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*Book Review*

## **Book Review: The political economy of schooling in Cambodia: issues of quality and equity**

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Literature on contemporary Cambodian education is relatively modest, focusing on specific aspects in a silo manner at different levels of education, rather than attempting to address the education system as a whole (Eng and Szmodis, 2016; Leng, 2016; No *et al.*, 2012; Sen and Ros, 2013). For example Khieng *et al.*(2015) limit their discussions mainly to the economic aspect of education, when attempting to address the whole education system. This is not to mention the paucity of in-depth studies on each subsector, be they general, technical or higher education. The lack of systemic analysis has exacerbated the already fragmented policymaking process in Cambodia, which has been influenced and shaped, mostly in a piecemeal way, by various local and international aid agencies and their agenda. Scholarly and policy fragmentation has been compounded by emerging problems as the education system has grown and expanded. This has raised concerns among education policymakers, academics, researchers and

professionals, not least because education has taken an increasingly important role in supporting Cambodia's socioeconomic development. The government's vision is for Cambodia to have achieved upper-middle-income status by 2030 and developed country status by 2050. To contribute to the betterment of Cambodian education as well as to fill the literature gap, *The Political Economy of Schooling in Cambodia* sets out to present the critical and contemporary issues facing education today. Part of the International and Development Education Series, this volume was edited by Yuto Kitamura, D. Brent Edwards Jr., Chhinh Sitha and James H. Williams.

Composed of six parts with 12 chapters, the introductory chapter by the editors sets the scene, placing the development of Cambodian education within the country's broader historical and political contexts since its independence from France in 1953. This chapter neatly concludes with a roadmap for each chapter. Chapter 2 explains the historical context of the civil conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s, with their destructive legacy still apparent today. Against this backdrop, an overview of the contemporary formal schooling system in Cambodia is presented, from preschool programs to higher education. With quantitative expansion at all levels come various issues, which are addressed in the subsequent chapters. Important to note in this chapter are the five five-year Education Strategic Plans (ESPs) which the government has adopted since 2001 as its key policy for the entire sector: (1) 2001–2005, (2) 2004–2008, (3) 2006–2010, (4) 2009–2013 and (5) 2014–2018. A five-year Education Sector Support Program designed to provide detailed action plans guided the implementation of each ESP. Successive ESPs were revised based on assessment of the achievement targets. Although basic education has been the main priority throughout, ESP 2014–2018 also prioritizes early childhood and postsecondary education. Plus, while previous ESPs have focused on inputs (textbooks, school buildings, qualified teachers, and so on), the current ESP emphasizes results and outcomes (p. 31), signaling the government's intention to shift focus from quantitative expansion to quality and efficiency.

Chapter 3 moves on to focus on the role civil society, particularly the NGO Education Partnership (NEP), has played in national policy making. Established in 2002, the NEP has come to represent all education-related NGOs in Cambodia in their interactions with the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, which has welcomed a collective

voice from a single organization rather than dealing directly with many education NGOs. Adopting Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach to social change as an analytical framework, Edwards and Brehm show how the NEP, despite its recent foray into policy influence, has succeeded in shaping policy making in Cambodian education, moving from the margin into the mainstream, recognized and valued by local and international partners. That said, the authors also suggested that, "As NEP navigates the politics of policy making going forward, it may find itself agreeing with MoEYS more often than challenging it" (p. 51) – a dynamic that could to a certain extent maintain and legitimize the government's power.

Based on ethnographic data, Chapter 4 highlights the tension between global policies and local practices – a contested and complex theme in the field of comparative and international education. Particularly, it examines how the concept of new effective teaching methods, rooted in the Anglo-American participatory practice of open debate and discussion, has been constrained by the Cambodian traditional view of what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is transferred. Cambodia's inherently hierarchical social order, along with the common Buddhist practice of chanting, has asserted the role of the teacher as the main repository of knowledge. Pedagogically, knowledge has been transmitted mainly verbally, with the teacher-centered approach remaining dominant across the country – a practice considered to hinder students and teachers from seeking new knowledge or ideas or, simply put, from thinking freely, creatively and differently. It follows, then, that any new policy or concept, for instance, more modern innovative teaching methods, would be seen as adversarial and consequently must overcome huge challenges. Thus in the conclusion the author points out that, "it is necessary to tackle the political, cultural, and social structures that sustain the logic of *paccekeeh* [technique] if MoEYS seriously wishes to bring substantial changes in teaching and learning" (p. 73).

Chapter 5 discusses the gap between policy interventions and policy implementation, with a focus on equity and diversity in education. In their in-depth analysis of the inclusiveness of the country's education policies, in particular for children from disadvantaged families, the authors consider five key variables: gender, disability, poverty, ethnicity and urban-rural location. Cambodia has ratified many international conventions to promote inclusive education and diversity. These include, but are not limited to, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The country's Education Law establishes that every Cambodian citizen has the right to access at least nine years of free and compulsory education in public schools. As the study reveals, many factors have hindered the successful implementation of the stated policies, though two stand out. One is the nature of policy intentions, which have not been inclusive enough, instead emphasizing equity in access over equity in inputs, outputs and outcomes. The other is the lack of resources constraining the government's ability to give full attention to such an emerging issue as inclusive education for all.

Chapter 6 describes shadow education in Cambodia as a complex form of educational corruption, resulting from interplay between individual agency (individual behaviors) and structure (socially determined outcomes of the system). Private tutoring has become a particularly pressing issue in Cambodia, with families covering up to 80.0% of structural educational expenses and the government only 20.0%. Structural deficiencies, including low government expenditure, high teacher-student ratio and shortage of teachers, have resulted in high household educational expenditure. Teachers, intentionally or not, have to offer private tutoring to supplement their income. And students and parents, regardless of family socioeconomic status, feel the pressure to pay for these extra classes. This has created a vicious circle of poor quality public education, high household expenditure and corrupt practice. As the author suggests, correcting the problem first demands public acceptance that private tutoring, one form of corruption, is not a closed system, but engages many stakeholders who all bear responsibility and must therefore work together to restore balance and depth to the education system.

Chapters 7 and 8 center on chronic school dropout. Focusing on sixth graders as the main research participants, the former found that "student achievement in school and the expectations and aspirations of significant others in parents' social networks play an important role in explaining parents' educational expectations for their children, and that parents' education expectations help explain student retention" (p. 135). Chapter 8 uses complexity theory to understand student dropout and retention in Cambodia at the lower secondary level (grades 7-9), where dropout rates are highest. Two prominent factors affecting student dropout are lack of family-school connections and lack of teacher

outreach to families and the community. Overall, the high dropout rate remains a major concern as Cambodia broadens and deepens its engagement in regional and international communities. While almost every Cambodian child now has access to primary education, the gross enrollment rate in higher education in 2016 was only around 12% of the college-aged cohort.

Part 5 extends the scope of the book by touching upon higher education. Chapter 9 looks at the growth and expansion of Cambodian higher education over the past 30 years, within the context of limited financial and human resources and lack of guiding policy. It is widely known that, as in other countries, many international aid agencies put more emphasis on supporting basic education in the belief that returns to primary and secondary education are higher than returns to higher education, which has been seen more as a private good. To accommodate the growing demand for higher education as the country embraced the free market economy and multi-party politics, privatization reforms were introduced in the mid-1990s, allowing public HEIs to offer fee-paying programs and private providers to set up HEIs. This marked the beginning of the massification of higher education in Cambodia. A wide range of issues are discussed, from access and gender equity to the quality of teaching and programs and to research. Policy wise, the government has emphasized in ESP 2014–2018 the improvement of education quality across levels, including higher education. The authors also provide a comparative analysis of higher education development in the Asia-Pacific region.

Drawing on a survey of teacher trainees, Chapter 10 delves into the teacher preparation system to see if it has promoted access, equity and the development of a Cambodian guild of teaching – a low-paid profession in Cambodia. One notable finding is the strong association between socioeconomic background and career aspirations: low socioeconomic status trainees want to teach for the rest of their lives, and high socioeconomic status trainees only want to teach for a few years before moving on to other professions. The chapter reveals how persistent underdevelopment of the teacher training system in Cambodia has reinforced the cycle of poor quality teaching and learning, with far-reaching implications for the whole system. These include the need to make teacher training programs more practical for trainees, improve teacher working conditions, create clear opportunities for academic

career advancement, and restructure teacher compensation for those with greater experience, training or teaching skills.

Chapter 11 focuses on the quality of teaching and research in Cambodian higher education. Among the key findings, engineering and agriculture faculty members expressed a relatively low degree of job satisfaction, due to lack of improvement in education quality and limited access to international journals. Overall, given time and resource constraints, research capacity remains largely underdeveloped, with many faculty members spending most of their time teaching. This is an unintended consequence of the neoliberal agenda where reduced government investment in higher education has been partly offset by allowing HEIs to run their own management and financial operations. Thus, in its efforts to create an environment conducive to research, it is important that the government accelerates higher education reforms to ensure that faculty members receive sufficient financial supports and incentives. Chapter 12 concludes by discussing access and quality in education, professional learning and support for teachers, and best practices in educational management.

The edited volume is outstanding in many aspects. First, it covers various contemporary issues from general education to the tertiary level, ranging from policy development to teaching and learning practices in the classroom. The editors deserve credit for skillfully putting these themes into one volume. This overview allows readers to build a holistic understanding of the current context of Cambodian education. Such a focus on the whole system reveals the lack of coherence and coordination within and between each subsector and reminds policymakers in particular of the dire need for a national master plan to move the education sector forward. As the book reveals, many actors are involved in the educational development of Cambodia, some working together and others independently with little collaboration, creating policy fragmentation, the impact of which will persist over generations.

Second, all chapters are methodologically sound and, except for Chapter 9, grounded in empirical data from primary sources including surveys, interviews and observations. This evidence-based research provides scholars, practitioners and policymakers with up-to-date information and a rich seam of insight into Cambodia's education system. Many chapters are also theoretically grounded, drawing on different scholarly works in the analysis of educational issues in Cambodia. Policy, theoretical or practical recommendations are offered

at the end of each chapter toward addressing contemporary issues in education.

Third, contextual analysis is a key characteristic of this volume. Any valid and meaningful understanding of the development of contemporary Cambodian education and implanting of new concepts or policies cannot be separated from the local sociocultural and historical context – an argument well supported in the field of comparative and international education (Crossley and Watson, 2003; Hayhoe, 2001; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). The successful experience of the NGO Education Partnership exemplifies how a foreign actor needs to recognize local agency and navigate local context in its efforts to promote new ideas or reforms. This reflects the epistemological assumption that power relationships are not a static, but rather a socially constructed, notion, emerging from the interplay between local and global agencies.

Another challenge for the adoption of new teaching and pedagogical approaches is explained in Chapter 4 by Ogisu, who looks at the contested and complex nature of educational policy borrowing: the epistemology and ontology of education in Cambodia. As the chapter reveals, traditional teacher-centered methods are still dominant in Cambodian education, largely shaped by inherently hierarchical power relationships. New foreign educational policies and practices need to be adjusted in order to have a palpable influence on such social norms. This ethnographic study makes a valuable contribution to the recent trend that challenges the global isomorphic influence of the world culture theorists who argue that, “the push of Western ideals of schooling has led not only to increasingly similar school systems around the globe but to increasingly analogous classroom-level pedagogies” (Straubhaar, 2014, p. 217). As a scholar in this field, I cannot resist saying that this is one of the few chapters to create space for critical reflection, paving the way for looking at the foundation of Cambodian epistemology. One of the stark reminders of this book is that as an educational researcher or policymaker, one should not privilege some theoretical approaches or positions over others. There are multiple ways of knowing in this contemporary world, all equally important. The student-centered approach in Cambodia has to be adapted and adjusted to ensure its relevance to the Cambodian context – a process which demands inclusive and frank engagement of all stakeholders, including local teachers and parents.

Despite the book's solid points, it would be remiss not to also point out a number of shortcomings. First, a list of abbreviations would be both courteous and helpful. Although context is important, it starts to become somewhat redundant when, for instance, yet another chapter elaborates the legacy of the Khmer Rouge regime. The later chapters could simply refer to similar information presented earlier.

In stark contrast, the book appears intellectually remiss with respect to localized scholarship. It is disappointing to find contributions from only three Cambodian scholars, none of whom take lead authorship. Almost all the international scholars authored more than one chapter, with several of them covering five or six. A lack of local empowerment in scholarship may well have contributed to this gap. But it also raises the critical question of "whose knowledge matters". There are many competent local scholars who are well trained and capable of making equally important contributions on many themes to this volume as their international counterparts. Hence, I would be glad to see a better balance of local and international scholars in such an edited volume in the future.

Although the book has addressed all objectives as stated on pages 6–7, it seems to lack breadth. True enough, an edited volume of this kind cannot cover everything, yet it raised some important ideas that merit careful consideration. In the editors' words, "schooling in Cambodia from the primary to higher education levels is failing to provide learners with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that upper-middle-income countries demand" (p. 4). This statement glosses over some aspects that are essential for ensuring the relevance of education to students' mental well-being, their future employability and Cambodia's immediate needs. One of the themes that should be discussed is internationalization of education within the context of Cambodia's increased engagement in the regional and international communities: What are the important skills that Cambodian students should be equipped with? And what are the roles of the government, schools and higher education institutions in the internationalization process? Another important theme is science, technology, engineering and mathematics education at K–12 and higher education levels, given government emphasis on moving Cambodia from low-skilled labor-intensive industry to high-skilled value-added industry by 2025. The rise of private schools in Cambodia, with different models from different countries, should also be examined. Future research could explore these new issues and would complement this volume.

Brehm's reflection indicates the hard truth about educational corruption in Cambodia. While everyone seems to agree that corruption is commonplace, addressing such a sensitive issue in research is a great challenge, demanding deep engagement of the researcher in the community. Hence, there should be a section on how the author dealt with research ethics, particularly concerning the core purpose of the study, and potential implications of his role as an outsider. Did he mention the topic of "corruption" to the participants? And before the article was published, did he ask the participants to fact-check the study and if they agreed with his analysis? Participants and the author might see this issue differently.

All in all, the book's strong theoretical and methodological substance transcends its shortcomings. It makes a significant contribution to the modest literature on Cambodian education as well as to the field of comparative and international education. It is appropriate for a wide readership, including policymakers, scholars, and those interested in education in Cambodia as well as in the developing world.

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