culture and environment for children development and growth physically, intellectually and emotionally (Cordeiro & Cunningham, 2013). Another main role of school director is the academic leaders and mangers. In such a role, school director works to achieve national and school educational goals by improving school performance, implementing national curriculum, managing school curriculum and instruction, creating school culture and environment and providing sufficient resources to support teaching and learning, providing students support services and providing staff professional development programs and community outreach and engagement (Morefield, 2007).

Therefore, establishing a school leadership and management system is identified as one of key strategic policies for education reform and development as stated, "School leadership is an education priority

around the word" (OECD, 2009, p.3). Four policy levels are formulated in most of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)countries to support school leadership practices. They include: redefining school leadership responsibilities; distributing school leadership; developing skills for effective school leadership; and making school leadership an attractive position' (OECD, 2009, p. 13).

In Cambodia, the MoEYS developed 'School Director Standards' for ensuring effective leadership and management practices in schools. For good leadership and management, duties of the director consist of academic qualifications and working experiences, school leadership capacities and characteristics, critical and innovative thinking skills, school leadership and management; leadership on curriculum, teaching and learning; and school and community connectivity (MoEYS, 2017). The primary goal of the Cambodian school director standards is to set criteria to recruit and develop prospective directors to provide effective school leadership and management in schools nationwide (MoEYS, 2017). This paper makes use of these aspects of school leadership and management as a framework to review and document best practices selected for the cases.

**Research Methodology**

An exploratory multiple case study approach was employed in this research. In achieving the study objectives above, two main sources of data were used: primary data from in-depth interview, focus group discussion and field observation as well as secondary data through, the review of relevant documents. Data were collected and analyzed qualitatively. For primary data source, 35 key school stakeholders from three primary schools were contracted for the interviewed and participated in focus group discussion. They included three directors, nine deputy directors, five school supporting committee, 20 teachers, and two guardians/parents. The semi-structured questionnaire and informal questionnaire were used to collect participants' experiences, practices and perspectives. The research covered effective school leadership, management practices and mechanisms to ensure effective school leadership and management practices in primary education level nationwide. For secondary data, relevant documents such as regulation, policies, strategic plans, national standards and administrative documents were reviewed and analyzed. Moreover, information from school observations was used to explore the process of leading and managing schools. The observation focused on

recording various leadership and management activities happening formally and informally in schools.

The data were analyzed in two main steps within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014). The two sources of empirical data collection: primary and secondary data was qualitatively recoded and analyzed by identified the thematic patters, starting with open coding, grouping into categories and themes (Saldana, 2009). The second phase of data analysis was cross-case analysis in which the process to compare and contrast key stakeholders' experiences and perspectives in leading and managing the schools. The cross-case analysis was done with comparisons with significant theories on school leadership and management in the form of synthesis for this research finding (Yin, 2014; Saldana, 2009).

**Results and Findings**

The synthesis of the results of the three schools and theories revealed that the effectiveness of leadership and management at primary schools in the study area was largely based on two levels of institutional capacities: the schools and relevant departments at the ministry level. The discussion of results primarily focused upon the ways forwards to ensuring effective school leadership and management practices at primary schools nationwide. A proposed mechanism by the research participants include: (1) Recruiting and appointing school director; (2) Mandate of school director; (3) School directors' roles and responsibilities; (4) Capacity development of school Directors; (5) Internal institutional support and external support to school director; (6) Performance evaluation of school director; (7) Socio-economic status of school director; and (8) Internal institutional reform.

*Recruiting and Appointing School Director*

Based on the government' mandate, school directors were formally appointed to lead and manage schools. The selection and appointment of school director were founded to be both direct and indirect impacts on school performance and students' learning achievement as in the words of a teacher, "*the appointment of good school leaders will promote school performance and also education development*". Up to date, however, the appointment of school leaders remained a great issue in the education system. Some participants expressed their concerns on school leader's appointment; a head of school support committee suggests that: "*the Ministry should develop and implement a transparent and systematic school director appointment procedures. For example, the candidates*

*must sit for the selection examination. And, the selection methods, procedures and criteria is arranged and taken to ensure the appointed school directors to have willingness, commitment and capacities to provide leadership and management in schools*".

According to a review of the relevant documents similarly reveals a lack of policies and regulatory procedures to ensure effective and accountable leadership for appointing school directors; it was systematically lacking at both at schools and department in charge at the MoEYS. Although the Ministry developed the school director standards to sets out criteria on school directors' functional qualifications, personal characteristics and roles and responsibilities, this standard was not yet officially implemented in the selection and appointment procedures. As a current practice, the selection of prospective school directors was mainly recruited among candidate inside the schools, they were in the line of the about-to-retired school directors. Concerning this, a school director suggests that "*the criteria and procedures on school director appointment must be improved to be more transparent and corruption must be abolished. Qualified candidates with functional qualifications to provide school leadership and management must be appointed*". In the same time, a head of school support committee adds that "*of course, we can select a deputy director or a qualified teacher to be a school director. But, he or she must demonstrate the willingness, competencies and professional ethics to fulfill this leadership position*".

### *Mandate of School Director*

As practice in other countries, a mandate of the school director is one of strategic policies to ensure the development and sustainability at the school level. However, in the context of Cambodia, an analysis of legal documents indicates that the policy and legal framework on school director mandates, terms and conditions have not yet been developed. As a consequence, school leadership position was a life-time appointment. The appointed school directors would work until they reached their retirement without any formal performance evaluation. At school level, working conditions and the performance of school directors had both direct and indirect impacts on school and student's performance and achievement (Lunenurg & Ornstein, 2012; Senge, 2012; Morefield, 2007). Moreover, school leadership and management influenced in different core dimensions of the schools for example school culture and environment, academic and administrative aspects (Lunenurg & Ornstein, 2012; Senge, 2012;

Hargreaves, Gábor Halász, & Pont, 2007; Morril, 2007; Morefield, 2007). Therefore, mandate of the school directors were required to be established in line with transparent and systematic performance and evaluation. The result from the interview suggests that school directors with outstanding achievements should be motivated and recognized both socially and professionally. Whereas, the school directors who could not fulfill their roles and responsibilities should be terminated his or her mandate.

### *School Directors' Roles and Responsibilities*

The interview results show that an effective leadership and management practices at schools were ensured; roles and responsibilities of school directors and all levels of leaders in primary education required to be clearly defined. The participants during the interview comments that a clear framework on roles and responsibilities of education leaders in the primary education management system need to be established. And, such a framework needs to classify the divisions of responsibilities and authorities from the national to sub-national and school levels, as participants stated:

> *Everyone has responsibilities to provide supports and suggestions to schools. Especially, when there is a proposal or school development plan submitted to local authorities forrequesting feedbacks, technical and financial supports.* (Head of school support committee)

> *School directors must be clearly aware of their roles and responsibilities. For instance, they need to know why they take up the positions as school directors. If they do not know about this, they will surely fail.* (Head of school support committee)

> *School directors must fulfill their roles and responsibilities effectively and responsibly.* (School directors).

As discussed, the MoEYS developed the school director standards to illustrate the main characteristics and functional qualifications and roles of school directors. Based on the standard, the school directors' roles and responsibilities include: school leadership and management, curriculum leadership and teaching and learning, and community engagement (MoEYS, 2017). Thus, it is suggested that the framework on school director and school accountability need to be in line with the established 'Cambodian School Director Standards'.

### *Capacity Development of School Directors*

Capacity development of school directors in school leadership and management was found as one of the main factors contributing to the effectiveness of school leadership and management. The results shows that school directors from these three study schools used different models for their professional development such as following the role model of other good school directors, observing, experiencing and doing. And, other parts of their on-the-job capacity development were knowledge and experience sharing, school partnership for staff capacity development, and school visits to observe good model on leadership and management.

#### *Learning capacities*

This study found that good educational leaders were good learners who had the capacities, commitment to learn and take good roles model in practicing in school leadership and management. Majority of participants believes that capacity to learn was the crucial tool to strengthen educational leaders' leadership and management competencies. Leadership capacity development began with individuals' willingness to learn and seek for opportunities and strategies to learn as in the words of one director, "*I take the roles model from other good directors and follow what have been effectively practiced in their schools*". In addition, abilities to learn, open minded and willingness to develop education were found as the main factors to strengthen leadership capacities and practices as another director said, "*To catch up with the new innovation, I have to develop my own capacities*". Also, being aware of strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement were found as key methods for leadership capacity development as the head of school support committee raised an example on how a high-ranking educational leader builds up his leadership capacities:

> *Having the heart to work for educational reform and development, HE. Hangchoun Naron, upon his appointment as the Minister of Education, he is very concerned and worried about getting this position. As he spoke from his heart that having hold this position without solid foundation made him so worried. Thus, he tries to observe and to learn from other counties' experiences and practices. He managed to reach the current level of success because of his willingness, commitment and capacities to learn.*

### *Knowledge and experiential sharing*

The interview results confirm that knowledge and experience sharing from the good directors to other directors was one of good capacity development strategies. Taking role models from outstanding directors lead to development of creative ideas in leading schools to fit with social-cultural context. Most participants believed that knowledge and experience sharing were the key factors to contribute to leadership capacity development for school directors across the country as a head of school support suggested:

> *Invite all school directors from the same district and level of education i.e. primary school, lower secondary school, to the workshop to discuss about school management…Make the videos and share them (through social media) on school leadership performance to seek for public opinions on how to improve school leadership and management at the school level. By doing so, the public will look at leadership and management strategies. Also, they will be curious why some schools perform very well, whereas, others perform badly. Then, they give comments on what have been practicing and on how to improve them.*

### *Establishment school partnership for staff capacity development*

Building school partnership for staff capacity development was found as one effective strategies for staff capacity development in those study schools as one good school director asserted that "*capacity development does not necessarily require a physical attendance to formal training at schools. We can learn and upgrade ourselves by establishing relationship with other schools with good achievement and taking the experiences from them*". For example, in 2004, the school director from one primary school signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with one of the most prominent primary schools in Cambodia. The Memorandum of Understanding has expanded the scope and opportunities for educational management and development and staff capacity building between these two schools. In addition, an on-going communication between the directors from these two schools on 'Leadership and Management Dialogue and strategies' 'Official study tour to learn and share experiences can strengthen the institutional capacities in the framework of school partnership.

### Oversea school visit

The results reveal that oversea school visit provide directors good opportunities to observe and learn about school leadership and management practicing in other countries. Some directors mentioned that, based on their personal experiences to visit schools in other counties such as Thailand and South Korea gave them with new insights and ideas for leading and managing schools. In addition, some participants said that the opportunities to observe the effectiveness of school leadership practices and participation in local and regional education events are practical methods for learning and developing leadership competencies and creating a diverse educational environment, as one director said about his own experiences:

> *From my observation, I found that primary education in the schools in other countries primarily focus on their culture, environment, hygiene, healthcare and safety. Thus, we should learn these good models on primary education from them. We need to cultivate our pupils with the love of the culture, environment, good living environment, good health and hygiene and safety since they are in the primary schools. Whenever we live in a good environment, our lives are prosperous. As long as we are healthy, the development will advance.*

### Internal Institutional Support and External Support to School Director

Directors needed to seek for and have various supports from both, internal and external institutions for school day-to-day operation and development. Currently, leading and managing schools were tough and complicated because of both internal and external influences. School directors had to address institutional challenges such as lack of resources (i.e. finance, human, physical, materials), information technology, culture, and environment (Morril, 2007). Meanwhile, political, social, economic and cultural factors also influenced on leading and managing schools. To address these challenges and to effectively manage school political environment and ensured good school operations, the school directors needed to have strong commitment, competencies and various supports from all key stakeholders. In relation to this, directors need emotional and inspirational support, technical support and financial support from inside and outside the school.

### *Emotional and inspirational support*

Emotional and inspirational support from both inside and outside the institution was an integral part to motivate school directors to fulfill their duties. To be effective and successful, the directors needed support from all key stakeholders as one director said:

> *Regarding essential support, I think, first and foremost, we need support from: (1) the people working with us such as vice directors or board of directors, teachers and all staff in the school; (2) community or parents; (3) local authorities; and (4) development partners. These kinds of support are the strong foundation for school development and advancement.* (Director)

In addition, the rewarding system was found as emotional support providing to school directors as expressed by one director "*Receiving the reward from the Ministry is a big motivation, I am so happy to receive it*". The rewards given to the school directors motivated them to put more effort to fulfill their duties as one rewarded director asserted:

> *When school directors receive rewards, they will try to work harder to keep good reputation and they do not want to lose faces. As an illustration, I keep reminding the teachers in my school that our school was rewarded as a good school, thus, we need to be careful and we need to ensure that we keep performing well as we were rewarded and never let the publics judge us that this evaluation was incorrect afterwards.*

Moreover, the agreement and support on initiative ideas related to school development planning created by the school was illustrated as an inspirational support given to school directors or school support committee. As a current practice, public schools were under the supervision and management of the relevant ministry departments. Thus, under the ministry governance framework, some initiatives or school improvement planning must be approved by the ministry. Thus, the approval and technical guidance and support from the ministry were also seen as the inspirational support to schools as one director said:

> *The crucial support that I want to get from the ministry are two main things: Fist, inspirational or emotional support, in that, the Ministry can provide me some ideas, opinions. For example, when the primary education department knows that we want to change our school to be a new generation school, they guide us to which departments or institutions to work with.   Second, when we*

*implement our plan and face some challenge, the ministry departments will provide us some assistance, solution and guidance.*

In addition to technical support, advices and approval from the department in charge of MoEYS were found as inspirational support to promote more initiatives and development activities created at the school level. Hence, it was strongly suggested by the participants that the relevant Ministry departments must be effective and supportive to schools, in term of their decision making and actions, because they directly influenced on the process of school operation and development.

### Technical support

Majority of participants believed the technical support from the central government through MoEYS contributed significantly to the school development and management. As a current governance practice, having developed initiatives or plans, the school must seek the approval and guidance from the Ministry as stated by the school support committee: "*to be effective, school development plans and initiatives must be created at the school level. But as the working system, the schools must receive the approval and support from the ministry to proceed with the planning*". He added that "*…initiatives are created at the school level, but it must be approved and supported by the upper layer authorities*". Thus, to ensure the effective school leadership practices, it requires all levels of school management in the system to work well together and support each other as a working system, especially providing support to schools, in term of their competencies, expertise and opportunity. In line with the ministry guidance policy and framework, some technical work should be developed at the school level. For example, the strategic plan should be developed by internal key stakeholders (i.e. board of director, teachers and school support committee) at school, where they can create school initiatives to fit well with their school needs for improvement as the head of school support committee said: "*to be effective, the first and critical step of school development plan should be developed by the schools, in that, the schools need to initiate and develop their workable planning and determine effective strategies for implementation to fit well with their own school context*". He added that, "*to be effective and successful, the schools must have capable directors to lead and carry out the initiative activities*". In relation to this, the head of school support committee asserted, "*School must be staffed with excellent persons. It initially begins from the*

*school…starts from school directors, teachers and the most important persons are the school directors*".

However, some participants express their big concerns on capacities of relevant in-charge persons at all levels that can negatively impact on primary education management system. While some participants mentions that schools should have a certain level of autonomy, in term of decision making and action taking, they also expresses another huge concern on limited competencies of directors to fulfill these functions as in the words of the head of school support committee, "*To be effective and successful, school leadership begins with capable school directors, however, currently some school directors still have limited capacities. Thus, it really needs the provincial and/or district departments to provide support and guidance to them*".

In relation to this issue, the participants also shows the concern on the competencies of the relevant Ministry departments to supervise and to provide guidance and support to schools.  As, a participant raised an example: "*if the school just make a proposal to be submitted to the provincial department, without any consideration or study on it, they skip their documents and then sometime blame and warn the school not to proceed with their plan to avoid problems*" (Head of school support committee). To address this problem, he suggested that the departments need to use their expertise to study deeply on the proposed school development plan prior to making decision as he said *"do not ban any initiatives, except, they bring negative effect on the nation or problems in schools*".

The interview results shows a clear framework on the different level of Ministry department accountabilities and competencies need to be developed as the head of school support committee said, "*the provincial level also needs to have a clear management roles and responsibilities…And, they need to examine the school situational context, to identify their strengths and weaknesses and the areas of need for school improvement*". Therefore, the higher level of school governance (i.e. Ministry, provincial, district) need to have capacities to provide technical support and guidance to schools under their supervision. For example, in term of their expertise and accountability, they need to have enough competencies to evaluate school development plan and provide technical support to schools, if needed. In other words, at the top level, the Ministry departments must be effective and supportive to schools, otherwise, it is

really challenging for schools to implement their school development plan or even to run their day-to-day operation as stated:

> *When there is a proposal submitted by the school, the provincial department has a big role to evaluate the proposal and also to provide emotional and technical support to schools. They have to study deeply on the proposal prior to making decision.* (Head of school support committee)

> *The Ministry should look at the directions of the schools and find out what school directors want for their schools, and identify the school capacities. The Ministry should have the capacity to help the school to achieve their development goals. For example, our school's goal is to become a new generation school, and we have some cash contribution from parents but we still need more financial support to run our programs. Thus, the ministry should also provide some financial and technical support to our school.* (Director)

### Financial support

Beside the technical, emotional and inspirational support, the schools also needed financial support to develop and implement school improvement planning. As an illustration, in the process of transforming the school to become a 'new generation school', the school needs to have sufficient finance support to build up their physical resources and infrastructure, teaching and learning materials and equipment as one school director mentioned: *"Running new generation schools require sufficient financial support. Currently, the school is seeking for financial supports from parents and also the ministry".*

### Performance Evaluation of School Director

Another mechanism, proposed by the participants during intevriewwas to develop and implement director performance evaluation. At present, the evaluation and selection of good school director was organized annually by using the evaluation tool covering these functional qualifications and actions:

> *Knowledge/qualification, competencies, school strategic plan, leading teaching and learning, professional development, school management, accountabilities, strengthening community*

*engagement, professional ethics, management outputs and youth development (MoEYS, 2017).*

However, an official school director work performance evaluation has not yet been established. Some participants suggests that the development and implementation of a systematic and transparent performance evaluation would clearly identify well and weakly performed school directors. Based on this fair evaluation, good school directors should be motivated by receiving incentives and social and professional recognition. Whereas, poorly performed school directors should be accountable for their actions and face penalties as one director suggested that "*For school directors who cannot fulfill their roles and functions, they should be removed from schools or from this leadership position. Otherwise, it will negatively impact on students and schools as the whole*".

This evaluation mechanism can be implemented effectively and smoothly when the school director's mandate is also established. As already discussed, the linkage of school director performance evaluation and mandate will lead to the completion of non-functional directors by virtue of the termination of employment mandated by legal basis.

### Socio-economic Status of School Director

One of the main mechanisms to having qualified directors in schools was to promote socio-economic status of school director. One school director mentions that "*if school directors can have, good and suitable salary, they can live and work with value and honor in the society. Obviously, they do not want to do second and third jobs*". Most participants suggest that the economics status of school directors should be socially acceptable because part of it can make school directors more influential, ethical and well respected, in addition to the power of knowledge as the leaders of education as in the words of one director:

> *If our living standard is poor, no one will listen to us. Instead, they will say that if you are strong, you will not be poor. However, we do not compete to get rich; we just want to have a good living status as others. And, the self-development and good economic status should be attached with our profession to catch up with this modern transition. For example, we also need help and strengthen ourselves in the right ways to build up ourselves to be a good model for our next generation and teach people to be united.*

### *Internal Institutional Reform*

Internal institutional reforms to strengthen the governance and management system of relevant institutions and primary schools also required to be done to ensure the effectiveness of school leadership and management. Regarding this proposed mechanism, the head of school support committed stated that "*the current educational system must be reformed including the internal management system of the institutions. The educational reform must be taken place at all levels of the management structure, from the top to bottom from the national to sub-national and school levels. This reform must be undertaken as a system, not only a single place, in that, the authorities and tasks must be delegated to relevant departments of their expertise*".

Up to date, the MoEY continued its mission to pursue all-level educational reform, from pre-school to higher education. As a universal implementation, national education reform was a long and difficult process, requiring both timely funding and high efforts from all key stakeholders. In particular, this reform required all level of educational leaders to have sufficient capacities, commitment, dedication and sacrifice to pursuing reform goals as in the words of the head of school support committee:

> *The reform which related to the national or institutional reform is not a one-year or two-year reform, such a reform takes five to ten years. And, during this reform period, it requires manpower to work on it to pursue shared vision and goals. As we can see that the vision on the education reform in the 5$^{th}$ mandate is really good, and we hope that the upcoming 6$^{th}$ mandate, the new elected government will continue this reform journey to develop our education system.* (Head of school support committee)

## Discussion

### *School Leadership and Management System Development and Challenges*

As presented in the finding section, the mechanisms proposed by the research participants are to establish the working system and procedure to have good and capable directors to hold leadership positions at schools. The proposed mechanisms to establish school leadership was found in line with the practices in many OECD countries. These developed nations treat the school leadership as an education policy priority to improve school

leadership practices (OECD, 2009). In the Cambodian context, effective school leadership practices remain as the main challenges in the system due to lack of relevant policies and regulatory framework, insufficient support mechanisms to schools, ineffective management and governance systems, limited self-leadership and management at school level. These current research results confirm the previous studies (eg. MoEYS, 2018; Shoraku, 2009).

### *Policy and regulation framework*

Underpinning previous research results, this study found that school leadership and management system was not yet systematically established to ensure effective practices as observed elsewhere at the primary education level due to the lack of relevant policies and regulative framework on: (1) school leadership and management practices; (2) school director's appointment, role and responsibilities and promotion; (3) transparent and fair supporting and rewarding system; and (4) school director performance evaluation.  Another challenge is the lack of related policy to attract and retain the capable and potential candidates to hold school leadership positions. Also, up to date, there is yet a clear guideline on school director appointment especially functional qualifications, experiences and commitment of applicants to ensure that they can effectively provide leadership and management in schools. As a common practice, school director selection is not competitive and attractive to director applicants from both within and outside the institution in order to select candidates with a high degree of abilities and commitment to take up school leadership position.  And, school director is a lifetime appointment since there is yet policy on director performance evaluation and mandate. Guidelines and tools to monitor and evaluate school directors' job performance are not established. Thus, the appointed school directors generally stay in this position until they reach their retirement.

### *Implementation of the centralized system*

As a current practice, the centralized system leads to low levels of authorities and accountabilities distributing to schools (Shoraku, 2009; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012; Foskett & Lumby, 2003). At present, school directors do not have enough authorities to make decisions, to develop and implement school development plan, to allocate and generate resources. As a common practice, school director's job is to handle administrative tasks and report to provincial or municipal departments. As a consequence, the 'complex organizational structure and more complex pattern of

decision making' (Hargreaves, Halasz & Pont, 2007) are not treated as the main roles of school director in Cambodia. And, in the context of Cambodia, it is generally observed that school leadership seems to be less interactive to the environment, both internally and externally. Leadership and management at the school level are likely to be in the state of isolation from the national and regional education development and trends. Thus, school directors or management team sometime is in the state of losing directions for school development and change management. Likewise, school directors are unable to management change and ensure good school operation influenced by internal and external factors and unable to lead schools in line with educational development and trends locally and regionally. Similar to the previous research findings (e.g. Shoraku, 2009), this current research results showed that the implementation of school-based management is not completely successful because of limited capacities of school leaders to catch up with the context of education change and education management system. Previous research conducted by Shoraku (2009) found that Cambodia imposes school-based management but the real practices did not fully in accordance with the guidelines. In relation to this, the centralized school governance system and limited self-school management capacities mismatch with school directors' functional qualifications, roles and responsibilities and characteristics set in the Cambodian school director standards and practices in other countries.

### *School leadership and management capacities*

School director capacities and commitment are central to ensuring the effective school leadership and management in schools. However, as discussed earlier, leadership and management capabilities of the school director remain as the main concern in the context of educational reform and development in Cambodia. And, to date, the primary education system still faces some challenges to attract and retain qualified school directors to this position. This current research findings revealed that the whole education system cannot be ensured to have qualified school directors due to the lack of education policies and legal framework to attract, develop, support and retrain good directors to work in schools nationwide. A general observation revealed that some school directors have achieved outstanding performance because they have support from the ministry, community, good school location especially individuals' abilities, commitment and personal characteristics to fulfill their duties. Yet, such a

remarkable achievement cannot be ensured in all primary schools nationwide.

One of the main goals of school-based management is to reduce the students' learning achievement gaps in schools with different socioeconomic context (Shoraku, 2009). This goal can be achieved largely depending on the school leaders' capacities to provide leadership and management to respond to school situational context, community and national educational goals. The Cambodian 'School Director Standards' illustrates the characteristics and functional qualifications of school directors, as yet, applying these national standards in the process of school director selection, evaluation and also leadership and management practices in schools are very limited.

### Towards Effective School Leadership and Management Practices at Primary Education in Cambodia

The synthesis of this current research findings with international literature indicates that the relationship between schools and upper level of the educational authorities play equal critical roles to ensure effective school leadership and management practices in primary schools nationwide. Therefore, the capacities of the teachers and educational officials at all levels need to be strengthened.

#### Strengthening school-based leadership and management capacities

As a current practice, school leadership and management are officially exercised by school directors and/or management team. As discussed, the mechanisms proposed by research participants demonstrate that, the first and foremost, the school must be led by the directors with competencies, education values and commitment. And, at the school level, a strong and distributed leadership and management must be ensured. School leadership and management directions and purposes need to be aligned with national standards and policies, and respond to the school context and community needs. More importantly, leadership and management of schools need to ensure that the rate of education returns and values are provided to community stakeholders, especially students and parents. In addition, school leadership and management should not be in isolation from the outsiders or external bodies. Community and key stakeholder involvement from the ministry, provincial and district levels contribute significantly to school development.  And, one of the major

roles of school directors is to engage all key stakeholders in the process of school planning and development.

### *Strengthening school governance system*

Effective school-based leadership and management require the development of a leadership and management system ranging from the national to sub-national and school level. To pursue this goal, first and foremost, the framework on competencies, accountabilities and authorities of the school leadership need be developed. In relation to this, in line the national, regional and global educational development trends, the roles and responsibilities of different levels educational leaders should be redefined. Moreover, the centrallevels of authorities need to be effective and supportive in term of exercise their authorities and competencies. Financial, technical and emotional supports to school directors are identified as the main mechanisms for effective leadership and management practices in schools. In this regard, the roles and responsibilities of upper level authorities to work with schools should be redetermined in line with national, regional and global educational development trends. More importantly, authorities at the higher level of the higher authorities such as the ministry, provincial and district levels must effectively supportive to schools.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

The strategies emerged from long-term perspectives of this research. The participants especially Cambodian outstanding school directors and international practices demonstrated that school leadership and management practices cannot be isolated. The whole primary education system must work together to pursue the ministry vision-mission and especially pursue the vision and mission of the Royal Government of Cambodia to transform Cambodia to become higher middle-income country in 2030 by strengthening human capital.

To achieve the national educational goal in implementing decentralized system and effective school leadership and management, relevant policies, standards and countabilities need to be strengthened. The definition of school-based leadership and management must be apporpreaitely defined and applicable in the context of Cambodia. In relation to this, the framework and indicators on expected learning outcomes at the primary education level need to be developed to guide and monitor school operation and development. These materials can also be

used as the tools to indicate school leadership and management purposes and school director performance evaluation. School leadership and management system need to be established through the development of relevant policies and legal frameworks in order to strengthening school governance system from the national to sub-national and school levels.

To strengthen leadership and management practices in schools, relevant policies and legal framework on school director appointment, mandate, professional development, roles and responsibilities, support, and performance evaluation need to be updated and/or developed in line with national and regional educational development and trends. Also, relevant policies to promote school director economic status and to attract and retain qualified school directors to hold leadership positions need to be developed and implemented. Moreover, soci-economic status of school director can be promoted by providing reasonable salaries and working conditions. Implementing the established 'Teacher Career Pathways' policies can partly address some of these current challenges. Continuing and expanding a transparent rewarding system, with national, social and professional recognition, to motivate school directors who are dedicated and committed in leading and managing schools to reach good school achievement and realize national educational goals. Meanwhile, the development and implementation school director mandate should now put into serious consideration to modernize the school leadership and management system in the Cambodian education reform context and in line with the international practices. Overall, the main purpose of creating these relevant policies and legal frameworks are to establish effective procedures on school director selection, development and performance evaluation to have qualified school leaders in the education system. Importantly, to ensure that the schools are led by directors with commitment, willingness, education values and competencies to develop schools to become learning organizations.

In addition, the Primary School Directorship of Cambodia and the Annual National School Leadership Meeting/Congress should be established to provide a platform for school directors to meet, discuss, exchange knowledge and experiences related to effective school leadership and management. And, online Communication and resources to provide school directors documents related school leadership and management, educational development and trends, national standards and policies and research reports/articles. Establishing this online platform is to build the social network of school directors across the country and to provide

support to school directors with ideas on effective school leadership and management, learning materials and other relevant documents. With the support of the sub-national levels, the forum will also be a platform for directors document the best school leadership and management practices by conducting action for publication and sharing nationwide. Another purpose of establishing this online networking and resources is to equally provide all directors technical and inspirational support and to empower of directors through social and professional recognition and to encourage director to take their responsibilities professionally and ethically.

Educational governance and management systems from the national to sub-national and school levels need to be strengthened. In line with national policies and school-based management framework, the levels of authorities, autonomy and accountabilities should be distributed to school directors or management team to make decisions and to develop and implement school improvement planning. Regarding this practice, national and sub-national officials/leaders need to play their roles in facilitating coordination and supervision of school operations and school development. Importantly, they need to be very effective and supportive to schools. Therefore, relevant policies on school leadership and management system and decentralization need to be updated/established and implemented.

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