

Understanding School in Rural Cambodia: Portraits of Elementary Teachers

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Abstract

Few educational qualitative studies have been done in Cambodia, a country held hostage by the murderous Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Still struggling to recover from these atrocities, Cambodia looks to education to aid in its redevelopment. This ethnographically-informed case study seeks to understand the beliefs and practices of today's teachers. Four practicing teachers were interviewed and observed to help describe the richness of their classrooms, and their practices in the face of crowded classrooms with few supplies. Interviews uncovered their strong beliefs in education. Alongside this is the teacher propensity to see themselves and their practice through a deficit lens. The article describes forces that impact literacy development, including well-meaning gifts from abroad.

Keywords: Cambodia, Elementary education, Portraiture, Ethnographic case study

Introduction

Using both Paulo Freire's (2000) work and a feminist lens as suggested by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005), field work was conducted in Cambodia using a variety of data sources: observations, interviews, casual conversations, and document analysis. Analyzing this data using the Portraiture Approach resulted in a complex picture of teachers and the school along with ways literacy is shared in rural areas of the developing country.

Freire (2000) embraces the power of local participation and dialogue. His concepts and theories view literacy campaigns as participatory, embracing the notion that such campaigns encompass the local population. I celebrate his problem-posing stance, his firmly held belief that reflection and action can change the world. Change, however, according to Freire, begins at the local level. This study is framed by Freire's words and ideas about literacy and liberation. As both a literacy activist and prolific author, Freire's work in South America is often the framework for researchers in developing countries along with those involved in praxis.

The inclusive ideas of feminist researchers who celebrate the everyday life experiences of women, especially the words of Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Deborah Piatelli (2007) capture the essence of this study: "Tapping into lived experience is the key to feminist inquiry and requires innovative practices in developing relationships and building knowledge" (p. 147). This feminist approach of starting where life is lived also frames this study. A feminist perspective allows me to collaborate, use reflexive techniques and work with participants.

Before examining the Apsara village (all names are

pseudonyms) and school, it is necessary to consider the recent turbulent history of Cambodia and the devastation wrecked by the Pol Pot Regime. Members of the educated class were systematically hunted down and killed between 1975 and 1979. An estimated 1.7 million people disappeared (Mydans, 2007). The terror of this regime only dissipated in 1998 with the death of its leader, Pol Pot. Questions still linger as to why this country was turned into a virtual concentration camp by their own people. Alexander Hinton's (2005) book title poses this question: *Why Did They Kill?* Those who visit the memorials filled with human skulls and walk over shards of bone and remnants of teeth in the "killing fields" are left to ponder the inhumanity of it.

This turbulent and chaotic historical timeframe is a part of the memories of parents and grandparents of present day primary students. The study seeks to uncover the practices of teachers and how these educators deal with the terrible views of education that have been written on the mystic slates of the mind, as Derrida calls it (Rambo, 2005). This is a key purpose along with understanding current classroom pedagogies.

As Cambodia rebuilds its educational infrastructure, those in Cambodia's government along with a limited number of international aid agencies claim to be ready to help with this process. What are the issues? What are the needs? What does education mean in a culture with such a tumultuous past? As teachers everywhere know, it is imperative to visit schools, observe teachers, and become immersed in classrooms to truly understand educational strengths and needs.

While the study delves into individual classrooms, it is limited in that it is a slice of life in a specific time and place. Ideas and practices of teachers may not reflect those of all Cambodian

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teachers. Additionally, as in all research, the researcher interacts with and influences participants. I realize that I can never fully appreciate how my presence in this school affected the interviews and observations.

Method

John Creswell (2007), Robert Stake (1995), and Robert Yin (2009) share the need for those doing qualitative fieldwork to be flexible. This is a hallmark of research completed in classrooms with practicing teachers and the daily challenges, often unexpected, that present themselves. Throughout the study, the need for this flexibility became apparent; however, two guiding questions framed the emerging inquiry. What are the practices and views of village teachers regarding education? What do village teachers feel are the educational needs?

The Case Study

A case study is appropriate when it is necessary to develop an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within a specific context by using multiple sources of data (Yin 2009, p. 18). This is the preferred study design when one is "examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated" (Yin, 2003, p. 7). Using Yin's (2009) work, I offer a somewhat paradoxical justification for this case study. He states that one would choose a single case design when it represents a unique case (p. 47). To the Western reader, a rural Cambodian school and village is unique; even Cambodia is not a country many Westerners think about. Yet, I also argue that this case is typical. In choosing the village for this holistic study, I focused on a place I found representative of other Cambodian villages I had visited. Thus, while seeming contradictory, these justifications depend on how one situates the case. For Cambodia, this case may be typical, but for the Western reader, the case is unique.

Using an Ethnographic Lens for Case Study

The ethnographic researcher looks at the patterns of the cultural group and seeks to describe the values, behaviors, and beliefs of this group (Creswell, 2007, p. 68). Moreover, the researcher becomes immersed in this culture-sharing group. I gravitate toward Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul's (1999) belief that ethnography is a "human endeavor" (p. xiv). They describe the importance of human interaction and contend that these face-to-face encounters are what give ethnography its rich flavor.

Data Sources

As Yin (2009) notes, the techniques of the case study researcher are similar to those of the historian but also include using information from contemporary data sources such as observation of events and interviews with participants. These multiple sources are necessary when doing case study research (p. 13). Multiple sources ensure triangulation. For this study I relied upon two main sources of data. One main data source came from my field notes generated from observations conducted in the school and village over several weeks. These formal observations and interviews were based on a previous visit to Cambodia where I informally met these same teachers. During my formal research time, I observed everything. Even when I thought I might have time for relaxation, I was usually engaged in valuable observation. My notebook was always with me.

Another main data source involved information shared by teachers in interviews. Formal interviews with individual teachers were conducted in their classrooms while interviews with villagers were conducted in their homes. Time spent interviewing varied with the person as some individuals were more eager to add details and deviate from my questions by offering additional thoughts and

examples. All interviews were conducted in Khmer with the assistance of a Khmer/English translator.

While I had pre-determined interview questions for teachers, my observations led to refinement of these questions and yielded many additional questions for both formal and informal interviews. I formally interviewed teachers in one session but often returned to speak with them as follow-up questions emerged.

Emerging questions were based on observations and my further understanding of the culture. Careful observations and detailed field notes allowed me to see gestures, voice tone, and to understand the nuances of life.

Secondary data sources were the photographs and videos I took while in Cambodia along with digital sound recordings. These helped me to recapture the feel of the countryside, background sounds, and richness of the environment. When writing my final portrait I often returned to slideshows to both put myself in the picture and to view the scene from a different perch. I used photographs of posters in schools illustrating various educational requirements along with copies of Khmer textbooks which are currently in use.

Information from these multiple data sources provided triangulation for this study. This design is in keeping with Yin's (2009) belief that case study research "... allows investigator's to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (p. 4).

Feminist Theory

I identify myself as a White feminist researcher, a woman who looks at the life of a woman in an attempt to hear her voice and paint her picture. Feminist researchers discuss the need to begin with the lived experiences of women (see for e.g. Hesse-Biber, 2007 or Kirsch, 1999). Women such as Carol Gilligan (1993) along with Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis (1997) offer data interpretation methods that are appropriate for the types of research advocated by feminist theorists and researchers. Additionally, the importance of advocacy is a role embraced by many women who do such research along with those using a Freirian perspective (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007). I consciously contribute to this body of work with this study.

A feminist theory is appropriate for Cambodia where many teachers are female but struggle to balance home and job responsibilities, as will be uncovered in the portrait of Miss Rattana (all names are pseudonyms). Additionally, teachers are placed in classrooms based on their graduate ranking from the post high school pedagogy school. This is a further issue, particularly for women that requires additional research.

Data Interpretation

During the data interpretation phase of my research I was guided by the Portraiture Approach (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The Portraiture Approach relies so much on the human experience so it was particularly meaningful for my work in Cambodia because of its underlying philosophy that the human experience derives meaning from the setting, whether historical, cultural, or social, in which the experience occurs. A portraitist needs to richly and thickly describe the physical setting along with identifying a personal place from which she or he will paint the portrait. Metaphors are used to help tell the "story" of the person and place. The context, along with the main actor, is dynamic as the story unfolds. It is used to combine the empirical with artistry to "...to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (p. 3).

Using detailed field notes, the researcher “gathers, organizes, and scrutinizes the data” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 185). She searches for the threads and patterns, looking for themes and understandings. The researcher reads and rereads her notes at the close of each day as this not only helps her to reflect on the events but also helps her to make sense of what she sees and hears. These thoughts and ideas about emerging themes and patterns are noted in what is called an “Impressionistic Record” (p. 188). This is what I did before writing the final portrait. I wrote memos to myself, and constantly compared these thoughts and searches. During my time in Cambodia, I took detailed notes and then wrote memos and searched for themes. I was vigilant to changing perspectives, to dilemmas, and to new areas of inquiry. I found this to be necessary in Cambodia as often ideas were not offered, but I had to ask based on observations. For example, I had noticed the blue and white handwritten signs in every classroom. I asked what these were and was told, “These are the names of the top three students in the class.” Later, I reflected on this and asked if these were boys and girls or if one gender prevailed. Nearly all the top students were female. This was an interesting component of my findings that would never have been revealed if I had not reread and reflected on my observations in the evening. This rereading and questioning is part of what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis call “the nagging puzzle” (p. 188).

As Lightfoot (1983) describes, I, too, continually read and reread my notes to uncover “the persistent repetitions and elaborations of similar ideas” (p. 17). This technique heightened my awareness so that when like ideas appeared I would underscore these. During this process I began to see what she calls “the skeleton of the story” (p.17) so that the “plot” could be told (p. 18). Additionally, she cautions that it is important to return to the original field notes and interviews often during the writing process so that distortions do not emerge.

Writing the Portrait

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) encourage the writer to consider a broader audience than merely the “academy.” With the Portraiture Approach, the researcher writes for a wide audience; she writes so that the larger community will understand her findings. Portraiture has been called “a people’s scholarship” (p. 10). As such, I wanted to bring the reader, any reader, to the world of my research. Readers should feel as though they are bathed in the steam of Cambodia as they gingerly sidestep along the dusty worn path of the village, avoiding the jutting rocks or overhead fronds, their eyes fixed looking for signs of landmines, knowing they cannot be detected, all the while listening for the silent steps of the village dogs. A story is woven and detailed pictures are painted. Words of participants are freely used in the portrait. Staying true to the form of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s Portraiture, I, of course, cite sources that are published but do not cite with the “personal conversation” notation the ideas shared by those I interviewed. It is to be assumed by the reader that these anonymous participants are those who agreed to talk with me about their lives for the purpose of this research.

The Tapestry of a Rural School

The Portrait of the School. Driving through the Cambodian countryside, one sees a patchwork of brown mud, flooded green rice paddies and tall scattered palm trees. But this foliage covers the tragedy of Cambodia’s recent past when the brutality of the Khmer Rouge killed, starved, or worked to death its own citizens, often for the sin of being educated. Does this past, with the connection between the phrase, “going to school” but ending up a victim in the killing fields,

impact rural schools? Stepping into the world of the Apsara School yields rich stories and hopeful answers.

To a visitor, this school may seem to sit as an extension of the large town nearby. But it is a world apart. Spending ten minutes in the back of a motor scooter cart called a tuk-tuk transforms the world from one of hoards of motorbikes and rushing humanity to a dusty village scene where bicycles rule and people know one another’s business. The metal gate is more than a physical barrier between the rare paved road and the school. It is uncommon for outsiders to venture into the schoolyard and the village beyond, and conversely those who call this place home have little interaction with and understanding of the world outside this oasis. Few teachers go into the city on a regular basis and most children have never traveled beyond the limits of their village.

As one leaves the paved road, dirt takes over and there is an intimate sense of intense interaction with the land. The village is a place where rice paddies are common, where chickens are both pets and dinner, and where water is either scooped from the muddy pools near-by or, for the lucky ones, hand pumped from a homemade well. It is a place where women cook over open fires and naked children chase chickens and nap in swinging hammocks. The dusty schoolyard is an anchor of sorts for the maze of footpaths that snake through the village, connecting the lives of the people. The Apsara School acts as a concrete monument to the wishes and dreams of those who live beyond its grounds in the stilted huts and palm-thatched hovels. The school has been here for a generation. Mothers and fathers in the village remember sitting in the dark classrooms, but there is little memory beyond that as the grandparents were victims of the Khmer Rouge, and written records for this spot do not exist. But despite the lack of educational memory, the dreams for education are vivid; the hopes for the future are intense in this land of contrasting pictures.

Here in This Place: The Picture of the Mesosystem of the School.

The school that stands in this spot is different than the Apsara School of a few years ago. Gone are the wooden walls and palm-thatched roof and in their place are poured concrete floors and walls. A small building to the left contains the two rooms that serve as administrative offices. Here is the only source of electricity so one of these rooms doubles as the spot where children go once a week to watch DVDs. A handmade wall poster illustrates the school’s structure; it shows little more than the name of the principal with ten lines running to the names of teachers and the grades each teaches. All teachers are responsible for two groups of students. One group arrives, often two or three children to a bicycle, at 7:00 am in the morning. After the four hour session, these students return home and another group arrives at 1:00 pm for the second four hour session. These two shifts of children crowd into the rooms that make up the main coral-colored L-shaped part of the school. White-latticed wood decorates the porch-like area that lines the school. During recess, many teachers sit on stone benches and watch their young charges at play. White wooden classroom doors can be pulled shut, but this is rare when children are present. The open doorways and the windows without glass allow what little breeze there is into the classrooms. The flag of Cambodia, the world’s only flag to bear an image of a monument, Angkor Wat, the famous ancient temple that draws tourists to Cambodia, hangs on a pole in the middle of the school’s courtyard. Here and there a few trees attempt to grow in the dusty brown dirt. A few colorful signs, carefully hand-labeled in Khmer, encourage children to “work hard” and “do your best.” This yard is a meeting spot for work crews of children, it is a playground, and it is a place for village dogs to gather.

Between the two buildings of the L is a small alleyway. Here there is a line-up of bicycles along with a roofed area where women cook breakfast over open fires for those children who attend the morning session. Some teachers switch morning and afternoon sessions so that students may attend school in the morning one week and in the afternoon on opposite weeks. But Miss Phalen does not. She is free to deviate from this policy and does so because she believes “the little ones need to learn in the morning.” But this also means only her morning first graders receive the free morning meal.

On the porch, just before this alleyway swings the object that first drew me to this school. It is the remnant of an American bomb that serves as a bell. The sound rings through the schoolyard, clanging out the welcome to school or announcing the end of a break. When I began visiting this school, my hosts were almost apologetic about its presence. They feared I would be hurt or embarrassed by its reminder of a brutal time in history which in this part of the world is called the American War. But my interest in it was so intense that the faculty began showing me the bell’s U.S. military inscriptions and then described to me the preponderance of such bells in Cambodian schools. My translator took great pride in telling me about “the great big bomb” that hung in his former elementary school.

Behind the last two classrooms of the bottom of the L is the newly constructed bathroom with two Western-style flush toilets. The door seems perpetually open as if to advertise the modernity of the tiny building. During my time at the Apsara School I was repeatedly invited to use this bathroom. It was as though this was a symbol of a step into an advanced world and a source of pride.

Monday through Saturday this place is filled with the 497 children who attend grades one through six. It is a busy, crowded place where it is common to find nearly 50 children squished onto wooden benches in a classroom with government issued paperback textbooks open on the tables in front of each student.

The Apsara School has an enrollment balance of girls and boys, and in the time I was there, I did not notice an unusual number of either girls or boys absent from school. This was easy to discern as the attendance figures are written on the board at the start of each session. This seemed to dispel the notion that these villagers, at least, did not value male education over female education.

Along with this display is a blue poster showing the names of the top three students in the class. My translator and I began a game of sorts with these blue and white-lettered posters. After visiting two classrooms, which meant I had viewed top students in four grades, I saw the pattern: all top students were girls. My translator then always looked to the poster upon entering a new room and would turn to me with great laughter to confirm, “All girls!” During my time in Cambodia I only found one boy listed as a top student. This child had a unique situation in that his mother is a teacher at the school. He attends the morning session as a student and returns for the afternoon session to “play.” During this time he can be seen poking his head into open windows, loitering in doorways, or even sitting on a classroom bench looking over an older student’s work. Despite being in second grade, he was often a fixture in Miss Phalen’s afternoon fifth grade session and listened attentively to what went on, intent on absorbing all that the school has to offer.

The loud voices of children spelling, reading orally, or reciting multiplication tables can be heard emanating from the open classrooms at any time of day. Choral response is the norm in all of these classrooms, but the success of this generalized teaching style varies with the

detailed practices of specific teachers. While I observed nine teachers at the Apsara School and interviewed all faculty including the principal and librarian, I will only describe the classrooms of three teachers. Two of these teachers were chosen because each represents a different end of the teaching spectrum. The first tries to involve her students in the lessons while the other has a classroom that feels uninspired. By describing these teachers, I show the variation of styles within a single school and broader methodology. The third teacher is one of the two male teachers at this school. While the purpose of this study is not to compare male and female teachers, a description may be helpful in further discerning the ways of education in Cambodia. I offer a small snapshot of a fourth teacher as she has a unique situation thus illustrating the flexibility and difficulties that are inherent within Cambodian schools.

The Second Grade Portrait. Miss Thida’s second grade class has 43 students who sit expectantly, two or three to wooden benches that are pulled in front of rough-surfaced tables. A few sentences are written on the front chalkboard. This preparatory lesson sets the stage for reading about the states of water. As the group settles in, I notice the same faded but dancing shapes strung high above the little heads. There is a board on the back wall with pencil drawings, now faded, hung via toothpicks into the weave of the bamboo backing. At the front sits the small teacher’s table bearing a basket of plastic flowers and Miss Thida’s small purse. A bucket and large bag wait on her chair. Other than the required lists of attendance and numerical grades, along with a nonworking clock, the walls are bare and the air is still.

After the required greeting where students stand and salute their teacher, Miss Thida walks to this bag. All eyes are on her and I feel great expectation. When she pulls out a bottle of water there is an audible gasp in the room. This seems strange as many children have water bottles in their book bags and freely bend down to take a sip. The students seem to know they are going to see a demonstration, likely a welcome relief from the tedium of repetitive answers. Miss Thida turns her back on the group, walks to the board, and writes the three Khmer words for liquid, solid, and gas. She points to each word as she explains that water can be a liquid, a solid, and a gas. She then saunters to the side wall, leans against it, and asks the class to explain this again. About half of the hands shoot up and Miss Thida calls on a little ponytailed girl in the front row who stands and recites the previous description. All clap and Miss Thida smiles. She returns to the board and points to the word liquid. She quickly calls a little boy to the front. He scurries to get his feet back into his brown flip flops and nearly stumbles as he runs up the aisle with excitement. She twists the cap from the bottle of water, smiles broadly at the glass, and pours a bit into his hand. He laughs. She bends down and asks him several questions: “Could you hold the water? Did the water have a shape? Was the water wet?” As each is asked he takes on an aura of comedian who is entertaining an audience and with great exaggeration, answers each question, albeit correctly. These questions reveal a propensity to encourage deep thinking (Aziza, 2018). Children clap and roar their approval for his answers, encouraged by Miss Thida. She then calls a girl to the front. She, like the boy, must first slip her dangling legs back into her flip flops before hurrying to the front of the room. She takes the bucket and ceremoniously pours the water into this container. She asks the girl to look into the bucket and to describe how the shape of the water is different now that it is in the bucket. After several questions where the class waits in anticipation, the girl gets to the required concept: that water takes on the shape of the container it is in. When this answer is given the class jumps to their feet and claps along with Miss Thida. The girl skips to her seat.

Miss Thida then launches into a soliloquy about boiling water and steam. The back half of the class begins to shuffle about on the benches. After about five minutes boys are whispering to one another and gradually swinging their legs closer and closer to their seatmates in a bit of a game, while a few girls are playing with their fingers or doodling in their notebooks. I think how this lesson could be enhanced simply by using pictures, which are not available. After several more minutes of teacher talk Miss Thida turns her back, erases the board, and writes more sentences about the shape of water. She takes her pointed stick and asks a group of girls, a group that I noted had been paying close attention, to come to the board. They look at one another triumphantly and walk proudly to the front. One girl picks up the stick and the others face the board and loudly read for their classmates. When they finish, all clap. This celebration has the attention of the boys again. Now many of them are waving their hands. Miss Thida calls on two boys and one girl. The same sentences are read, with the girl who reached the board first, holding the pointer. This scenario is repeated five times with mixed gender groups. Except for one group, a girl always held the pointer.

The lesson concludes with students reading the sentences on the board chorally. This is repeated several times. Many children are fingering notebooks and staring blankly at the board, often saying nothing. A few, mainly girls near the front, seem to carry the sound for the rest of the class. Others, mostly boys, are pushing one another under the tables. One boy flicks at a bug flying around him. Miss Thida smiles at those in the front who are reading loudly and ignores the remainder of the group.

I hear the ring of the bell. She asks all to stand; they oblige and salute her before running into the schoolyard. A small group of girls stays behind to play teacher. They take turns using the pointer and reading the sentences to the others who stand and quietly wait their turn but obligingly applaud the pretend teacher. The lesson is repeated over and over again by them. Just as in Miss Phalen's room, the feel of the girls' lesson and reactions accurately reflects the feel in the room.

During this break, Miss Thida talks about her class and the struggle to bring literacy to her students. She speaks specifically about this lesson and says, "I need materials like cooking pots so that students will better understand what they will read." She continues her litany of wishes by noting the shortcomings of her classroom and of Cambodian education in general by stating, "I think the best way to teach students well is to have learning material. I wish we could get more pictures and books and math material." She wistfully repeats her concern regarding lack of materials, "I think we do not have any pictures. Some students cannot catch on and I try in every way to act out or show them so they can understand. But I need more pictures." This is a desire repeated over and over again. But infused into this is a belief in her students. "I feel very happy as I think my students can read and write but they still can get better, as any student can." She asks for any advice I have, particularly as it relates to instructing those who are not learning but I tell her that I am there to learn from her, my usual reply. As we say good-bye, the sounds of the little girls clipping the blackboard with the pointer continue. Their high-pitched voices nearly overshadow the running and chasing games outside.

The Third Grade Portrait. The third grade teacher seems tired and bored. The faded dull yellow of the walls and dusty floor mirror her mood as the vocabulary and spelling lesson proceeds. No dancing shapes flutter above students' heads nor are there any works of art on the walls. Miss Kunthy's voice is very quiet, and she yawns frequently. I hear the chickens and roosters. Their sounds almost overwhelm the dullness of this room. There are few

smiles. Even my translator, who is usually eager to explain everything, seems bored. His eyes glaze over and he yawns at regular intervals. She rarely moves. Words are written on the board and Miss Kunthy's flat voice recites them as she reluctantly shuffles to the front and points as each word is said. Very few children look at the board, most are swinging their legs close to a seatmate, doodling in a notebook, or are involved in an assorted number of other activities. At one point there is great excitement among a group of boys near me. I watch as one boy creeps out of his seat and grabs something from another boy's neck. Soon there is giggling. I strain to see what the drama is about and almost laugh as a tiny gecko is being boogied along the student's table. The boys watch the puppeteer as the show takes an extraordinary number of twists and turns. The poor creature finally finds release in death and is hidden in the cubby. Miss Kunthy has been oblivious to this theatre. Her monotone voice had rattled on and on so that even I was more interested in the gecko show and neglected to take notes on this part of her lesson, focusing instead on the dancing reptile.

When I pay attention again she is leaning against a wall and three children are at the board. They write, erase, write, erase, and write again. No one, except possibly me, is watching them. Even Miss Kunthy is talking to the principal who is standing outside the opening that serves as a window, holding his baby son.

Finally this trio is released, with no celebration for any accomplishments, and she calls on another group of students to repeat the same assignment. The three work at the board while the rest of us look for entertainment elsewhere. This pattern goes on for an interminable length of time until the bell releases all of us to the joys of the schoolyard. As I walk from the room, I wonder if anyone, other than those students who worked at the front board, learned anything. And possibly not even all children who worked on this stage were engaged in the assignment as I noted that often two children would work while the third merely smiled or looked at the floor. No words of encouragement were offered to these children. It is not surprising to me that no one stays in this room during the break. All, including Miss Kunthy, stepped into the sunshine.

Later I talk with this instructor about her teaching. She, like others, describes the lack of materials and books. She says that children just do not enjoy the boring black and white books that are in limited supply. She reflects on what it takes to be a good teacher with these words, "I think that to be a good teacher, we must have all material like paper. We need pictures." She repeats her desire for a specific supply, "I need [sic] paper." Then she speaks about her successes as a teacher, "I feel delighted and very happy when they read and write. I think they are doing very well." Like the others, she asks me for any suggestions I have.

Perhaps I was with Miss Kunthy on a bad day. I have had my own dull days with students. But my teacher antennae lead me to believe otherwise. Some students will pay attention, anticipating an interesting comment or activity if they are accustomed to that happening. There were just too few students who followed Miss Kunthy's lesson. Additionally, even on the occasional "bad day" students will stay in during recess in an attempt to be close to or mimic a teacher they like. I saw this in many classrooms at the Apsara School so know this is not just a Western tradition. This closeness did not happen between these third graders and Miss Kunthy.

The Sixth Grade Portrait. Mr. Manith's sixth graders were reading about Khmer drums on the day I observed in his classroom. It was a particularly hot and humid day so I took care to find a seat near the opening. It was a few minutes

after one o'clock when my translator and I settle into the crowded classroom but Mr. Manith was nowhere to be seen. Five minutes later, the sputter of a motor scooter announced his arrival. He whipped his helmet off and bounded up the few steps to his classroom. The lesson began.

Without missing a beat, he tells the class to open to a specific page containing line drawings of drums. Mr. Manith begins reading to the class about these cultural artifacts pacing back and forth in front of the room. Occasionally he stops to gesture and ask questions. His face lights up when students raise their hands, and he smiles even more broadly when a correct answer is given. He repeats questions as he attempts to make sure everyone knows the memorized answer to the types of drums and materials used to make them. Here we see the use of the zone of proximal development (Guseva & Solomonovich, 2017).

When he is satisfied the students can recite the answers, they are asked to reread what he has read. He points to one boy who stands to read. Five other boys are following along by pointing at the words. A group of girls near me begins to giggle. They glance at me, aware that I see their inattention to the lesson but they make no attempt to hide the photos they are passing back and forth. They have likely been torn from a fashion magazine as they depict young males and females dressed in what I assume to be expensive attire. Mr. Manith notices this group, and calls on one of the girls to explain the characteristics of a specific drum. She stands but cannot comply with his request. She sits and he asks one of the boys to do the task. This boy has been paying attention and quickly answers. Mr. Manith returns to the group of girls and asks if they now understand. Another girl in the group is asked to stand and repeat the answer. This seems to diffuse the picture-passing and calls the group back to attention. Mr. Manith continues to encourage those who are engaged in other activities to pay attention. One boy takes out a yellow balloon and blows it up. When it pops, he laughs but I note that he asks this boy several questions during the next few moments in an attempt to reengage him in the lesson.

Mr. Manith repeatedly walks up and down between the third and fourth aisle of the room. The majority of boys are seated here. He uses proximity control (Hunter, 1967) to keep students engaged. But he appears to focus on the boys. And he is successful. They are active listeners. Many smile when he smiles and are quick to give correct answers to his rapid fire questions. He is nonstop energy. He travels back and forth along this aisle and gestures constantly. When he notices someone looking in another direction, Mr. Manith is quick to move to that spot. He never overtly corrects a student or admonishes someone to pay attention. He just moves to that spot in the room. The whole class lesson continues with Mr. Manith using a combination of lecture, oral reading, and questioning of individual students. There are no drums or colorful photos to illustrate his points. The only concrete object is a ruler which is taken out at one point to show students just how small a particular drum is. The lack of materials means his energy is especially key to keeping the class engaged in his lecture and the oral reading that is performed.

A girl near the front points at Mr. Manith's shirt which has become drenched in sweat. She giggles, but it is not behind his back. He grabs some material and laughingly points out the wetness to the class. He fans himself with his book. They all chuckle in a moment that seems to connect teacher and students.

As the afternoon progresses, he begins to lose energy and the students become less interested in listening. By 3:55 it is pouring rain, and darkness has settled into the electricity-free classroom. Few are still paying attention

to the whole class lesson. Small groups whisper to one another. Mr. Manith ignores them and continues to work with those who still have a book open. He walks down the aisle and uses his marker to write on a table in an attempt to illustrate a point for a boy. He rubs this drawing off and glances at me. I think I discern a sigh.

Finally it is break time and many sixth graders stream onto the porch. Several students remain in the room. A group of girls playfully pokes at Mr. Manith's wet shirt. He banters back and forth with the gathered boys and girls. It is easy to tell that this is a well-liked and respected teacher who wants his students to be able to correctly answer fact-based questions when they are posed. But he does not use small groups to discuss issues. He later tells me that he has too much material to cover to do this.

When I have the opportunity to speak with Mr. Manith he, like the other teachers, laments the lack of materials and books. He says he has no posters or "colorful pictures." He wishes he had more material for math. When asked about books, he shakes his head, "I need books for children, much book. The more the better." Like the others, Mr. Manith knows there is a serious lack of teaching material, but he says he tries to use the local environment to provide learning opportunities and uses land near the school to teach about aquatic plants. He describes his questioning techniques including those requiring factual knowledge such as the color and size of plants along with questions as to how they are used by local villagers. He talks about instructing his students as to proper farming practices and what to do about problem insects and animals. While he never described a teaching technique requiring students to problem solve, his use of local land and practices indicated that as a teacher *he* had employed problem solving techniques to overcome the deficiency of materials.

Portrait of Teacher Reality. On the opposite end of the school is Miss Rattana's classroom. It is unusually dark, even for a school that doesn't have electricity. The administrative building blocks any sun from the door and the roof of the school's kitchen shades the window opening. To add to the dreary feeling of this classroom is the knowledge of this teacher's struggle. She is a young mother of three whose husband died "from an illness" a few months ago. Life is difficult for Miss Rattana as she now must support these children on her limited salary. She cannot afford to pay a babysitter so must bring her baby with her. The child, who is nearly one, is in the room during school hours.

This was not the only baby who spent his days at the school. The principal is married to one of the teachers. Their one year-old was often handed back and forth between the two or held by an older female student. When the young family would climb onto their motor scooter to ride home, the baby was placed in front. He stood on the seat, grasping the handlebars with a big grin. Because two parents are employed at the school, there seems to be a greater opportunity for this baby to be cared for by whichever parent may be less occupied with other responsibilities thus not creating the atmosphere I observed in Miss Rattana's room.

When I first went to visit with Miss Rattana, she was holding her young son who wore only a shirt. Upon my entry, she placed him on the concrete floor to greet me using a salute.

On this morning, these second graders are learning to write what Miss Rattana terms "French numerals," a term relating back to the days when the French governed the country. As she shows the children how to write 2, 3, and 4 on the board, the baby scoots about on the floor, stopping occasionally to pull himself up to peer at children. The baby stops at one table where a pair of girls waves their fingers at him. He pulls himself up, and in the process their books

fall to the floor creating a ruckus and stopping the lesson as the girls retrieve their material and quiet the child.

During the time I spent in this classroom, many eyes were focused on the engaging and curious baby as he crawled about, occasionally pulling himself up on a bench or table leg to attempt to entice a smile or coo from his audience. He was a distraction to both the students and his mother who often stopped her lessons to deal with his needs. I offer no suggestions as to how to solve this teacher's childcare needs, only the observation that the child's presence added to the attention issues in this classroom. Additionally during the time I was in Cambodia, this classroom was closed twice as Miss Rattana was absent, further adding to the already limited amount of teacher/student interaction time.

This situation presents several interesting considerations. One consideration is economic. This young mother is not paid enough to afford any daycare, even if it were available. Another consideration deals with teacher/student time. As discussed, classrooms are simply locked if the teacher is not available. Despite the baby's presence, students are getting time with their teacher. This is time that, if Miss Rattana were to stay home, would not be available to these children. But there is another way of looking at this situation. It involves the differences in the Western versus the Cambodian view of "it takes a village." This baby's presence may be providing a key lesson: We are all responsible for the care of one another. Who am I to even say that this child is a distraction? In Cambodian culture, the lesson of caring for another person is an essential model. This baby is a constant reminder and model of this lifestyle commitment. Months later, as I write of this classroom, fresh from a summer of watching U.S. news replete with town hall meeting footage, scandals involving infidelity, and a lack of civility from athletes, politicians and entertainers, I contemplate this experience. Perhaps it is Western cultures that need to learn this lesson.

A School Practice "Morphs" to Concern. A situation at the Apsara School is surprising and caused me to carefully consider the impact gifts from foreign donors could have on Cambodian school practices. One morning when the tuk-tuk deposited me at the front gate of the school, the principal greeted me with an invitation to view one of the required activities he had instituted in the last year. The school had received the gift of a DVD player, television, and about seventeen DVDs from a foreign donor. The result was a new requirement that each class spend one hour per week watching television, which is the playing of a DVD. This means that even if one DVD is viewed per week, the number of weeks in a school year would result in the same DVD being viewed many times. Later I was told that only about ten of the DVDs worked, making this requirement even more repetitive.

As I walked across the schoolyard to the one room with electricity, the principal's office, where the DVDs could be viewed, I considered the benefits of the programming content. Perhaps I was imagining engaging educational programming and conjured up a picture of edutainment at its best that would hopefully fill a gap in Cambodian literacy needs. I was not prepared for what I saw and was swept back in time to my own son's preschool years when he begged for anything having to do with the *Mighty Morphin Power Ranger* characters. And here they made their appearance again at the Apsara School, swinging at cheesy monsters and hiding behind what had always seemed to be rocks made of paper.

Children squished together on adult chairs or sat shoulder to shoulder on the floor, eyes glued to the television. I didn't have to hide my disgust as no one bothered with me. Even the teacher didn't acknowledge my presence as I took

a seat. She was too busy following the antics of the red, blue, green, and yellow rangers. I settled in to watch the children view the DVD. They laughed together and cried out together when the rangers fought. This went on and on. There were few notes to take as the class reacted in unison to the antics on the screen. I did not need to watch individuals as the reactions were collective.

When this show ended, there was no discussion. The teacher did not ask about the plot or characters. Another program was simply played. This was a Japanese cartoon I had never seen. The stage fighting of the Power Rangers was gone and these characters screamed, punched, and stabbed. Even during this violent cartoon no one showed any desire to turn from the screen. I finally left for a classroom where learning was happening. The principal walked with me and with obvious pride said this was a very popular requirement with the children.

Later I asked to see the other DVDs, perhaps hoping I had stumbled upon an outlier and that the rest of the collection had more educational value. But all DVD covers reflected cartoons of a violent nature or were pirated copies of Disney movies. Valuable classroom time was used for this "entertainment." The question of why a gift would come with so little discussion about ways to appropriately use it perplexes me. This DVD snapshot is indicative of the considerations donors and donor organizations should make when considering ways to help individual schools.

Envisioning the Possibilities

Listening to Teachers and Communities. The use of the donated television, DVD player, and DVDs is an example of a well-meaning gift that was given with little instruction as to how to best use such technology. These types of donations combined with certain ideas of "outsiders" do not serve the rural Cambodian population. The necessity that local people should be involved in all projects designed to assist a population can be seen in these projects put forth by Westerners. I advise those who offer such suggestions to "step back" and look at the realities of primary school classrooms such as the ones described here. Local people can and should be involved in studies that consider how educational programming could benefit Cambodian children as the country develops into a more technological society. Assessing the value of various programs, with the input of villagers, would be an important step in helping guide decisions about the use of television as an educational tool.

Teacher Sharing. There are Cambodian teachers who utilize meaningful and varied activities to encourage interest in and development of literacy. As Lightfoot (1983) points out, it is necessary to look for the positive in a system. A vibrant teacher observation and training program would help teachers share workable strategies. This coaching model would allow teachers with various strengths guide one another. As part of such a local sharing program a teacher, such as Mr. Manith, who designed a hands-on aquatic plant project for his students, could encourage others to use locally available materials and village sites, an idea reminiscent of John Dewey (2001). Experience with Cambodian teachers tells me that a facilitator would need to ensure discussions stayed focused on the positive steps and strategies that are used with students to avoid the trap of talking about the negative points, the needed materials, and shortcomings of the system.

Teacher Placement. The issue of "good" teachers going to the most desirable areas is not an issue unique to Cambodia. Inner cities and extreme rural areas in the United States struggle with finding highly qualified and successful teachers. However, this placement issue seems to be built into the Cambodian educational system as the

most successful pedagogy school graduates are given choice assignments. If we are to assume that success at the pedagogy school equates to good teaching, Cambodia might consider higher teacher salaries or incentives for those who are willing to serve in rural villages. This would encourage some high-ranking graduates to choose teaching assignments in these areas. Even the incentive pay of an extra dollar seems to be enough to encourage people to take on administrative responsibilities suggesting that even a small bonus might entice talented teachers to accept and retain rural appointments.

The Kingdom of Cambodia will face challenges in integrating all of the societal, economic, and political aspects to enhancing literacy in this country. It will require efforts from teachers, but also partnerships among parents, administrators, NGOs, development agencies, infrastructure-related planners (electricity), and technology experts.

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