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Cambodian youth perspectives on social and educational barriers: An exploratory case study in a rural border region

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ABSTRACT

Life in Cambodia can be challenging and education is often seen as a key development intervention to address social and economic issues. However, rural Cambodian youth face a variety of barriers to education. The current case study examines these barriers using a questionnaire assessing youth's attitudes toward education (N = 50). Results indicate that poverty and the pressure to migrate for work are a significant barrier to educational attainment, despite the perceived benefits of education by youth and encouragement by families. Results also reveal that inter-educational issues persist. These findings can be used to better tailor development aid targeting educational measures, particularly encouraging a shift from convincing rural Cambodians to value education to targeting the contextual barriers that exist.

Keywords: Cambodia, development, education, poverty, youth

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Cambodia is a developing country in Southeast Asia that has made significant strides in many important development indicators, yet, continues to face lingering challenges. In particular, youth issues in Cambodia remain at the forefront of national and international level education and development discourse due to troubling demographic trends. Education is uniquely situated to address youth issues and foster broader national change. Nonetheless, due to a variety of historical factors and social issues that limit Cambodian education's effectiveness, more concerted efforts are needed in the education arena. The following study explores the perspectives of rural youth living in border communities in Western Cambodia on education and barriers to education within the context of the efforts of a Cambodian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). Recognizing the importance of education, this research seeks to better understand the current local, rural situation, to inform grassroots actors of the contextual issues and youth perspectives that may influence the effectiveness of micro-level efforts, as well as to contribute to the broader literature on education in developing contexts.

When the Khmer Rouge regime came to power in Cambodia in 1975, all public institutions including public education were dismantled. In addition, the tools of education such as teaching materials and textbooks were destroyed. When the Khmer Rouge were ousted in 1979, the new government began to rebuild the education system with little infrastructure or skilled populace. The approach for rebuilding focused on a simple principle, "Those who have more education will teach those with less" (Bunlay, Wright, Sophea, Bredenburg, & Singh, 2010, p. 3). By 2003, 75% of primary school teachers still had less than an upper secondary education (Bunlay et al., 2010). The quality of public education in Cambodia remains problematic. Further, teaching in rural Cambodian schools remains teacher-centered using traditional teaching methods, despite the research pointing to the enhanced effectiveness of other methods.

Demographically, Cambodia continues to suffer from a skills shortage and skills mismatch society-wide. The loss of the intelligentsia during the Khmer Rouge era severed "the link of human capital transfer between generations" (Jeong, 2014, p. 3), as exemplified in the teacher shortage. Further, after the end of the Khmer Rouge rule, a Cambodian baby boom occurred, with those youth now aging into the labor force. The need for improved education and training is becoming more important for

younger generations, particularly as the unskilled labor force continues to grow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education is key to addressing the social issues and, for almost two decades, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MOEYS) has outlined strategic plans to address the shortcomings of the Cambodian education system. However, Cambodian schools still face issues of enrollment, high dropout rates, and high repetition rates (Tan, 2006). Despite expanding the quantity of schools across the country, quality remains inconsistent (Dy & Ninomiya, 2003). Further, extenuating issues, such as teachers charging informal fees of students and the high opportunity cost of youth choosing school over work, have been acknowledged and documented for years (Tan, 2006; Vo, 2016). Widespread corruption and graft in the form of fee-based exchange for grades and extra tutoring within Cambodian schools (Tan, 2006) further limits the expansion of education to those least-advantaged children. Large numbers of unskilled youth in the labor force reinforce the sex industry, impacting youth vulnerability to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation (Vo, 2016). Within these educational and social circumstances, the current study attempts to provide a micro-perspective of rural youth and the issues they face, as they cope with the educational and social realities of rural village life along the Thai-Cambodia border while contributing to the broader comparative literature on educational issues in developing settings.

The researchers for this case study have collaborated with a small NGO in Western Cambodia near the border with Thailand since 2014. The NGO established a modest four-room school for children and youth in one village and in 2016 partnered with an American NGO and began to expand efforts into building additional schools and nutrition programs in more villages, as well as launching a medical care program and a foster care program. Prior to this transition, the researchers and NGO staff conducted a small-scale survey of both women and youth in the surrounding villages. With the documented educational issues from the literature in mind, the researchers sought to clarify the extent to which educational and social issues were occurring with the local youth. Further, the researchers sought to clarify youth attitudes toward the government schools in relation to the educational programs provided by the NGO.

The current case study was conducted in a cluster of rural villages with numerous children who are not attending government schools, and even when families can afford to send their children, they are often behind their urban peers academically and developmentally. Low educational

attainment of parents further limits these children's educational support at home. According to the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (2015), for those students in the area where the villages are located, 139,474 students (64%) are enrolled in schools with 102,923 (47%) being youth from a rural location. In the 2014-2015 reporting period, it was noted that 13.8% of primary students in the province are over-age for their grade-level, as well as 20.8% for lower secondary and 25% for upper secondary, respectively. Only 75% of primary students in the province transition to lower secondary school and, of those, only 63.8% transition to upper secondary school. The research setting villages have similar issues to those of the province and comparable to other rural, developing areas.

Similar to Cambodia at-large, the number of students matriculating to higher educational levels in the province is drastically reduced and these figures point to the need for additional support, particularly for rural children, to successfully complete primary and secondary education. Educational success is interwoven with a host of other contextual factors impacting these children, including economic pressure on the family, health of the children and their families, and family support of learning at home. Developmental delays are also prevalent among rural Cambodian children in general due to acute malnutrition, an issue impacting children country-wide (World Food Programme, 2003). Many of the children in the rural villages targeted by this study face malnutrition and stunted growth, which has serious implications for brain development, cognitive functioning, and long-term health consequences (Morley & Lucas, 1997; Stein & Stusser, 1985; World Food Programme, 2003), as well as effects on education (Behrman, 1996).

Childcare is another issue impacting school age children, as older siblings of primary and secondary school age children in these villages are obliged to care for infant and toddler siblings as parents migrate for work. Across extended periods of time, such absences stifle children's educational opportunities, and missed educational opportunities for these school-age caregivers further cement generational poverty of families. Anecdotally, local youth have noted to NGO staff that they feel their own guilt at going to school knowing that they could be working to support the household.

Drawing on Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation, which includes his *hierarchy of needs* conceptualization, the researchers sought to identify the significant issues that these rural youth face in social, economic, and educational terms. Given the universal nature of what Maslow proposes, our expectations regarding Cambodian youth transcend their specific time and location. We argue that not only are the basic needs of nutrition and economic security not being met, but basic safety and security at school may

also be in question due to attitudes and behaviors of teachers. Further, safety in the community is an issue, as village children and youth must travel significant distances on rural roads to get to the closest government schools.

According to Maslow (1943), the first two levels of basic human needs are *physiological*, which includes food and shelter, and *safety*, which includes security and freedom from fear. However, as will be noted below, the youth in this study do not have these two levels of basic needs met, even in public school, and therefore education is likely to be limited as an effective intervention.

Maslow's hierarchy has been adapted to serve educational settings (Mittelman, 1991), emphasizing the importance of meeting needs in an ordered fashion to maximize the learning experience. As clarified by Hutchinson (2003), without these basic needs being met, students will likely be demotivated (if not outright unable) to learn with student disengagement increased. In a general sense, lower-order needs must be met before one can progress to higher-order needs (Burleson & Thoron, 2014). With the focus on real world educational outcomes, it is worth considering a holistic understanding of the social and economic factors impacting these village youth and other youths facing similar settings and circumstances.

Research Questions

Research Question One: What barriers do rural Cambodian youth face to accessing education?

Research Question Two: How do rural Cambodian youths' attitudes of their government school compare to their attitudes of their NGO school?

RESEARCH METHOD

Survey items arose from a combination of discussions with NGO staff, informal interviewing with select youth, and exploration of the literature. Survey items were grouped according to the key elements of interest given the research questions. Furthermore, survey items were vetted by NGO staff for accuracy, age appropriateness, and face validity prior to administration.

The survey was intended to capture a clear understanding of youths' perceptions of barriers and attitudes toward education, the concrete material realities of the youth, their general attitudes toward migration, as well as youth attitudes toward the NGO school versus government school. The following items are organized around the research questions and utilize a variety of response items.

For Research Question One - *What barriers do rural Cambodian youth face to accessing education?*, responses are organized around seven themes: teachers, perceived safety, educational encouragement, enjoyment of education, perceived benefit of education, access to resources, and migration.

Six items asked the students to reflect on their teachers, specifically the behaviors of charging fees, hitting, verbally abusing, and payment for supplies. Three items were assessed using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree*, 2 = *partly disagree*, 3 = *partly agree*, and 4 = *agree*) while three additional items employed a *yes/no* response.

Three items asked students to reflect on the perceived safety at the locations of home, governmental school, and NGO school using the same 4-point Likert scale mentioned previously. All Likert scale items for this research employ the same 4-point scale.

Three items asked students to reflect on the extent to which they are encouraged at the home, governmental school, and NGO school using a 4-point Likert scale.

Two items asked students to reflect on their enjoyment of government school and the NGO school using the 4-point Likert.

Two items asked student to reflect on the perceived benefit of government school and the NGO school using the 4-point Likert scale.

Six items asked students to comment on whether or not they had the following resources: school supplies, school uniform, motorcycle, bicycle, smartphone, and computer. All six items were assessed using a *yes/no* response.

Lastly, six items asked students to provide information regarding whether their family engages in migrant working in Thailand and whether or not the student is interested in working in Thailand.

For Research Question Two - *How do rural Cambodian youths' attitudes of their government school compare to their attitudes of their NGO school*?, responses are organized providing a comparison of the government school with the NGO school, with the student's home included in some instances. Paired-sample t-tests were utilized when comparing only the government school and NGO school. When adding home as a third location, a repeated-measures ANOVA was employed. Items include comparisons across four themes: enjoyment of education, perceived safety, perceived benefit of education, and educational encouragement. All items were assessed using a 4-point Likert scale.

Participants

The current case study focused on the data from a small-scale survey using a purposeful sample of youth in the target area of Western Cambodia. The case study approach (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2002, Yin, 2003) was selected as effective for addressing research questions for a concise case limited by time and space. The case study approach was also selected as it allows for further expanding of the findings in both scope and depth with subsequent research in the future. The 25-item survey was designed by the researchers and the questions were based on information gathered from informal interviewing of NGO staff and youth participating in the NGO's programs. The key issues noted in these informal interviews became one or more of the survey items. In addition, an IRB has approved the use of human subjects in this study.

Surveys were implemented by NGO staff and administered to 50 youth, all of who participated in NGO programs to varying extents. Of the 50 youth, 35 were female and 15 were male. The participants' age ranged from 11-20 years old (M = 14.62, SD = 1.98). All of the youth participants attended government elementary, lower secondary, or upper secondary schools as well as the NGO's supplementary educational programming during the evenings and on weekends. Further, the number of people living in the households of these youth ranged from 3-12 (M = 6.66, SD = 2.61). An examination of sex differences revealed no significant difference by sex for the number of people in household, $t(48) = 0.36$, $p = .718$ nor by age of participant $t(48) = 0.89$, $p = .379$.

RESULTS

In response to Research Question One - *What barriers do rural Cambodian youth face to accessing education?*, descriptive statistics are organized around the seven themes addressed previously.

For Likert-style responses, means and standard deviations can be found in Table 1. For yes/no responses, raw numbers and percentages can be found in Table 2. A general summary of findings is that while barriers to education exist, students are able to recognize aspects of their educational circumstances as promising. For questions utilizing the 1 (*disagree*) to 4 (*agree*) scale, higher scores indicate greater agreement with the survey statement, while lower scores indicate greater disagreement and with 2.50 being the center point.

Results pertaining to government school teachers are mixed. While students tended to agree with statements that teachers do not hit (M = 2.68, SD = 0.89) or verbally abuse (M = 2.62, SD = 0.61), students agreed that

teachers charge fees for tutoring and snacks (M = 3.12, SD = 0.96). Regarding the item assessing agreement with the statement that teachers do not hit, 22 students (44%) indicated some level of disagreement, while for verbal abuse 20 students (40%) indicated some level of disagreement. These findings are of particular importance as these are some of the lowest scores for some of the most disheartening items indicating that some students experience hitting and verbal abuse in schools.

When asked Yes/No questions, most students (80% - 90%) similarly agreed that additional payment was needed for extra supplies, tutoring, and snacks.

Regarding perceived safety, students indicated agreement that the home (M = 3.32, SD = 0.98), NGO school (M = 3.40, SD = 0.76), and government school (M = 2.98, SD = 0.74) were generally safe places.

Regarding educational encouragement, students agreed with statements that they go to school, in part, due to encouragement from their parents (M = 3.72, SD = 0.54), from the NGO school (M = 3.44, SD = 0.64), and from the government school (M = 3.14, SD = 0.81).

Regarding enjoyment of education, students tended to agree with statements that they enjoyed both their NGO school (M = 3.52, SD = 0.54) and government school (M = 3.00, SD = 0.64).

Regarding perceived benefit of education, students tended to agree with statements that their NGO schooling (M = 3.66, SD = 0.52) and government schooling (M = 3.02, SD = 0.65) would benefit them in the future.

Results pertaining to access to resources showed that students are most likely to have a school uniform (72%), followed by bicycle (54%), school supplies (50%), a smartphone (34%), motorcycle (20%), and lastly a computer (12%). While these results are not surprising due to the overall poverty in the Banteay Meanchey province (Asian Development Bank, 2012, p. 3, 9), it is important to note that not all students own a school uniform or school supplies which are further indicators of poverty.

Regarding migration, 32 (64%) students have family working in Thailand. Of those with family working in Thailand, the number of family members working ranges from 1 to 9 with the average number, M = 3.94, SD = 1.98. Regarding the frequency of travelling to Thailand, four students (8%) reported everyday travel while 28 students (56%) reported travelling for an extended time period. Regarding the type of work, 1 student (2%) reported a cleaner, 25 (50%) reported laborer, while 6 (12%) reported seller.

When asked if the student was interested in working in Thailand, 29 (58%) reported “No” while 21 (42%) reported “yes”.

In response to Research Question Two - *How do rural Cambodian youths' attitudes of their government school compare to their attitudes of their NGO school*?, a series of paired-samples *t* tests and repeated-measures ANOVAs were utilized to examine group differences. Results indicate that the NGO school was viewed more positively than the government school, though differences were minimal. Means and standard deviation by location can be found in Table 3.

A paired-samples *t* test was used to examine differences comparing student enjoyment of school at the different locations. Students reported significantly more enjoyment at the NGO school ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.54$) than at the government school ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.64$), $t(49) = 5.43$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .38$. Overall enjoyment responses for both locations were favorable.

A paired-samples *t* test was used to examine differences comparing students' view on school being beneficial in the future. Students reported getting significantly more benefit from the NGO school ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.52$) than from the government school ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.65$), $t(49) = 5.64$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .39$. Overall perceived benefit responses were favorable for both locations.

A repeated-measures ANOVA was used to examine differences comparing feelings of safety at home, government school, and the NGO school. A significant difference was found amongst the three locations, $F(2, 98) = 4.38$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .082$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that youth felt significantly safer at the NGO school ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.76$) as compared to the government school ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.74$). The youth's home ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.98$) did not significantly differ from the government school nor the NGO school. The youth indicated that they felt safer at the NGO school as compared to the government school though overall perceived safety scores across all three locations were favorable.

A repeated-measures ANOVA was used to examine differences comparing sources of encouragement comparing home, government school, and NGO school. A significant difference was found among the three locations, $F(2, 98) = 10.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .171$. Parents were most encouraging ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.54$), followed by the NGO school ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.64$), and lastly the government school ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.81$). Only parents and government school were shown to be significantly different ($p = .001$). The youth feel encouraged across all three locations, though more so at home.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Barriers to Education

Educational/Situational Variables	*M*	*SD*
1. Teachers at my school charge student fees for tutoring or snacks.	3.12	0.96
2. Teachers at the government school do not hit students.	2.68	0.89
3. Teachers at the government school do not verbally abuse students.	2.62	0.61
4. My home is a safe place.	3.32	0.98
5. The NGO school is a safe place.	3.40	0.76
6. The government school is a safe place.	2.98	0.74
7. I go to school because my parents encourage me.	3.72	0.54
8. I go to school because the NGO school encourages me.	3.44	0.64
9. I go to school because the teachers at government school encourage me.	3.14	0.81
10. I enjoy attending the NGO school.	3.52	0.54
11. I enjoy attending government school.	3.00	0.64
12. I feel that the NGO school will benefit me in the future.	3.66	0.52
13. I feel that secondary school will benefit me in the future.	3.02	0.65

* Scores < 2.50 associated with disagreement; scores > 2.50 associated with agreement

Table 2: Response Frequencies for Barriers to Education

Educational/Situational Variables	No	Yes	Response Rate
1. I am required to pay teachers for extra supplies.	2 (4%)	48 (96%)	50 (100%)

2. I am required to pay teachers for tutoring.	8 (16%)	42 (84%)	50 (100%)
3. I am required to pay teachers for snacks.	4 (8%)	46 (92%)	50 (100%)
4. I have school supplies.	25 (50%)	25 (50%)	50 (100%)
5. I have a school uniform.	10 (20%)	36 (72%)	46 (92%)
6. I have a motorcycle.	40 (80%)	10 (20%)	50 (100%)
7. I have a bicycle.	23 (46%)	27 (54%)	50 (100%)
8. I have a smartphone.	33 (66%)	17 (34%)	50 (100%)
9. I have a computer.	44 (88%)	6 (12%)	50 (100%)
10. Do you have family working in Thailand?	17 (34%)	32 (64%)	49 (98%)
11. Are you interested in working in Thailand?	29 (58%)	21 (42%)	50 (100%)

Table 3: Comparison of Student Attitudes Across Government School, NGO School, and Home

Student Attitude	Government School (M & SD)	NGO School (M & SD)	Home (M & SD)
1. Enjoy attending school	3.00 (0.64)*	3.52 (0.54)*	N/A
2. School beneficial in future	3.02 (0.65)*	3.66 (0.52)*	N/A
3. School/home as a safe place	2.98 (0.74)*	3.40 (0.76)*	3.32 (0.98)
4. School/home encouraging	3.14 (0.81)*	3.44 (0.64)*	3.72 (0.54)*

* Significant at the .05 level

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Regarding Research Question One, educational issues persist in the rural villages. These rural Cambodian youth are affected by many situational factors at the macro-level that impact their access to education including: inadequate educational infrastructure, poor educational background of teachers, and increasing numbers of unskilled youth in the labor market.

Of particular interest were data on teachers charging fees for supplies, tutoring, and snacks. These financial obligations among already resource poor families act as further barriers to sustained educational attendance and attainment. Personal resources were the most significant micro-level barriers noted. Without transportation, school supplies, and even electronic devices, educational success is further limited. Rather than seeing these issues in isolation, they paint a picture of compounding issues that restrict rural youth's access to education, particularly over time, and make attrition more likely. To add to the barriers, the significant number of youths interested in migrating to Thailand for work, as well as the number of youths with family working in Thailand, represent an important pull factor exacerbating the educational barriers. Development initiatives targeting education in rural Cambodia, as well as other developing contexts, should consider the social and contextual barriers, the barriers within government school settings, and the professional development of teachers, in order for educational measures to be effective.

The literature shows improvements at the macro-level but generally paints a picture that rural and impoverished Cambodians are encouraging their children to choose work over school. The current data indicates a counter-narrative that rural Cambodian youth are encouraged to go to school by their parents and teachers, enjoy school, and see the benefit of education. This data illustrates the overall positive attitudinal orientation toward education. The lower ratings for encouragement from teachers represent a potential growth area that may impact educational attrition issues and would benefit from additional investigation.

Improved teacher training in Cambodia could target positive encouragement of students and sensitization to issues of verbal and physical abuse in schools. Teacher training could also highlight the educational barriers related to teacher's charging fees, though, unless addressed, teacher pay will remain an issue. Training on effective methods of understanding and addressing poverty through orientations such as Maslow's (1943; 1987) work may also positively impact student attrition. As clarified by Haggerty (1999) and Desautels (2014), these basic needs impacted by poverty must be addressed in order to see real comprehensive educational outcomes at a

broader scale in rural Cambodia. The situational issues may remain more overpowering than the encouragement and benefits perceived, despite some of the more promising elements in the results of this study. Nonetheless, recognizing the criticism that have been leveled against Maslow's approach (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976), we should simultaneously be somewhat cautious in overly applying Maslow's tenants. Might the context of a Cambodian border region, and the cultural differences found when comparing Cambodia and the Western world be sufficient to rethink application of Maslow's hierarchy? With the necessity of needs being met in a rank-ordered fashion being challenged (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976), it may be that the youth are capable of learning in the absence of foundational needs being met. Further, the changing landscape of education within the global marketplace makes identifying the essential skills and knowledge needed for student success in a place like rural Cambodia a moving target. We must also consider the barriers noted above as potentially motivating factors for students to seek out education from various sources.

Regarding Research Question Two, evidence supports the claim that the NGO schools are viewed by students as more favorable than the government schools. Significant differences were found in favor of the NGO school for the variables of enjoyment, perceived benefit, and feelings of safety. Given the nature of the 1 (*disagree*) to 4 (*agree*) scale, results indicate that while some students generally agreed that their locations (NGO school, government school, and home) were favorable, not all felt this way. The only mean to fall below a 3.00 was that for feelings of safety at the government school, which scored a 2.98. In sum, student agreement with the four statements (enjoyment, beneficial, safety, & encouragement) paints a somewhat promising picture.

While the current data reflects positively on the NGO school, it should be noted that the variables under investigation are student sentiments that may or may not reflect real world academic gains. Data pertaining to student success, graduation rates, post education employment, and other more tangible outcomes would provide a relevant complement to the current findings.

Past research on non-formal education through NGOs in Southeast Asia confirms the current findings favoring NGO schools over government school, at least in terms of student engagement and enjoyment (Author, 2014; 2015). NGO schools have multiple advantages over government schools, particularly in terms of their flexibility. NGO programs can adapt and customize their programs and curriculum based on local needs, as well as tailor skills needed in the local job market. As well, NGO staff may have

different opportunities to build relationships with youth in less formal settings,

However, NGO-based non-formal education programs often face obstacles associated with existing outside formal educational credentialing and accreditation structures that government schools enjoy (Author, 2014; 2015). Consequently, education received from an NGO education program may not be formally recognized in the job market or for further tertiary education pursuits. NGO schools face other limitations as well. Resource limitations, recruiting, training, teacher retention, and infrastructure needs are common problems. NGO schools often face an additional challenge regarding locally accepted pedagogical practices. As funding for NGO schools often comes from abroad, so do ideas regarding pedagogy. NGOs that employ educational practices that operate outside of the cultural norm often face criticism, contention, and resistance in their local communities for not using tradition approaches.

Although the data in this study was informative and useful for understanding educational issues impacting rural youth, it was not intended to be fully comprehensive at addressing all the educational barriers and issues present. The study had several limitations. While the questionnaires used to assess youth viewpoints had face validity, they lacked formal validation procedures. Additionally, a larger sample size would have allowed for less overall error in the self-response data. Further, the study represents a snapshot in time in a setting that is dynamic; it may fail to capture the multitude of variables that are impacting individuals and the region. To better understand the trajectory of educational issues in light of rapid economic and social changes in Cambodia, longitudinal research is needed. The viewpoint of teachers, parents, and community members is also needed to gain a broader, more holistic perspective on the educational issues noted in this study. Finally, this study is limited in its focus on student attitudes and perceptions, rather than concrete outcomes of educational achievement.

Somewhat negative attitudes toward teachers imply teacher practices as potential educational barriers that need further investigation. Although it was evident that some verbal and physical abuse occurs in schools, clarification through more research is necessary regarding verbal and physical abuse and general safety. The lack of overwhelming evidence of abuse may imply that these issues could be addressed and are not highly prevalent. Resources dedicated to better understanding the needs of the teachers may have a direct impact on the quality of education for the students.

IMPLICATIONS

It is clear that students' basic needs are not being met in the community, with students' basic needs (in terms of Maslow's *hierarchy of needs*) being challenged in schools. There is a definite need to improve the quality of government school education. Such efforts need to acknowledge the importance of learning environments that value and foster student physical, emotional, and economic safety. Without a safe learning environment, free of bribery and preferential treatment by teachers, student learning will continue to suffer at the individual and community level, further limiting Cambodia's development, and stifling youth development and well-being. Such effects extend beyond Cambodia in similarly developing societies with large rural and youth populations.

This study contributes to the field by highlighting the voices of particular rural village youth in Cambodia who are directly affected by the learning environments in government schools, and whose voices are often overlooked. Much dialogue occurs regarding the increase in educational provision for poor children and youth in developing settings. In addition to discussion regarding curriculum and instruction, the basic needs of safety for students, not only in terms of physical violence, but also in terms of misuse of emotional and economic power by teachers, is often overlooked in the literature and needs more attention. The findings of this study illustrate the presence of these issues, implying the need for both focused and comprehensive understandings of the relationships between the physical, emotional, and economic well-being of rural government school attendees, their academic achievement, and their likelihood to gain knowledge, skills, and credentials needed for the rapidly changing Cambodian economic landscape.

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