9. CHARTING PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN CAMBODIA: STARTING PLACE AND DESTINATION

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9.1 Introduction

This chapter reports a study aimed at generating an understanding of leadership at the primary school level in post-conflict Cambodia. The particular focus was on the historical background to primary school leadership, recent developments occurring in primary school leadership, and issues of current concern to primary school leaders. The interpretivist paradigm guided the study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and document study. Purposive and maximum variation approaches were employed to select both schools and participants. The data were analysed using grounded theory methods of data analysis, namely, open coding and analytic induction.

The results of the study highlight that no major developments occurred in primary school leadership in Cambodia until the post-conflict period, during which significant efforts were made to enhance the quality of primary school leadership through promoting decentralisation in school administration and through improving school leadership development and support. The results also highlight that school-level stakeholders encounter three broad sets of issues, namely, those relating to administration, to teaching and learning, and to the curriculum. Some of these issues may be attributed to ‘general’ developing world circumstances, including poverty and low economic growth, while others can be attributed directly to the legacies of armed conflict and genocide.
9.2 The Context

Since 1998, following the end of the brutal genocide of the 1970s, the government of Cambodia, with support from donors and international communities, introduced a large number of education initiatives aimed at rehabilitating and reconstructing the primary school system. These were in line with education policies and prescribed strategies that focused mainly on promoting access to education, enhancing the quality of education, and promoting institutional development and capacity building for education decentralization. Concurrently, however, it was not possible to inform initiatives with locally-produced research results since very little systematic enquiry has been conducted on school leadership and management at the primary school level in Cambodia, and specifically in relation to the post-conflict period. More specifically, given the complex political, social and cultural background to the nation, it is unfortunate that hardly any research has been undertaken to examine the issues that primary school leaders confront and the strategies that they use to deal with them.

The situation in Cambodia, of course, is not unique. Rather it is in line with the fact that while an extensive range of research projects have been conducted on education leadership...
over the last three decades, most of it has focused almost solely on relatively stable countries economically and politically (Bush, 2014; Nawab, 2011; Oplatka, 2004). By contrast, there are relatively few studies that have focused on extraordinarily challenging circumstances (Bush 2008; Harris 2002) and, in particular, on such circumstances at the individual school level as they relate to post-conflict settings (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2013). As a result, there is a poor knowledge base to draw upon to promote understanding of the context and the nature of school leadership in post-conflict contexts.

This chapter, as already indicated, reports a study undertaken to address the deficit mentioned above by seeking to generate theory on leadership at the primary school level in post-conflict Cambodia. The decision to focus on leadership at this level was taken for a number of reasons. First, the study was undertaken as a response to calls over the last 15 years for investigations that aim at understanding the context within which school leaders work in extraordinarily challenging circumstances (Harris, 2002), and especially as they relate to post-conflict societies (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2013). More specifically, there remains a considerable lack of empirical evidence on the challenges that school leaders in post-conflict countries face, and on how they deal with them.

Secondly, the study’s focus was a response to criticism that education policies and reforms in developing countries are often based on models extrapolated from studies on Western practices (Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Nawab, 2011; Oplatka, 2004). Given that Cambodia is a developing country, as well as a post-conflict one, the study reported here contributes to deepening understandings of how cultural context and politics shape conceptualisations and practices of school leadership in such settings. Also, it can be seen to be a contribution to heightening awareness of the importance of considering context and its influence on leadership practice (Gronn & Robbins, 1996).

Thirdly, the study provides insights on the relationship between leadership, school effectiveness and student learning outcomes. On this matter in general, it has been argued that the quality of school leadership can have a significant influence on school effectiveness and student learning achievement (Bush, 2012; Jacobson & Ylimaki, 2011; Leithwood & Massey, 2010). In particular, it is held that it can be a crucial factor influencing the achievement of universal primary school education, as promoted by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and also in UNESCO’s Education for All aim (EFA) (UNESCO, 2000).

The fourth reason for taking the particular focus in the study reported here related to the purported contributions that primary school education can make to economic and social change in developing countries (Psacharopoulos, 1985, 1994; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004). Particularly instructive in this regard is the evidence that education at the primary school level can help to improve the economic circumstances of individuals by reducing a nation’s birth rate and mortality rate. It is contended also that it can help to promote democracy, social justice, human rights and tolerance in a society (Cohen, Bloom, Malin & Curry, 2012).
A final reason for undertaking the study related to contributions that can be made by reflecting on its outcomes. For example, in having the aim to understand the nature of the context within which school leaders in post-conflict Cambodia operate and the strategies they use for dealing with the complexities of their work, the view was that a contribution could be made to improving leadership preparation and development for Cambodian primary school leaders and teachers.

The nature of the aims of the study is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, which provides approaches to enable one to examine social phenomena and develop an understanding of complex social institutions (Crotty, 1998; O’Donoghue, 2007). In particular, it can help one to understand the experiences of people from their own perspectives (Hennik, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). Given this situation, the data collection procedures adopted needed to be such that they could help to promote understandings of the particular situation studied (Merriam, 2009). To this end, not only were appropriate documents and participants selected to provide data, selection was purposive.

The total number of participants was 29. This cohort included school principals, deputy principals, representatives of school support committees (SSC), and education officers at different levels. They were selected from 15 primary schools located in five provinces, namely, Kampot (4 schools), Phnom Penh (1 school), Kampong Cham (2 schools), Siem Reap (4 schools), and Oddar Meanchey (4 schools).

The data were analysed using two grounded theory methods of data analysis, namely, open coding and analytic induction. Open coding facilitated the construction of conceptual categories grounded in the data through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Punch, 2009). Analytic induction was then employed to relate themes and categories generated about the phenomenon to each other (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Attention is now turned to describing the main results of the study.

9.3 The Historical Background to Primary School Leadership in Cambodia from Colonial Times until 1998

The specific rationale behind investigating the historical background to primary school leadership in Cambodia is that the past regularly has an impact on the present in various ways, including through influencing people’s actions. As such, it was recognised that it is not possible to comprehend current school leadership in Cambodia, broadly, without a clear knowledge of how it has evolved over time. Accordingly, developments related to primary school education in general, and to primary school leadership in particular, were examined with reference to seven political regimes. These are the pre-colonial period (prior to 1863), the French protectorate and colonial period (1863-1953), the Sihanouk regime period (1953-1970), the Khmer Republic or Lon Nol regime period (1970-1975), the Khmer Rouge Regime (1975-1979), the People’s
Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) period (1979-1989), and the United Nations Transition Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and coalition government period (1989-1998). The development of education during these periods progressed through a number of stages, namely, those of traditional education, the promoting of formal education, the destruction of the formal and compulsory education system, and the restoring and reconstructing of the formal education system.

9.3.1 Traditional Education

Traditional education existed amongst Cambodians before the arrival of the French. This took place at ‘wat’ schools, which focused on mastering and practising religious and cultural principles (Ayres, 2003; Bilodeau, 1955; Clayton, 1995; Fergusson & Masson, 1997; Osborne, 1969). Wat school education had no standardised curriculum, timetable, assessment or inspection (Bilodeau, 1955). Also, it did not promote universal access as it was available only for boys and young men. Furthermore, it had no practical use in the social world (Bilodeau, 1955; Steinberg, 1959). As a result, the country’s population had low levels of literacy.

9.3.2 The Promoting of Formal and Compulsory Education

Traditional education weakened when there was a movement towards promoting formal and compulsory education in the country in the late 19th century (Ayres, 2003; Bilodeau, 1955; Clayton, 1995). This was particularly the case during the French colonial period and then during the Sihanouk regime. While the French began to introduce a formal education system in Cambodia in the 19th century, it was limited to a small section of the population, primarily the children of the colonisers and those of local elites (Ayres, 2003; Chandler, 2008; Clayton, 1995; Osborne, 1969). The main purpose of this education was to produce a workforce to promote the French colonial administration in the country (Ayres, 2003; Bilodeau, 1955; Clayton, 1995). It was not until the early 20th century that the French started to introduce several administrative changes to facilitate mass participation in formal education and to encourage quality education in primary schools. These reforms led to the introduction of the ‘khum’ school model, French-style teacher education, the issuing of royal instructions and the Cambodian Civil Code, and the modernising of wat school education (Ayres, 2003; Bilodeau, 1955; Clayton, 1995).

Efforts to promote formal and compulsory education in Cambodia were continued by the Sihanouk regime in the immediate post-colonial period. This regime viewed education as a means to develop individuals who could make a social and economic contribution to the development of the modern state (Ayres, 2003; Steinberg, 1959). Accordingly, significant efforts were made to expand access to education to reach a wide population. For this purpose, an increased annual national budget was allocated to the education sector. Also, there was an
increase in the nation’s education facilities and infrastructure, a significant growth in the enrolment rates, and changes in the primary school curriculum (Ayres, 2003; Bilodeau, 1955; Chandler, 2008; Fergusson & Masson, 1997; Steinberg, 1959). The latter included changing the medium of instruction from French to Khmer, restructuring the number of teaching hours per week, and producing teaching and learning materials written in Khmer. The efforts to expand and reform formal education during the two political periods under consideration, however, were hampered by a lack of economic resources, inadequate education infrastructure and facilities, a shortage of trained teachers, and a perception amongst many that the school curriculum was irrelevant (Ayres, 2003; Bilodeau, 1955; Steinberg, 1959).

9.3.3 The Destruction of the Formal Education System

The landscape of education in Cambodia shifted to one of destruction when the country suffered seriously from the political, social and economic dislocation of war. This began under the Khmer Republic Regime in 1970, which introduced new education policies with a focus on three key elements, namely promoting a connection between civic education and the economic and political ideologies of the regime, changing the language of instruction in schools from French to Khmer, and encouraging the participation of students in political projects (Ayres, 2003). The implementation of these policies was, however, constrained by the widespread occurrence of armed conflict throughout the country, leading to the emergence of refugees, disruption to learning, and the destruction of education infrastructure (Ayres, 2003; Chandler, 2008). The situation deteriorated when the Khmer Rouge Regime came to power in 1975. This regime, which aimed to build an egalitarian and agrarian society, led the country into a brutal genocide that resulted in considerable loss of human capital, and the destruction of socio-cultural and economic structures, as well as much of the nation’s infrastructure (Ayres, 1999, 2003; Chandler, 2008). Only formal education at the most minimal level was maintained, with a focus on raising political awareness and resolving production issues at Party meetings (Ayres, 1999, 2003; Bit, 1991).

9.3.4 The Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of the Formal Education System

After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge Regime in 1979, the education system was reconstructed, especially between 1979 and 1998. The mission began within what was by now the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), with the primary focus being placed on rehabilitating the basic education infrastructure and associated human resources to bring back ‘normality’ in the public education services. Special attention was given to establishing administrative bodies, reopening schools, repairing and establishing schools, and recruiting and training teachers (Ayres, 2000, 2003; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; Pou, 2012; Ratcliffe, Patch & Quinn, 2009). This mission was accelerated by the coalition government that existed between 1989
and 1998. During these years, education reform initiatives were introduced to facilitate the reconstruction process. This included formulating legislative and policy documents to guide education reconstruction, introducing a 12-year education system, restructuring the primary school curriculum, and expanding access to education (Ayres, 2003; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; MoEYS, 2007; Ratcliffe et al., 2009).

The rehabilitation and reconstruction of education was undertaken with significant support from NGOs, international multilateral donors and such international organisations as the International Red Cross, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, and the World Bank (Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; Ratcliffe et al., 2009). Numerous challenges needed to be tackled. These related to the lack of human resources, the destruction of physical infrastructure, dealing with psychological trauma, the influence of the Vietnamese government on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of education, inadequate economic resources, shortage of teaching and learning materials, high student dropout, low student attendance, poor quality education and lack of involvement by stakeholders in education (Ayres, 2003; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; MoEYS, 1994; Pou, 2013; Ratcliffe et al., 2009; World Bank, 1994).

9.4 Developments That Took Place in Relation to Primary School Leadership from 1998 until 2015

The specific rationale behind investigating developments that have taken place in relation to primary school leadership from 1998 until 2015 arose from the recognition that it is important to gain an understanding of the Cambodian government’s recent initiatives, and its efforts to develop education in the nation, in order to understand more fully current primary school leadership practice. To this end, recent developments in relation to primary school education and leadership at this level of schooling in the post-conflict period were examined. Overall, the post-conflict period in question has been one of peace and political stability accompanied by steady economic growth and social development. Developments in primary schooling not only reflect the social and political interests of the nation, but also align with an international development agenda by promoting the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Education for All (which seek to promote universal primary education). A number of associated education initiatives were introduced to facilitate the realisation of this agenda. These include the formulation and implementation of various laws and policy frameworks which guided the development of primary school education, especially through the Cambodian National Plan for Education for All 2003-2015 (MoEYS, 2003), Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2001-2005 (MoEYS, 2001), 2006-2010 (MoEYS 2005a), 2009-2013 (MoEYS, 2010) and 2014-2018 (MoEYS, 2014a), Education Sector Support Programme (ESSP) 2006-2010 (MoEYS, 2005b), Education Law (Royal Government of Cambodia 2007), Policy for Curriculum Development 2005-2009 (MoEYS, 2004), Child Friendly School Policy (MoEYS, 2007), and Teacher Policy
Changes were also introduced to the governance and administrative structures of the education system to facilitate the implementation of initiatives.

The various endeavours undertaken resulted in impressive progress in the expansion of the provision of primary schooling to reach a wide population throughout the country. Enrolment rates increased rapidly, with many provinces achieving an over 90 per cent enrolment in 2015 (MoEYS, 2014b, 2015b; UNESCO, 2015). Impressive progress was also achieved in narrowing gender disparity in primary school education and in reducing the dropout rate at this level of education (MoEYS, 2014b; UNESCO, 2015). At the same time, the quality of primary school education was improved as primary school teachers obtained improved academic qualifications and a refined primary school curriculum was introduced. Nevertheless, multiple challenges remain that need to be tackled. These relate to such matters as ‘out-of-school-children’, low student learning achievement, inadequate education infrastructure and facilities, and a large student-trained teacher ratio gap (CCOSC, 2015; Hattori, 2009; MoEYS, 2014b).

Significant efforts were also made to promote development in primary school leadership. One such effort has been centred on promoting a decentralised school administration in relation to school budgets (Duy, Hang & Yos, 2001; World Bank, 2005), adopting a school cluster approach (Bredenberg, 2002; Pellini, 2007; Pellini & Bredenberg, 2015), and introducing school-based management. This has facilitated the transfer of some autonomy on school operation matters from the central office of education to lower-tier offices. In particular, it has promoted accountability in the utilisation of financial resources and has enabled local education stakeholders to become involved in some areas of school management. Overall, the approach can be seen to be a reflection of the commitment of the government, of donors, and of development partners, to promoting the key education policies of improving access to education, enhancing the quality of education, and strengthening the institutional and individual capacity of the education system at all levels (Chhinh & Dy, 2009; Ratcliffe et al., 2009; World Bank, 2005).

Another endeavour aimed at promoting the development of primary school leadership in post-conflict Cambodia relates to improving professional development and support for school leaders. This has involved implementing various school leadership and management projects seeking to develop the capacity of school-level stakeholders, and especially school principals, to enhance education outcomes. These projects have included the introduction of a mandatory management-training programme for school principals operating at different levels. Related projects have had a significant impact on educational leadership, with school leadership being part of the government’s strategy to promote school effectiveness and improvement (MoEYS, 2013, 2015a).
9.5 Perspectives of Primary School Leaders on Current Issues They Face and on the Strategies They Adopt to Deal with those Issues

An analysis of current issues faced by primary school leaders, as seen by themselves, and of the strategies they adopt in order to deal with them, led to the generation of three broad themes, namely issues relating to administration, to teaching and learning, and to curriculum. Adapting the work of Winter (1982), these issues can be classified according to three levels, with each level relating to the perceived degree of impact the issues that fall within it have on the school leaders in their work. These three levels can be labelled ‘inconveniences’, ‘impediments’, and ‘impending threats’. ‘Inconveniences’ refer to issues that are perceived to be a nuisance, but do not tend to generate great concern. ‘Impediments’ are issues that, it is held, can be tolerated for a while, but need to be sorted out eventually. ‘Impending threats’ are issues that, it is held, if not addressed soon, have the potential to seriously threaten the delivery of the education services. Each of these matters is now considered.

9.5.1 Inconveniences

The first level of inconveniences that do not evoke great concern, can be grouped into those relating to administration, teaching and learning, and curriculum. Regarding inconveniences to administration, participants drew attention to lack of community involvement, natural disasters, landmines, and psychological trauma. Specifically, regarding community involvement, while acknowledging that community members have become more involved in school management than has been customary, participants argued that this involvement is somewhat limited. Community members, they argued, continue to rely upon school principals and teachers to decide on matters relating to school budgets, to formulating school development plans, and to teaching and learning. They also stated that natural disasters and landmines can constrain the ability of students to gain access to school and to remain in attendance. One school principal commented on the challenge of natural disasters as follows:

One of the main problems we face in this school is flood which occurs every year. It has an effect upon the school facilities including tables, chairs and especially textbooks and teaching aids because the level of water is high and there is limited space to relocate those facilities. Also, when the flood is gone, we have to deal with mud and dirt left by the flood. We have to clean all classrooms immediately; otherwise, the mud becomes dry and it can be more difficult to clean.

These circumstances, they contended, are compounded by the fact that many school principals suffered a great deal from psychological trauma resulting from the armed conflict.
and genocide that has occurred throughout the country. Such traumatic experiences were reflected in the following comment of one school principal:

I can’t forget what happened in the 1990s when I began my job as a teacher in this school, the Khmer Rouge soldiers were around the community. Teaching and learning was frequently interrupted when they came to the community. Some teachers and principals were caught up and taken away from the community. I was lucky back then that I was saved by the head monk who was previously associated with the Khmer Rouge. I was suffering a lot at that time. I risked my life.

This trauma can continue to have an impact that may limit school principals’ ability to perform their work effectively and to promote a democratic working environment.

School principals also highlighted a variety of inconveniences in relation to teaching and learning. These pertain to peacebuilding and conflict-prevention education, to deciding on what foreign language to teach in primary school, and to a lack of parental involvement in education. Regarding the first of these, and notwithstanding Cambodia’s status as a post-conflict country, no major attempts have been taken to promote peacebuilding and conflict-prevention education in the school curriculum through specifically dedicated programmes. Rather, education in this area is often promoted by means of two more general approaches, namely the history curriculum and the conducting of public forums. In this regard, school principals widely recognise that the teaching of history in primary schools relating to war and genocide could have a positive impact on how future citizens will engage in society, but they also consider that much more could be done.

The change in the foreign language policy to the teaching of English as a school subject is also seen by school leaders as an inconvenience. School principals have welcomed the initiative, commenting that it can give students a chance to learn English formally and help to prepare the country for ASEAN integration. At the same time, however, they reported that two main concerns could act as inconveniences hampering effective implementation of the curriculum. These two concerns are the lack of teachers with English language competency and the shortage of relevant teaching and learning materials. One participant explained the situation as follows:

The Ministry has already published and distributed English textbooks to schools to be implemented. We have received the books which meant for grade 4, grade 5 and grade 6. The problem is that we do not have teachers who can teach English in this school. Some teachers here have very limited knowledge of English while others including me have never learned English at all. We don’t know how to deal with this problem.

Another perceived inconvenience relating to teaching and learning pertains to a lack of parental influence on the learning of their children. Participants recognised that some parents
through participating in various school activities that have a positive influence on the learning of their children have changed in the way they perceive education. In this connection, three major types of parental involvement in education were apparent. These are parental resourcing, parental school-based involvement and parental home-based involvement. Nevertheless, participants also expressed a concern that the involvement of parents in school remains somewhat limited. Many parents, it is argued, still pay little attention to the education of their children, make only a limited contribution of resources to assist their children’s learning, and participate in very few school activities. One school principal made explicit reference to this issue as follows:

Parental involvement in schooling is limited. Parents who understand the value of education tend to pay more attention to their children’s learning. However, many parents of children below average tend to lack involvement in the learning of their children. I believed that if they paid attention to the learning of their children by helping them with homework, for example, their children would do better at school. We actually have students’ learning records that keep parents informed about the learning of their children.

He concluded by saying that “some parents do not even read it. We invite them to school meetings to discuss their children’s learning but they said they were too busy. We not only wrote to them but also called them”.

School principals also identified two inconveniences that they connected with the curriculum. The first perceived inconvenience relates to frequent curriculum change. Several changes have taken place in relation to the national curriculum policy since the beginning of education rehabilitation in the 1980s. The first national curriculum policy reform was in 1996, with the establishment of associated curriculum committees to oversee the reform. The 1996 curriculum was revised in 2004, with changes being made to some key features, including the quantum of teaching and learning hours, and subjects of study. All of these changes have created two particular concerns that could serve as inconveniences for school-level leaders. These relate to the limited knowledge and understanding of the curriculum changes amongst stakeholders and the shortage of resources available to support the implementation of the curriculum at the school level. Another perceived inconvenience relevant to curriculum is that of overload. As such, school principals revealed that there is an imbalance between the number of subjects prescribed in the school curriculum and the amount of time allocated for teaching them. This inconvenience can be a factor that undermines the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.
9.5.2 Impediments

‘Impediments’, which have a perceived impact on the primary school leaders’ ability to perform their work in the best possible, or most efficient, manner, may be grouped into those relating to administration and those relating to teaching and learning. As far as administration is concerned, school principals reported multiple impediments. The first is political influence. There is an indication that the dynamics of politics affect primary school education, and especially school leadership practices, in a number of ways. These include the use of networks in processes of appointing school leaders, through procedures for the transfer of teachers, through financial contributions by teachers and principals to the political party with which they are associated, and through attendance at political party meetings. In relation to the latter, one school principal explained:

To avoid any conflict and interruption to the work performance of civil servants, political party meetings are held on a Sunday. I am sometimes invited to attend the meeting. The meeting is held more frequently when there is an election. However, it is not much work. I have to be cautious as the school principal because I am being watched by other people (teachers) in the school.

Such influence, it is held, can exert a negative impact on the performance of school principals. In particular, it can create discrimination among school-level stakeholders and limit their participation in school development.

Another perceived impediment in relation to administration pertains to poor working conditions. Primary school principals are influenced a great deal because of a shortage of appropriate offices being available. The situation is particularly evident in schools located in rural and remote communities where there is often a shortage of classrooms. In addition, some participants commented on difficulties they experienced in getting to their schools owing to poor road conditions and floods during the rainy season. This comment from one school principal on the situation is enlightening:

One main problem facing our school relates to poor road conditions. We cannot reach our school during the rainy season because all roads become severely flooded. We have to use a taxi boat during this period as the level of water is as high as our waist. It is costly to use the taxi boat. A round trip can cost around 10,000 Riels (USD 2.5).

There is also a perception amongst school principals that they are not paid enough for their work.

Regarding impediments that relate to teaching and learning, school principals drew attention to the limited professional development opportunities and support available to teachers. Although more teachers are now trained in pedagogical knowledge and skills before
they take up their position, many experience little prospect of ongoing professional development. One school principal commented on the matter as follows:

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has recently implemented a wide range of education reform, but little attention has been given to developing the capacity of teachers. I have not seen any programme that aims to prepare teachers to implement the reform. In general, teachers receive little professional support to improve their teaching ability.

Also, the professional support that is available for teachers, it is contended, tends to focus on introducing them to broad education changes and on familiarising them with what these changes entail. No systematic professional support with the specific purpose of promoting the teachers’ capacity is available.

9.5.3 Impending Threats

‘Impending threats’ relate to the issues which school principals consider have the potential to have a significant negative impact on their ability to carry out their work effectively in the future. They have been grouped into those relating to administration and those relating to teaching and learning.

School principals identified two impending threats associated with administration. The first is the lack of professional preparation and development for school leaders. While significant efforts have been made to promote access to education, to enhance the quality of education, and to promote decentralisation, little attention has been given to promoting the effectiveness of school leadership and management. School principals are not required to engage in any formal leadership and management training before they take up their positions. Often, they are appointed on the basis of having a successful teaching record, the length of their experience, and according to the influence of social networks to which they belong, rather than on leadership potential and qualifications. School principals also tend to have few opportunities for continuing professional development following their appointment. It is true that some professional development support is available for a minority, but the focus is usually on administrative matters relevant to communicating with the central office and on general changes occurring in education. This situation could eventually undermine effective school leadership and management.

Another perceived impending threat relates to financial constraints. Schools rely mainly on funding support from the government. This support is given to schools based on the number of students in the school and on its location. Before the funding is distributed, school-level stakeholders are required to formulate a school financial plan along with a school development plan and submit them to the district office for approval. However, participants consider that this process, which involves correcting and adjusting the budget before it is officially accepted,
is often complicated. Also, the financial allocation, which is often insufficient, is pre-
determined, in terms of how it can be spent, leaving minimal discretion for school-level
stakeholders to utilise the budget for meeting the school’s priorities and needs. One school
principal commented on this situation:

One problem with the school operation budget is that we have to spend it according to what is already decided. The budget is set into different accounts and subaccounts, each of which has its limitation. In principle, we cannot spend more than the amount set in each account and subaccount. This limits about ability to utilise the budget to meet our actual needs in the school. For example, less than 40,000 Riels (USD 10) are allocated to water usage, but we usually spend twice of this amount of budget on water usage.

This situation is amplified by the financial distribution often not occurring on time. These circumstances can have a negative impact on a school’s operation as a substantial budget is usually required early in the school year.

Regarding impending threats relating to teaching and learning, school principals drew attention to the shortage of teachers, which they attributed to the country’s legacies of armed conflict and genocide. Continuous efforts have been made by the government to address the problem, but it remains unresolved in relation to many primary schools, especially those located in rural and remote areas where working conditions are not attractive to teachers. In this connection, one school principal from a large rural school commented:

There are only seven trained teachers in my school and this number is inadequate for the actual classes that we have. There are more than 700 students in this school including kindergarten. That is a real challenge for my school. All teachers have to do double-shift teaching- morning and afternoon. It is a headache. We need more teachers.

The situation can also apply to small remote primary schools. One school principal from such a school stated:

The shortage of teachers has been a critical issue in my school. There are only two teachers in this school including myself. So we have to teach both morning and afternoon classes. It is quite difficult for me to take the responsibility as a teacher and as a principal. I sometimes cannot sleep at night as I have to prepare my teaching lessons and some administrative work at the same time.

Multiple strategies have been adopted by school principals to improve the situation. These include the redeployment of teaching and non-teaching staff, using double-shift teaching, recruiting teachers from other schools within the same school cluster, adopting multi-
grade teaching, and using contract teachers. Here one school principal in Siem Reap Province explained how he dealt with the shortage of teachers using contract teachers:

Because of the teacher shortage in our school, I have to recruit four contract teachers and I also borrowed three teachers from other schools this year... I am given the authority to recruit the contract teachers, but I have to request for financial assistance from the higher office of education to support the recruitment.

Another school principal from the same province commented on the qualifications of contract teachers as follows:

Some contracts teachers had lower secondary education while others completed upper secondary education level. One problem they all have is that they lack relevant pedagogical preparation. They have limited knowledge and understanding of teaching methods and strategies and this can have an impact on the quality of their teaching.

However, the view remains that the teacher shortage could seriously disrupt education in the long term if not dealt with adequately.

The lack of school infrastructure and facilities is another impending threat for primary school principals. While acknowledging that the number of schools established with proper sanitation facilities and basic classroom equipment has increased significantly over the last decade, there are still schools without such facilities and equipment. Some school principals reported a shortage of classrooms in which to accommodate students. This can be a particular challenge for many primary schools in disadvantaged areas and for some schools in urban areas with a large population of students. There are even schools without proper roofs, walls, and floors. School principals also stated that there is a deficit of essential instructional and learning materials, including textbooks, teachers’ guidebooks, posters, maps, and technology-related tools. This impending threat is evident across all schools.

9.6 Implications

9.6.1 Policy Development and Practice

Rosli and Rossi (2014) identified two approaches often used in policy formulation and implementation. The first approach is a ‘bottom-up approach’, in which attention is paid to the importance of involving local education stakeholders in the process of policy formulation and implementation (Rosli and Rossi, 2014). The second approach is that of a ‘top-down approach’, in which it is assumed that policy makers have authority and autonomy in producing well prescribed policy objectives and a set of appropriate instruments for policy implementation.
nationally. Those adopting this latter approach often pay little or no attention to the role of local education stakeholders in the process of policy formulation and implementation (Rosli and Rossi, 2014).

Education policy formulation and implementation practices in Cambodia reflect the second approach noted above and has tended to open a gap between policy formulation and implementation. In this connection, there is an indication from the study reported here that recent education policies and strategies have been formulated with minimal or no involvement from school-level stakeholders, and especially from teachers and school principals. This observation concurs with the finding of Weinstein, Freedman, and Hughson (2007), who argued that education reconstruction plans in post-conflict countries often lack local sensitivity, and that the needs and voices of the most affected groups tend to be unheard. Consequently, the content of policy plans may not adequately address the practical challenges faced by the groups in question. Rosli and Rossi (2014) have commented that this kind of approach rarely leads to success owing to unrealistic expectations and resistance from education stakeholders involved in implementation.

Along with the inconveniences, impediments and impending threats considered in the previous discussion, the study also revealed that little support is available for school-level stakeholders to implement education policy plans. School principals reported that they receive minimal support when education reform takes place and are often not well informed about curriculum change. Thus, they hold, they may be thwarted in their efforts to translate proposed changes into practice as effectively as possible. Also, there is often a lack of resources available to facilitate the implementation of education policy at the school level. These deficits can constrain the ability of school-level stakeholders to fulfil the objectives that have been set. This situation calls for the introduction of an approach which would enable stakeholders at all education levels in the country to engage in the process of education policy formulation and implementation.

9.6.2 Professional Preparation for School Leaders

There is a general indication that many primary school principals and deputy principals receive no formal or specific leadership preparation when progressing from being a classroom teacher to being a school principal. Rather, they have often been appointed on seniority, on having a successful teaching record, and through the influence of social networks, as opposed to having leadership potential. In addition, some primary school principals, and especially the senior ones who became teachers shortly after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, have minimal educational attainment and lack preparation in teaching. Consequently, many of them have an impoverished professional knowledge base regarding what is required to perform their role. In these circumstances they face multiple challenges in their schools, including those related to financial, staff, and student management.
The importance of providing formal and specific professional preparation for school leaders is also reinforced by the increased recognition throughout much of the world that the role of school leaders has become more complex and demanding over the last two decades. The shifting landscape of development in education has led to a changing role for school leaders. For this reason, it is axiomatic that they need specific preparation to perform their work as effectively as possible. According to Bush (2008), there are four main reasons why initial preparation for school leadership has become crucial. They are “the expansion of the role of school principal, the increasing complexity of school contexts, [the] recognition that preparation is a moral obligation, and [the] recognition that effective preparation and development make a difference” (Bush, 2008, p. 26). These observations are just as applicable to Cambodia as they are to other countries. It is, therefore, highly desirable that school principals in the country are equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills for their new responsibilities and roles.

9.6.3 Professional Development of School Leaders

It has also been revealed that primary school principals in Cambodia have only limited opportunities to engage in continuing professional development following their appointment. The programmes that are available tend to be short-lived and focus on administrative matters and on change in education in general, with little attention being paid to leadership development. Also, they are often not accessible to primary school principals located in rural areas. Given these shortcomings, it is important to consider ways in which further professional learning opportunities for primary school principals might be provided in order to support them in dealing with perceived challenges encountered in their roles and to promote school effectiveness and improvement.

The importance of professional development for school leaders of the type proposed is widely articulated by various scholars. Bush (2008, p. 106), for example, stated that “appropriate training, recruitment and selection do not ensure that principals are equipped with the requisite skills, attitudes, knowledge, and motivation to lead their schools effectively”. Principals, he held, need further professional support if they are to succeed in leading their schools and promote education outcomes that can compete in an increasingly challenging global economy. Goldring, Preston, and Huff (2012) made a similar point, arguing that professional development for school leaders is of paramount importance if they are expected to lead teachers and students to accomplish high levels of performance and learning.

At the same time, while the importance of professional development for school leaders has been widely recognised, there is little agreement on what constitutes an effective professional development programme. Bush, Glover, and Harris (2007) have suggested that a rigorous professional development programme for school leaders should relate to the learning environment, learning styles, learning approaches, and learning support. Drawing from a review
of the literature, Goldring et al. (2012) identified five key elements of professional development for school leaders. First, professional development for school leaders should be based on job-embedded instruction that enables participants to apply what they learn. Secondly, it must accommodate the needs of individual school leaders and stages in their careers. Thirdly, it must be long-term and provide various learning opportunities for school leaders. This suggests that professional development should take place in both a formal and informal environment. Fourthly, effective professional development should adopt a coherent curriculum which addresses conditions and activities that school leaders face in their daily work. Fifthly, it should create opportunities for school leaders to develop networking and consultation. It would be desirable for attention to be given to these five key elements when designing professional development programmes for school leaders in Cambodia, while being appropriately sensitive to how they may need to be adjusted or changed in response to the contextual influences that prevail.

9.6.4 Professional Development and Working Conditions for Teachers

While pre-service preparation for primary school teachers has been widely expanded in Cambodia over the last two decades, little attention has been devoted to promoting professional development opportunities for them. The outcomes of the study reported here certainly indicate that primary school teachers have few prospects for continuing professional development following their commencement of teaching. Consequently, teachers can often be lacking in up-to-date pedagogical content knowledge, the ability to teach multi-grade classes and students with special needs, and the ability to translate policies into practice. These deficiencies call for an initiative to advance systematic professional development for teachers in assisting them to promote effectiveness in their teaching and in policy implementation.

The commentary here also highlights the importance of drawing attention to ameliorating the working conditions of teachers. While the Royal Government of Cambodia has made efforts to improve the living standards of public servants, teachers still, they say, do not receive sufficient remuneration to cover their day-to-day expenses. In response to these circumstances, some teachers take on extra teaching classes to earn additional income, while others make extra money by having a second job. This situation can exert a detrimental influence on teachers’ professional capacity and on their impact in the classroom.

9.6.5 Further Research

Over the last 15 years, there has been increased attention to deepening understanding of the relationships between education, conflict, and education reconstruction in conflict and post-conflict countries. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining the area of educational leadership in these contexts and especially leadership at the individual
school level. This has resulted in very few empirical studies that can help us to understand the context and nature of school leadership in conflict and post-conflict contexts at an international level.

The study reported here serves to highlight the need for further research on leadership at the individual school level in conflict-affected societies. In particular, it would be beneficial to pursue qualitative research agendas (longitudinal and case study) for investigating the perspectives of school leaders on the problems they face and how they deal with those problems in conflict-affected contexts.

Future researchers might also consider a more extensive adoption of comparative approaches to the study of educational leadership and management. This would enable the making of robust comparisons between school leaders’ perspectives on school leadership practices across post-conflict contexts. Embracing comparative approaches would also assist researchers to develop a broad understanding of the contextual complexity of school leadership practices across cultural contexts. In this connection, Dimmock and Walker (2000, p. 159) have stated that the cross-cultural comparative approach “can embrace a wider rather than narrower perspective, incorporating school leadership, organisational structures, management, curriculum and teaching and learning, in order to present holistic and contextualised accounts”.

In Cambodia, there is a further need to undertake research on school leadership which is inclusive of additional school-level stakeholders, and especially teachers and parents. The commentary here has identified a number of challenges encountered by teachers, including inadequate opportunities for professional development, poor working conditions and their limited agency in pursuit of curriculum change. It would be potentially fruitful, therefore, to investigate teachers’ perspectives on challenges facing primary schools that could generate new insights into primary school education and school leadership in post-conflict Cambodia. The lack of involvement by community members and parents in education is a further phenomenon that warrants greater academic attention by means of similar research endeavours.
Figure 9.2: The outside of a typical school in rural Cambodia.

Figure 9.3: Inside a typical classroom in rural Cambodia.
9.7 Conclusion

This chapter has chronicled the historical background to primary school leadership, recent developments in relation to primary school leadership in the country, and the issues of current concern to primary school leaders. No major developments occurred in primary school leadership until the post-conflict period. During this period, significant efforts were made to enhance the quality of primary school leadership through promoting decentralisation in school administration and improving school leadership development and support. It has also been shown that school-level stakeholders encounter three broad sets of issues relating to administration, teaching and learning, and the curriculum. Some of these issues may be due to ‘general’ developing world circumstances, including poverty and low economic growth, while others can be attributed directly to the legacies of armed conflict and genocide.

Hopefully, this chapter contributes to understandings of educational leadership in developing-country contexts, especially as it is argued that educational leadership and reforms in such circumstances have primarily drawn upon models taken from Western societies. Insights have been offered that may guide future research on educational leadership and leadership policy and practice in post-conflict and developing-country contexts. Given that existing research in the field of education and conflict has failed to fill the theory-practice gap (Karpinska, Yarrow & Gough, 2007), it is also hoped that these insights may assist in bridging the policy-practice divide. In doing so, the study reported here, as well as other research endeavours conducted along similar lines, could make a small, but valuable, contribution to the field of education and conflict. This is particularly the case in regard to the potential of such research to provide a solid body of professional knowledge on which to base advocacy to the international community and to inform the planning and implementation of effective policies and programmes that can enhance the efficacy of school leadership both in Cambodia, as well as similar contexts.
References


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