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Person-Context Influences on Educational Involvement in Rural Cambodian Schools

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Abstract

Based on Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time model, this study explored the attitudes and potential factors affecting children's educational participation in two non-governmental organization-sponsored rural schools in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with students (female and male), teachers, principals, and parents. A discovery-oriented qualitative analytical approach revealed that at the individual level, truancy and student respect for school regulations impacted school participation. At the family level, parental support and family difficulties influenced school participation. At the school level, teacher ability, teacher-parent interactions, and adequate resources either facilitated or hindered student success. At the socio-cultural level, socioeconomic conditions, communal supports, and traditional gendered expectations created gender disparities in school involvement. Policy implications include a nation-wide comprehensive professional development program targeting teacher training (structural level), a strong teacher-counselor partnership to facilitate the development of literacy campaigns (community level), and increasing female mentors and counselors to increase gender parity (cultural level).

Keywords: Person-context, Cambodia, educational participation, gender, student dropout

Introduction

Cambodia has seen remarkable growth in the formal education system since its independence (Overseas Development Institute, 2010). With the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGoC) prioritizing a universal nine-year basic educational plan (No, Sam, & Hirakawa, 2012) and the assistance of international and non-governmental organizations (NGO's; Brush, Shin, & Shrestha, 2011), enrollment in schools increased from 1.57 million in 1990 to 3.07 million in 2016 (Education Management Information System [EMIS], 2017). Despite this increase, primary and secondary level dropout rates reflect gender disparities (No, Kreng, Sok, & Heng, 2016). For instance, for every 100 boys enrolled in lower secondary education, there are 63 girls enrolled; for every 100 boys, there are less than 50 girls enrolled in upper secondary and tertiary education (United Nations Development Fund for Women [UNIFEM], the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom, 2004). Moreover, with 90% of the population living in rural areas (UNIFEM et al., 2004), urban-rural disparities have also been revealed. For instance, in comparison to 2.94 years of school in rural areas, urban communities have on an average of five years of schooling. Moreover, males tend to have 4.17 years of schooling on average when compared to 2.54 years for females (Ministry of Education and Youth Sports [MoEYS] & United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2005). Males in urban areas have an average of 6.04 years of schooling whereas females in rural areas have 2.25 years of average schooling (Ministry of Education and Youth Sports [MoEYS] & United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2005). Further, in comparison to female dropout rates at the primary level (3.9%), the entire Kingdom reported a 20.1% upper secondary level dropout rate in rural areas. These statistics are replicated in Siem Reap (primary level: 3%; upper secondary: 18.2%) for females (EMIS, 2017). Although Cambodia has requirements for monitoring school regulations, no programs or personnel exist to hold schools accountable in meeting the government standards for education (Brush et al., 2011). "Thus, Cambodia could be said to encourage schooling but not require it," (Brush et al., 2011, p. 6) affecting both attendance and retention of students within schools, especially within secondary levels.

Dropout trends have been rooted in the larger socio-economic structure of Cambodia (Gorman, Dorina, & Kheng, 1999; Keng, 2004). Using data from a household survey and annual school census, the World Bank (2005) found poverty, low availability of schools, late school entry,

low monetary incentives, low teacher quality, and inequality resulted in dropouts in Cambodian schools. Primary reasons for girl's dropping out have been attributed to high levels of housework, early marriage, and security risks (Velasco, 2001). Keng (2004) noted additional reasons at individual and household levels (e.g., students' and parents' low educational aspirations). Recently, No et al. (2016) expanded the focus on the influence of multiple factors, and highlighted similar reasons impacting dropout in Phnom Penh and Kampong Speu. However, studies are either limited in capturing opinions of only a couple stakeholders (e.g., dropout students, or parents, and/or teachers; Keng, 2004; No & Hirakawa, 2012; Velasco, 2001) or lack a theoretical frame (e.g., Keng, 2004; No & Hirakawa, 2012; No et al., 2016). Given the paucity of empirical research in this area, our study sought to understand how multiple person-context factors support or hinder male and female students' participation and attendance in two NGO sponsored schools: a junior high school and a high school in the rural areas of Siem Reap in Cambodia. Moreover, although some steps have been taken to develop a "girl's counselor scheme in UNICEF-supported schools" (Creative Associates International, 2011, p. 58; MoEYE & UNICEF, 2005), there is a limited research addressing the role of school counseling within the Cambodian school system. Thus, in this study, we also focus on identifying implications for the role of counselors within the Cambodian school systems.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model includes a focus on "proximal processes" and served as a guiding framework. Proximal processes refer to regular reciprocal interactions that occur over an extended period of time (e.g., playing with a child, reading to a child) and influence development (Tudge, Mokrova, Hartfield, & Karnik, 2009). Because of the cross-sectional nature of our study, we were unable to examine the everyday interactions between stakeholders in the developmental process. However, we identified messages received (from peers, parents, teachers, etc.) by our student participants as proximal processes that influenced school participation.

In his theory, Bronfenbrenner (2005) focused on personal characteristics (e.g., gender, age, motivation, cognitions) as well as personal values and beliefs (e.g., attitudes/beliefs) that influence an individual's development (Tudge, et al., 2009). Studies have explored the role of such personal characteristics in dropout rates in Cambodia (e.g., Keng, 2004; No et al., 2016; World Bank, 2005). Research suggests that, parents' positive attitude toward children's future careers and their economic status can increase children's chances of participating in formal education (e.g., Keng, 2004; No et al., 2016; World Bank, 2005). However, traditional Cambodian cultural norms shape parental expectations of boys' and girls' education. Parents believe that economic returns on boys' education are greater in comparison to girls, with more employment opportunity for boys (Fiske, 1995; No et al., 2016). This is also influenced by the fact that girls are typically relegated to non-economic activities such as domestic responsibilities (Kim, 2011a, 2011b). Further, parents tend to be very protective of girls, especially when they enter puberty (Velasco, 2001), even restricting them from attending schools in rural areas. Thus, gender, age, as well as parental attitudes and beliefs towards education and gender served as personal characteristics in our study.

Four Interrelated Systems

Proximal processes are also influenced by the context in which individuals exist and develop. Bronfenbrenner (2005) highlighted four interrelated systems -- microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Beyond these interrelated systems, Bronfenbrenner highlighted time as an added dimension. Time reflects the historical timeframe within which individuals develop.

Microsystems. In our study, family and school represented the microsystems. As the fundamental socializing institution, the family plays an important role in academic success as well as challenges of children (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992). Early family socialization influences and parents' education backgrounds are predictive of students' academic achievement as well as dropouts from school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Keng, 2003; No & Hurakawa, 2012). Schools and especially supportive administrators, teachers, and school counselors play an important role in a student's success (e.g., Kim, 2007; Pennie, Lertora, Crews, & Hicks, 2016; White & Kelly, 2010). For instance, administrators can promote teacher-school quality, morality, consistent practices, and mentorship programs, including service learning activities (Jaureguizar, Ibabe, & Straus, 2013; Pennie et al., 2016; Wentzel, 2002). Kim (2007) reported that teachers hold a greater capacity to retain children at school if they adhere to a more personalized approach (e.g., consider familial and personal factors that impact school attendance). Similarly, school counselors can serve as a bridge between the home and the school by increasing positive teacher-student relationships as well as parent-teacher collaborations (Jaureguizar et al., 2013; Pennie et al., 2016; Walker, Shenker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2010)

Mesosystem. Mesosystemic influences relate to interactions between systems (e.g., school-family) and highlight significant challenges. Not only do teachers and educational officials in districts and central government departments lack good training (World Bank, 2005), a second problem is absenteeism (Kim & Rouse, 2011). Due to low salaries, Cambodia teachers often remain absent and take on additional jobs such as farming, tourist guiding, and taxi driving (Kim, 2007). The low teacher wages also result in their unprecedented charging of informal fees (e.g., Barton & Rith, 2006; Kim & Rouse, 2011; No et al., 2016), further impacting students and their families' experiences.

Although the constitution assures free education for all, education-related costs, including school fees, uniforms, stationery, transportation, and tutoring, are a major impediment for parents (Gorman et al., 1999). Moreover, barriers for students and teachers include lack of parental monitoring, such as checking homework, encouraging offsprings to work hard, and consultation with teachers (Keng, 2004). Lack of parental involvement and weak parent-student and teacher-parent interactions seem to be important determinants of school participation for rural Cambodian children (No et al., 2016).

Exosystem. The exosystem refers to those contexts that influence the child's development (e.g., parent's work environment) but are not directly connected to the individual. Existing literature suggests that family characteristics such as, parental education, occupation, and income can influence students' drop out of school (e.g., No et al., 2016; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009; World Bank, 2005). Moreover, when economic pressures require parents to participate in multiple jobs, their children are required to assist or contribute economically to the household (Gorman et al., 1999), significantly impacting children's academic achievements.

Macrosystem. Finally, macrosystem or broad social perspectives such as economic circumstances, cultural expectations, and government policies, are important sources of influence. Cambodia has a hierarchical societal structure where power and status are important determinants of social relations (Downs, Bernstein, & Marchese, 1997). One such influence that we examined was the cultural-gendered expectations for boys and girls. Despite being a matriarchal society, gender-role expectations in Cambodia are deeply rooted in the culture (Gorman et al., 1999) and the social order considers women to be at a lower status than men (Downs et al., 1997; UNIFEM et al., 2004). Although the constitution recognizes gender equality in political, economic, social, and cultural participation, the conventional social practices contradict this basic right (No & Hirakawa, 2012; Gorman et al., 1999). In fact, the 2010 National Education Support Strategy report of the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) noted that attaining gender equality in Cambodia is difficult due to shifting "market-oriented economy, rapidly growing labor force, and limited employment opportunities" (p. 14). This has important implications for the education of female children in Cambodia. In fact, No et al.'s (2016) study revealed that in rural areas, community values dictated lower investment in girl's education in particular.

Time. The final component in the PPCT model is time. This includes the historical timeframe within which individuals develop. Cambodian historical events including genocide and the destruction of the Khmer Rouge regime (Bergin, 2009; Totten & Parsons, 2012) have significantly affected the educational system of the country, resulting in an urgent need for restoration and rebuilding of the educational system (Sophoan, 1997). Although the education system expanded rapidly, it has not kept up with the equally rising population. This has led to higher illiteracy rate among females (females: 25%, males:13.5%), particularly in rural areas (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012). A Cambodian Socio-Economic Survey conducted in 2014 (National Institute of Statistics [NIS], Ministry of Planning, 2014) revealed a 14% gap between females and males, and a 11% gap between rural and urban areas. This historical context is an important consideration, not only due to the transmission of Khmer cultural values intergenerationally (e.g., attitudes towards systems), but its impact on educational attainment as well as mental health (e.g., stress, domestic violence). Jong et al. (2001) revealed that 28% of adult Cambodians suffer from PTSD with symptoms of intrusion and avoidance prevalent in at least 50% of the population within several provinces (Dubois, et al., 2004). Rumbaut (1991) concluded high correlations between adolescents' grade point average (GPA) and caregivers' psychological profiles. Eng, Mulsow, Cleveland, and Hart's (2009) study revealed that parents who reported brain injury during the genocide tended to have children who performed poorly at school. Such research findings support a multigenerational legacy of trauma and its impact on children's academic potential. In our study, attitudes influencing school involvement at the current time were considered.

The Research Questions

As informed by the literature and given the exploratory nature of our study, two research questions guided our study:

1. What are the attitudes of different immediate stakeholders living in rural Cambodia (students, parents, teachers, and principals) towards education?
2. What factors facilitate or hinder student involvement and dropout in two NGO-sponsored schools in rural Cambodia?

Method

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the related research questions, focus groups and individual interviews were regarded as the best collection tool for the study because of their ability to generate in-depth data on the topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This was important in relation to be able to probe for further clarity on issues that may not be feasible in survey methodologies. Focus groups were held with students, parents or guardians, and teachers, whilst the two heads of school were interviewed individually. Data were then analyzed using a discovery-oriented qualitative approach (Mahrer, 1988; Yeh & Inman 2007).

Participants

Because NGO's have been identified as key educational partners in providing greater access and community participation in Cambodia (No et al., 2016), a junior and

senior high school affiliated with an NGO in rural Cambodia were approached. Due to the critical transitory period between primary and lower secondary schools in Cambodia (i.e., completion of primary school at age 12) when dropouts tend to occur (Kosal & KinKesa, 2015), we chose to interview students during this period as well as those that had successfully been able to enter high school. Thus, participants were students in grades 7-8 and 11-12. The seven student focus groups included 34 junior and high school girls (age range 13 to 23 years) and 15 junior and high school boys (age range 13 to 22 years). Many students were older than would be typical of these grades due to starting school at a later age. Of the 18 students interviewed at the high school, three female students had dropped out of school (age range 15 to 23) within the 2011-2012 year but still agreed to participate in the research. All participants were identified through the school principal with a primary criterion of selecting both male and female students who were currently in grades 7-8 and 11-12 and those who had dropped out from these grades. All students lived with their families which included parents, siblings and, at times, their grandparents, uncles, and aunts. A recruitment flyer was sent to parents by the school principal resulting in three parent focus groups included eight mothers and a grandmother (age range 39 to 66 years), and three fathers and a grandfather (age range 39 to 67 years). Table 1 describes participant characteristics and Table 2 describes students' family characteristics relevant to the study's objectives. The two teachers' focus groups, also recruited through a recruitment flyer by the school principal, included four males and eight females (age range 23 to 42 years). All the teachers had taught in both primary and secondary education and their experience ranged from 1 to 23 years. The two school principals were both males (age range 43 to 45 years), and their experience in schools were two and nine years.

Procedures for Focus Group Interviews

Pursuant to seeking approval from the NGO, we received approval from the Lehigh University Institutional Review Board. Informed consent forms (for adults) and assent forms (for children) that described the purpose of the study, the benefits and risk of engagement in the study, the voluntary nature of the study, and well as the option to stop participation at any time were written in English but translated in Khmer for participants by the interpreter.

Interviews (focus group and individual) were held at the NGO-sponsored schools in the rural area of Siem Reap in Cambodia. Groups were differentiated based on gender for students and parents to control for gender effects on group dynamics. We conducted five focus groups with female students, two focus groups with male students, two focus groups with mothers, one focus group with fathers, and two focus groups with teachers. The principals were individually interviewed.

The focus groups were audio-recorded and conducted with assistance from a Cambodian interpreter (a high school teacher of English and Khmer literature), conversant in the local language-Khmer. Language discrepancies or meaning associated with certain translated phrases were discussed with a faculty member conversant with the Khmer language. Participants were provided with a description of the study and informed consents were obtained prior to interviewing. The focus groups lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. No incentives were provided.

Data Collection Tool

The interview protocol included semi-structured open-ended questions that focused on understanding participant experiences with the school, the importance of attending school, and exploring stakeholders' expectations of the students. Interview questions were informed by the literature (e.g., Keng, 2004; Valesco, 2001; World Bank, 2005).

We wanted to explore what parents, teachers, and principals hoped for the children's future, and whether they had similar aspirations for students, regardless of their gender. We also asked teachers and principals what their own goals and expectations were in their roles. Further, we wanted to understand how parents dealt with disagreements with their children and whether they gave the same message to their daughters and sons.

Demographics. We collected information on students' age, gender, grade level, length of time in school, number of siblings, birth order, parent's education, parents' occupation, and number and type of family members living in the home. Demographic data on parents included age, gender, number and gender of their children, education, occupation, and number and type of family members living in the home. Teachers and principals were asked for their age, gender, years at school, and grades taught.

Data Analysis

The discovery-oriented qualitative analytical approach was used to code the data (Mahrer, 1988). As an exploratory method, this qualitative approach uses an "up close, in-depth, and naïve study of a phenomena that is new" (Yeh & Inman 2009, p. 374). A salient aspect of this methodology is the ability to use it with either a small or large sample while maintaining consistency across cases, through a consensual process using multiple raters (Yeh & Inman 2007). We addressed the validity of our data analytic approach by using multiple strategies. First, using multiple raters was an important way to triangulate data (Denzin, 1978). A second strategy was to explore discrepant evidence or negative cases (Maxwell, 1996). Here, generating comparison tables (Mahrer, 1988) was important to revise categories that reflected the lived experience of the participant. A third strategy is the use of numerical or quasi-statistical results in reporting findings (Becker, 1970).

Using frequencies is a common approach used in discovery-oriented approach (Mahrer, 1988) to reflect the amount of discrepancy that may exist in the data (Maxwell, 1996). A fourth and final validity is transgressive validity (Richardson, 1994). By being sensitive to the interplay of the different contextual factors (e.g., micro, meso, etc.) we were able to critically examine the experience of these stakeholders. We saw the discover-oriented qualitative approach as particularly meaningful for all these reasons as well as because it allowed us to make sense of the data by scanning the units or statements to develop themes and patterns that evolved within the broad stimulus topic areas defined by our interview questions.

The research team consisted of a South Asian female Counseling Psychologist and two first year doctoral level Counseling Psychology graduate students (a South Asian female international student and a Southeast Asian female student). All three research team members had experience supervising as well as providing school counseling services in the United States and were well versed in qualitative analyses (using discovery oriented and consensual qualitative research). In addition, all three members had a range of personal, clinical, and research experiences related to Asian cultural contexts.

Before coding the data, all data was deidentified. The coding process consisted of initially reading a couple of verbatim transcripts and then identifying a preliminary set of categories. Categories were developed based on patterns noted in the data set. After a collective consensus on the final list of categories within each domain, each team member independently went through each interview and sorted participant responses into potential categories. Coding disagreements were discussed and resolved through consensus.

Results

Findings have been reported on groups rather than individual participants to maintain confidentiality. The data elicited led us to present our results through four lenses (Table 3): (a) individual; (b) family; (c) school; (d) sociocultural factors. Each of these lenses are aligned with the four proximal processes and interrelated systems of micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems including attitudes within the current time frame.

Individual Factors

All stakeholders spoke of "problematic student behaviors" such as truancy (e.g., engaging with bad elements, gambling) impacting student success. Student ability and investment (e.g., lack of respect for school regulations, fighting, lack of perseverance, time management, difficulty understanding class material) was a second factor that impacted student dropout. Principals, teachers, and girls also referred to the age gap amongst same-grade peers as an embarrassment resulting in dropouts. Illness, marriage, and lack of knowledge regarding school policies as to when to return to school were three additional factors that seemed to impede school participation.

Conversely, participants identified several "good behaviors," that one needed to display in order to succeed in school. Principals as well as both groups of students identified cooperation and collaboration amongst students as important for success. These stakeholders also noted that being perseverant in their desire to be educated was an important factor in school success. Student-participants also noted that principals, teachers, and parents would want them to develop good character and discipline. Subsumed in this were following school regulations, avoiding drugs, avoiding truancy, and better time management. Finally, only the girls noted that it was important to take responsibility for one's mistakes.

Family Factors

All stakeholders noted family difficulties as one major reason for students' dropout or lack of school participation. In this regard, participants highlighted several factors within their exo- and macro-systems such as poverty, domestic violence, parental education, migratory parents, balancing home and school life as examples of this challenge. Parents and girls specifically referred to financial constraints as challenges. Although girls expressed concerns over lack of money, parents expanded on this by identifying challenges in paying for private classes and additional fees frequently charged by teachers for test booklets and other copied materials used in class.

At the microsystemic level, parents also expressed challenges related to children not conforming to family expectations. When speaking about these problematic behaviors, parents highlighted the disagreements/quarrels they frequently had with their children. Most problems or disagreements were related to money issues with children (in particular boys) threatening to drop out of school if they did not get the money. Parents reported several different strategies they used to address these issues: attempting to reason out the issue, role modeling appropriate behavior, persuading them to listen to them, and giving advice. If none of the strategies worked, parents typically encouraged their children to seek employment to support the family. They indicated that they provided the same message irrespective of gender. However, parents also advised their sons to associate with good friends to "escape from doing drugs, smoking, drinking." Alternatively, parents advised their daughters to conform to traditional gendered roles and expectations noting: "Cambodian girls shouldn't travel a lot, and they cannot go to special places like the Buddhist monastery without their parents."

Conversely, parental investment and support were seen as both facilitating and hindering. For instance, praise from parents and parents persuading children to attend school were seen as facilitative. Student-participants and the principals shared that it was important for parents to be

proud of their children's accomplishments, with education being seen as a valuable tool to achieving. Parents also hoped that their children would be free to choose different professions. Overall, there was a sense that parents desired a better future for their children, family, and society in order to have what they called a "prized life." Parent-participants needed to prevent their children from facing hardships. Conversely, principals and teachers noted lack of familial support and negative messaging or attitudes towards attending school (i.e., time) as hindering success.

School Factors

At the microsystemic level, all participants mentioned the supportive and cooperative nature of the teachers as a definite strength. Teachers were endorsed for their cooperative abilities and schools were praised for their resourcefulness. In addition, at the macrosystemic level, participants identified both schools as model schools, with good learning environment, free education, access to a variety of classes, access to resources (e.g., computer, library, school supplies), good peers, and good discipline. In addition to the school's location, each of these factors was seen as salient to school attendance. Further, parents, teachers, and students regarded a clean and secure school environment as a strength, referring to beautiful schoolyards with trees and a garden and parking space for their vehicles. Finally, principals and parents noted support from the NGO as evidence of a strong school.

Conversely, participants identified factors that negatively influenced school participation. Students regarded classroom challenges (e.g., noisy classroom, difficult subjects) and lack of resources (e.g., electricity, lab equipment) as factors that hindered success. Principals, boys and teachers highlighted teacher ability and behaviors (e.g., tardiness, violence, inadequate teacher training, lack of integrity, poor lesson plans) as impacting academic growth. Relatedly, both teachers and principals wanted professional development to gain more knowledge and as one principal noted, "be conscious of jobs and education," and to develop the school for current and future generations. They also identified a need for more financial resources (e.g., additional monies or higher salaries).

In addressing the linkage (i.e., mesosystem) between systems, participants felt that better cooperation between staff and parents added to the quality of the school. In particular, principals and teachers identified a need for better cooperation with the parents so as to persuade their truant children to come back to school. Teachers also noted a need for greater cooperation in the context of their work with principals, colleagues, and students. Finally, the principals spoke to a need for greater cooperation with the NGO.

Socio-cultural Factors

At the macrosystemic level, principals, teachers, boys, and girls identified environmental barriers such as floods, lack of a clean environment, and noisy surroundings as impeding the running of the school. Lack of community support (e.g., negative messages about schooling, peers and neighbors dissuading student from attending school/class) reflected the current attitudes towards schooling (i.e., time) and was an additional factor that made students dislike school. Girls in particular noted several ways of countering these negative messages. They spoke of using distractions (reading novel, listening to music), forgetting the problem, talking to friends, tolerating or disregarding the complaint, or standing up and speaking back to the neighbor who dissuaded them from going to school. Participants also acknowledged gendered expectations and inequities, influenced girls' ability to fully engage in school. There were aware that in their communities, education was regarded as secondary for girls, but primary for boys. Finally, participants believed the location of the school was both facilitating and hindering success. Whereas for some students, the school was located close to their home, for other it was challenging, because "students come from outskirts and spend long time coming to school." Lack of transportation compounded this issue and was identified as a major challenge by all five stakeholders. Student-participants either did not have bicycles or had to share bicycles with their siblings resulting in dropping out of school.

Finally, education was seen as a valuable tool to improve self, family, and societal wellbeing. Participants shared that their hopes were the same, regardless of gender. Students noted that their principals, teachers, and parents expected and hoped that they would develop knowledge and skills that would help prepare them for the future. For example, teachers and principals wanted students to have better jobs in the future and teachers wanted students to follow in their footsteps and become teachers, and to deal with potential obstacles that may impede their success.

Discussion

This study focused on better understanding the attitudes toward education and factors that influenced school participation by interviewing five different stakeholders, namely, male and female students, parents, teachers, and principals in an NGO-sponsored junior high school and a high school in the rural areas of Siem Reap, Cambodia. Findings clearly revealed the usefulness of the Bronfenbrenner PPCT model as a guiding framework for understanding factors that facilitated and hindered student success in the two schools.

It was evident that all participants considered education to be an important avenue to not only develop one's character but also gain a better foothold in the developing Cambodian economy. Contrary to Keng's (2004) research, parents, principals, and teachers agreed that educational values are important regardless of the students' gender. Notwithstanding, cultural messages impacted girls' educational aspirations. Our data revealed that girls struggled more with cultural and familial messages that were

indirectly or directly conveyed to them. These messages negatively impacted their decisions to stay in school. Our participants highlighted several factors influencing dropout rates for both boys and girls. These included familial challenges (microsystem), students' level of investment in their education (individual level), engaging in bad behaviors (individual level), parental education (exosystem), and lack of transportation (macrosystem). However, what stands out are the distinctions between girls' and boy's ability to continue education. Boys made active decisions based in individual factors (e.g., using school as a bargaining tool or engaging in bad behaviors); whereas, girls were impacted by external factors based within their meso-, exo-, and macro-systems (e.g., domestic violence, parental education, balancing home and school work), as well as the need to conform to traditional roles. This clearly highlights the invasive role of traditional gendered expectations (Gorman et al., 1999).

The role of teachers in particular seemed to be remarkably salient in our findings. Consistent with other findings (e.g., Bunlay, Wright, Sophea, Bredenburg, & Singh, 2010; No et al., 2016; World Bank, 2005), our participants noted that at a micro level, teachers were frequently under-qualified and needed professional development to be better educators. Having well-trained teachers who are collaborative, supportive, and provided good advice were seen as important to student's growth and development. The findings that teachers expect students to follow in their footsteps and that students also wanted to become teachers provided additional support for the valued role of teachers (Kim & Rouse, 2011).

There seemed to be much consistency among participants on aspects that contributed to successful students at an individual level and a good healthy school at a macro level. These include good character and discipline, cooperation with and respect for school regulations, adequate resources, and clean and secure environments. Conversely, crowded classrooms, noisy environments, and not having clear information on school policies regarding attendance and ability to rejoin the school after a period of having dropped out, were important concerns that impacted student success in school. The latter has important implications for a hierarchical system where students, and in particular girls, are in less powerful positions within the school and society. Furthermore, given that students typically were older for their grade, embarrassment and shame further exacerbated their situation. These findings are consistent with other research conducted in Cambodia (Keng, 2003; Valesco, 2001; World Bank, 2005). In fact, data from a 2001 Cambodia Child Labour Survey (World Bank, 2005) highlights that over-age enrollment tends to be higher in rural (80.5%) versus urban (73.7%) areas, and higher for males (82.1%) than females (71.7%). However, these data only reflect students who have stayed in the schools rather than dropped out of school.

Our findings also revealed that parental investment (e.g., support, pride, motivation) as well as ability to reason with their children on the importance of attending school and greater interaction between teachers and parents (i.e., mesosystem), was noted as an additional factor in facilitating student success. Likewise, Keng (2004) highlighted parental role in promoting student educational attainment. However, the fact that there were community members who seemed to dissuade girls and their families from attending school is concerning and reflects the communal censors that can impact familial decisions in collectivistic Asian cultures (i.e., macrosystem; Inman, Howard, Beaumont, & Walker, 2007).

In sum, our findings reveal the impact of proximal processes (e.g., messages from parents, teachers, principals) and contexts (e.g., parental education and involvement, financial constraints, parent-teacher interactions, teacher training) on student success and in particular, dropout rates for both girls and boys. There appeared to be several personal (e.g., age, poverty, access to basic necessities, lack of transportation) and contextual factors (e.g., hidden educational costs, communal pressures, gendered attitudes) that seemed to influence student academic attainment and in particular girls' educational achievement, despite some progressive thoughts surrounding gender equity in education for both boys and girls within this sample. Moreover, the idea that good education is important to survive in modern society and develop the country highlights the temporal shift in attitudes based in needs of current day Cambodia (e.g., time).

Limitations

The participation pool was restricted by the availability and selection of participants. The parents who showed for to the interviews seemed committed to the educational process and had a positive relationship with the school personnel. It is possible that these parents' perspectives may have differed from those who chose not to participate. Furthermore, the principal and the NGO staff selected the students and teachers who participated in the study. In doing so, it is likely that we may have missed out on hearing from disempowered or marginalized students and teachers. Moreover, it would have been helpful to speak to the parents of students who had dropped out and never returned to school to get a more contextualized perspective on this situation. A second limitation may be reflective of the methodology and data analytic procedures used. Our dependence on the interpreter to accurately interpret the comments made by our participants, may have influenced the manner in which the data were recorded and coded. Regardless, our findings have important implications.

Policy and Practice Implications

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (2005), implications need to be considered at multiple levels. Specifically, implications at structural, community, and cultural levels need to be identified in shifting policy and

practice. Such a broad and yet targeted emphasis can help facilitate changes needed at the multiple levels.

Structural Intervention

Dropouts seem to be affected not only by the school's location from the home, but also teacher quality, the connection between curriculum and employment, and need for mental health support. Thus, we make the following recommendations:

Teacher training. A nation-wide comprehensive professional development program for teachers and support staff can assist teachers and schools in the provision of quality education. This entails teacher training programs that focus on active pedagogical approaches and incentivize teaching while monitoring informal fees or costs incurred within their teaching assignments (No et al., 2016).

Connecting education to vocational skills. This involves strengthening the relevance of upper secondary education to specific vocational skills (European Commission, 2010). This requires the development of comprehensive education and career guidance policies for traditional and alternative vocational pathways, at the national level. For traditional pathways, schools can house career information centers and develop school-work placement programs that have strong school-business partnerships, allowing students to interact with significant mentors in the community (UNESCO, 2010). For alternative pathways, school can develop "second chance education programs" or "catch up programs" that use mutiprofessional teams (e.g., teachers, guidance/school counselors, businesses) to target those students that experience interruptions in school engagement (ECORYS, 2013). These can include linking school projects to local community needs, flexible curriculum focused on work experiences, developing good communication skills, and basic life skills related to financial education (e.g., Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010; Nevala et al., 2011; Spielfhofer, Marson-Smith, & Evans, 2009).

School counseling. Given the intergenerational trauma and history of Cambodia, schools need to not only address teacher's own self-care strategies but also make provisions for students' emotional wellbeing to prevent impediments to educational achievement. The incorporation of school counselors can play an important role here. School counseling programs that "enhance student learning … to help deal with their personal and emotional problems," (No et al., 2016, p. 43) is an important addition to the infrastructure.

Community Interventions

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2008) suggested that a caring relationship between students, their families, and an adult connected to the school creates a greater sense of belonging, instills mutual respect, and builds trust. A strong school-family-community engagement is key to preventing dropouts. As such, the following recommendations are made in relation to community-level interventions:

School counselors. School counselors can play an important role in promoting different partnerships (Bryan, Griffin, Kim, Griffin, & Young, 2019). One example is the creation of constructive relationships between teachers and students through shared activities (meals, extra-curricular activities).

Literacy campaign. Given the agrarian culture in Cambodia, a differentiated strategy for parental involvement is needed (Downes, 2014). School counselors, teachers, and principals can seek alliances from local revered community members to help educate people in the community about the importance of education for girls in particular. Literacy campaigns to increase awareness of the role of education and connecting it to the job force and upward mobility would be key in this regard (No et al., 2016). Such understanding can create a stronger foundation for public education while increasing community awareness of gender inequities in education.

Cultural Interventions

Dropouts needs to be looked at from the Cambodian cultural lens. Given the social censures and gender disparities (UNIFEM et al., 2004), a gender-based support for engagement with schools, and services (e.g., counseling and mentoring) that promote agency for girls is particularly important. We provide two recommendations.

School counselors. School counselors and female mentors can play an important role in the personal and emotional problems that may result from these censures, as well as providing life skills training and personal development to influence self-efficacy for girls in particular. As women take on these leadership roles, they can become a more "integral part of the country's economic and social development" (UNIFEM et al., 2004, p. 4)

Media. Using mass/social media to develop public awareness campaigns to shed light on gender disparity and promote gender equity (UNIFEM et al., 2004) can be an important mechanism.

Concluding Reflection

This was the first study to examine how multiple person-context factors support or hinder male and female student' participation and attendance in NGO-sponsored schools. Our findings revealed a great need to attend to personal, communal, cultural, and institutional factors in bringing about change within the two Cambodian schools. Despite support from NGO's (No et al., 2016) and policies and targets developed by the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (MoEYS) to address gender parity by 2015 (UNIFEM et al., 2004), implementation of these policies seems to be challenged at the lower/upper secondary

levels of education. Proactive measures are needed to increase enrollment and incentives to keep girls in school, to intentionally connect education to vocational skills, and integrate female school counselors or mentors to help bridge connections between the larger community and the school community. Given the potential role of school counselors in each of these areas, future research may choose to examine how connecting education to vocational skills and the integration of female school counselors impacts school participation.

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Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Group	N	Age Range	Mean	SD
Girls	34	13-23	15.91	2.35
Boys	15	13-22	14.93	2.34
Teachers	12	23-42	34.66	7.23
Principals	2	43-45	44	1.41
Parents				
Mothers & Grandmother	9	39-66	49.11	8.82
Fathers & Grandfather	4	39-67	49	12.33

Table 2

Student Group Family Characteristics

Family Size	**Girls**	**Boys**
	4-13	4-10
Sibling Positions	**Girls**	**Boys**
Oldest	8	0
Middle	13	8
Youngest	9	6
Only child	0	1
Parental Education	**Mother**	**Father**
No education	13	9
Grades 1-9	23	19
Grades 10-12	1	8
Unknown	12	13

	Girls		**Boys**	
Parental Occupation	**Mother**	**Father**	**Mother**	**Father**
Farmers	17	18	5	4
Housewife	7	0	5	0
Seller	2	1	1	0
Teacher	1	2	1	1
Driver	0	2	0	4
Fishmonger	3	4	0	1
Tourism	0	1	0	0
Hotel	0	0	1	0
Business	0	1	1	1
Unemployed	0	0	0	1
Unknown	4	5	0	3

Career Aspirations	**Girls**	**Boys**
Teacher	14	2
Tourism	3	3
Business	3	4
Engineer	0	1
Doctor	5	1
Lawyer	2	0
Nurse	4	0
Hotel Industry	1	1
Accountant	2	0
Journalist	0	1
Hollywood Star	0	1
Soldier	0	1
Naturalist	1	1
Unknown	2	3

Note. Numbers may not add up to total number of participants due to multiple responses by participants

Table 3

Representation of Stakeholders' Profiles (Principals, Teachers, Parents, Boys, Girls) Within Each Category and Across Each Domain

Domain	Categories	Endorsed by	Examples
Individual Level Factors			
Problematic Behaviors	Truancy	Principal, Teachers, Parents, Boys, Girls	"Truancy challenges class content;" "Difficult to get students to join education especially with truant students;" "Students do not join with teacher, do not listen, make trouble;" "student is gangster, do not like students who fight and steal;" "gambling"
	Student ability and investment	Principal, Teachers, Parents, Boys, Girls	"spending free time smoking under tree in school yard;" "falling in love;" "fighting, not cooperating;" "not punctual;" "when asked by teacher, give reason of being busy;" "boredom…dislike teachers and courses studying;" "lazy to learn;" "Low level students, cannot complete goals"
	Illness	Teacher, Girls	"Sickness"
	Marriage	Teacher	"To get married"
	Lack of knowledge regarding school policies	Girls	"afraid to return because do not have knowledge of when to return"
	Age Gap	Principals, Teachers, Girls	"because of age not suitable for learning… shy about being older than other younger students;" "embarrassed to return…older than others"
Good Behaviors	Cooperation and Collaboration	Principal, Boys, Girls	"unite and help each other;" "share good experience with each other;" "clever student helps low level student;" "when teacher asks me to work, have to follow;" "try to learn not to play truant;" 'come to learn on time"
	Perseverance	Principal, Boys, Girls	"fight to learn;" "want to bring honor to family and make neighbors proud of me"
	Develop Good Character and Discipline	Principals, Teachers, Parents, Boys, Girls,	"students must attend to school regulations during education;" "divide time for learning when suitable for learning and home work;" "join with teacher about morality;" "parents want me to communicate with good friends;" "change bad habits into good ones"
	Take responsibility for mistakes	Girls	"apologize when make mistake"
Family Level Factors			
	Family difficulties	Principal, Teachers, Parents, Boys, Girls	"family life is poor;" "parents move somewhere else;" "problem of food, nutrition in family;" " cannot afford children to study part time and in private school;" "not enough money to support children;" "because students have to work during education"; "domestic violence;" "drop out due to patents fighting"

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Table 3

Representation of Stakeholders' Profiles (Principals, Teachers, Parents, Boys, Girls) Within Each Category and Across Each Domain, continued

Domain	Categories	Endorsed by	Examples
	Children not conforming to family expectations	Parents	"do not allow to travel during night time…girls help mother in house, boys help father outside;" " boys will go to ceremony at Buddhist monastery by self" "both boys and girls ask for money"
	Parental Investment and Support	Principal, Parents, Teachers, Boys, Girls	"even if I did not have anything I would send children to school;" "ask children to bring back homework;" "parents motivate me, praise me to come to school"; "happy when children come to school;" " honor them in front of other students;" "after graduation can be officer, doctor…; " "Students' parents think students are spending too much time in class;" "parents are illiterate and stop children from learning;"
School Level Factors			
Positive factors	Supportive /Cooperative Teachers	Principal, Teachers, Parents, Boys, Girls	"Teacher pay attention to poor students;" "Teachers treat kinds well;" "Teachers try teach according to lesson plan and give good advice." "Teacher follows lesson plan and have student-based approach"
	Model School	Principal, Teachers, Parents, Boys, and Girls	"School recognized by Ministry of Education as Model School;" "Principal is well organized, can control teachers and students well;" "do not pay for education;" " lots of programs for education;" "Cooperation between staff and parents;" "well-organized classrooms;" "access to computers, library, study materials;" "school supports with porridge in the morning and purified drinking water;" "Very good discipline, punctual, respect education;" "student consultant tracks discipline after principal;" "playing with friends;" "good friends;" "school is close to home"
	Clean and Secure School Environment	Parents, Teachers, Boys, Girls	"Environment is clean and nice;" "Nice garden;" "trees… clean school;" "Beautiful school, parking place for bicycle;" " Safety at school"
	Support from NGO	Principals, Parents	"Good intention from NGO to support school to develop;" " poor people can come to school because of support from NGO"
Negative factors	Classroom Challenges	Boys, Girls	"crowded classrooms;" " difficult subject (math) and cannot understand"
	Teacher Ability/Behavior	Principal, Teacher, Boys	"Teachers ill-equipped to teach because it's difficult to find techniques to teach students;" "Some teachers stay away from school and do not come on time;" "teachers give answers to students before exam;" "never discuss how students feel;" "don't like teachers be violent to students;" "teacher cannot educate because of their skills… for example, no English teacher, Khmer teacher is a stand by"

Table continued next page

Table 3

Representation of Stakeholders' Profiles (Principals, Teachers, Parents, Boys, Girls) Within Each Category and Across Each Domain, continued

Domain	Categories	Endorsed by	Examples
	Lack of Resources	Principal, Teachers, Girls	"no consistent electricity;" "no access to experimental materials in subjects like chemistry, biology"
	Need for Professional Development	Principals, Teachers	"teachers should always do research;" "be conscious of jobs and education;" "get more experience;" "teachers need to have lesson plans"
	Need for Financial Resources	Principals, Teachers	"government should give enough salary to lead life;" "would like [NGP] to provide additional money to praise teacher to teach more"
	Better Cooperation	Principals, Teachers	"need cooperation of student' parents to persuade their children to come back to school" "hope parents are happy with school regulations which teachers take issue with"; "Teachers have good cooperation with principal and with each other;" "good cooperation with [NGO] organizations;"
Socio-Cultural Level Factors			
	Environmental Barriers	Principal, Teachers, Boys, Girls	"cleaning school yard and gardening in comparison to other schools;" "Miss class for two months due to floods and teachers have to make up class;" "noise from outside (monastery and traffic) interrupts education;" "Environment is sticky… classroom very noisy"
	Lack of Community Supports	Teachers, Girls	"neighbors try to persuade family to stop me from studying, saying your family is poor, why study; "Neighbor said, since I does not have parents, I do not need to learn more to get a good future," "friends persuade to leave school"
	Gender inequities	Principal, Teacher, Girls	"according to Khmer tradition, normally did not allow girl students to study in high school, just stay at home" "ask girls to drop out- no need to learn more;" "feel shy—not enough restrooms"
	Lack of transportation	Principals, Teachers, Parents, Girls	"long distance from school;" "no bicycle;" "no transportation;" "Students come from outskirts and spend long time coming to school;" "House is far from school, takes one hour by bicycle"
	Education as valuable tool	Principal, Teachers, Parents, Boys, Girls	"education has value for my life and in future hope to get real knowledge from education;" "Child should get knowledge because she can protect self and find job to feed their lives;" "good knowledge equals good job;" "teachers want students to get good knowledge to use in real society;" "need students to have good education to help develop country;" " spread knowledge to siblings"