

Supplementary education in Cambodia

— *The tricks of the teacher... that's the way we force the students to study in private tutoring. The teacher says the new math formulas are only introduced in private tutoring.*

Cambodian elementary school teacher

Walter Dawson



THE QUOTE ABOVE was taken from my 2008 study of supplementary tutoring and teacher corruption in Cambodia (see Dawson 2009, Dawson 2010). The case of supplementary education in Cambodia presents an interesting case involving the politics and economics of corruption; however, it is difficult to ascertain whether this case has 'Asian characteristics' or rather 'post-socialist' characteristics. Nevertheless, my hope is that by discussing the various factors which seem to drive the phenomenon of supplementary education in Cambodia, we may be able gain a better understanding of the supplementary education phenomenon within the particular context of Cambodia and elsewhere.

Supplementary education in Cambodia involves state teachers conducting private tutoring for their own students. This is not a phenomenon which is unique to the education system of Cambodia. In fact, this practice is well documented and not unusual in many developing countries such as Cyprus, Indonesia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Russia (Bray, 1999: 37). The crux of the problem revolves around the issue of whether these teachers are practicing corruption in consideration of their role as educational representatives of the state and exploiting the potential for economic gain in relation to their inadequate salaries. The practice has further implications for equal opportunity for education and the global movement for Education for All (EFA).

The vagaries of war and politics

In order to understand the existence of this 'shadow education' system in Cambodia, it is useful to know something of the political climate of the nation. Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodia People's Party (CPP) have enjoyed a 23-year term of continuous rule, representing the longest current period for a politician in Southeast Asia, as a result of the strong national network of the CPP and the web of corruption which it supports.

The Cambodian education system has long been at the mercy of the political system resulting in repeated failures with tragic consequences for the Cambodian people. Cambodian education reached its peak of development in the 1960s, at which time teachers and civil servants were well paid, honoured and respected. However, this peak in educational expansion was devastated by the civil war of the 1970s and then destroyed by the policies of the Khmer Rouge who eradicated the pre-existing system and executed 75 percent of the country's teachers and intellectuals. The end of the Khmer Rouge

period with Vietnamese occupation (1979-1989) saw an attempt to implant a new brand of socialism. Cambodia's emergence into a post-socialist future with the UNCTAD elections in 1991, places the age of Cambodia's fledgling democracy at approximately the same as the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and further raises the question of whether to view Cambodia's political and economic system as Asian or post-socialist.

The origins of the political system and its effects on educational development have been well documented by Ayres (2000) who attributed the failings of past regimes to expand education in Cambodia to the political culture and the conflict between tradition and modernity. My research has sought to move beyond this cultural explanation to point to multiple economic and political micro-processes which lead to teachers being the agents behind this shadow economy of private tutoring.

The shadow economics of teacher corruption

The shadow economy of private tutoring is a formidable obstacle to Cambodian's achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and especially those goals related to education for all (EFA). Access to a free primary education is a right included in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, to which Cambodia is a signatory. Therefore, one could argue that the Cambodian government has an obligation to eliminate this corrupt practice in order to ensure these rights; however, it is quite difficult to lay the onus of blame on teachers.

The issue of corruption in Cambodia is not restricted to the education sector. Transparency International rated Cambodia 166th out of 180 countries on its Corruption Perceptions Index within which lower ranked countries display higher degrees of corruption. In 2006, government graft in World Bank infrastructure and water sanitation projects in Cambodia led the World Bank to threaten to cancel those projects worth US\$64 million and to demand repayment of misused funds.

The state of education has improved in Cambodia despite these challenges and the nation's dependence on outside sources for education funding. Total education spending from outside sources in 2002 amounted to US\$44.6 million, which consisted of funds from the Asian Development Bank (31.9 percent), the World Bank (16.8 percent), UNICEF (14.0 percent), and the Japan International Cooperation Agency

(12.4 percent) (Bray & Bunly, 2005: 17). Corruption is a clear drain on the education budget in Cambodia as indicated in the 2005 CSD Corruption assessment which found that corruption in the public education sector accounted for US\$37 million per year, making up about 55 percent of the total corruption in public services in Cambodia (EIC, 2006: 7).

In the summer of 2008 I carried out a study on supplementary tutoring in elementary schools in Cambodia within which I visited four schools in Phnom Penh, two schools in Kampong Cham, and two schools in Ratanakiri Province. I administered written surveys to 197 parents and interviewed 72 teachers. Teachers reported in my study that about half of their students attend their private tutoring lessons. When asked why they were offering private tutoring, fully four out of five teachers mentioned their low salaries and a need to increase their income. Teachers report an average monthly income of US\$61.16 from private tutoring. A European Commission study (World Bank, 2008) estimated teachers' monthly salary at about US\$44. A World Bank report (2008) states that teachers in Phnom Penh earn a salary equivalent to approximately 1.8 times the per capita poverty line and as sole income earners with children would likely live in poverty if they relied on salary alone (p. v). For this very reason, some researchers hesitate to call the practice corruption and lay the blame on teachers.

"We have no choice"

To address the problem there have been several large salary increases. The situation was much bleaker in 1993 when the average official teacher's salary was US\$6 per month. In 1994 a 20 percent pay raise was granted in addition to a 'prime pédagogique' of US\$8 per month for teachers and education officials. In 1998 an additional raise of 20 percent was put into effect (Bray & Bunly, 2005: 20). Nevertheless, the pace of salary increases is outstripped by the increase in market prices and cost of living in Cambodia. As ambitious as these increases may sound, it may be too little, too late. The danger is that national and international actors have missed a window of opportunity to increase salaries earlier to avoid the institutionalization of corruption throughout the national civil service.

Chhinh (2003) in his study on teacher satisfaction referred to encountering two teachers breastfeeding their babies at school. When he asked them why they did not take maternity leave, they replied that if they did not come to school they would "starve to death" (7). In the EIC Study one teacher stated that teachers "feel ashamed and guilty to do so, but our children need rice to eat...Thus, we have no choice" (20). While one can sympathize with the plight of underpaid teachers, it is important to understand the complexity of their varied responses to their lack of income.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) Report of 2005 refers to teachers who withhold curriculum content important for examinations in order to persuade their students to pay for private tutoring. This corruption does have important ramifications for the perception of teachers in Cambodia. The Cambodian word for teacher, *kru*, derives from the Sanskrit term *guru* and affords a great deal of respect (Ayres, 2000: 41). However, unless that respect is reflected in adequate teacher pay, the position of teachers in Cambodian society will remain a precarious one.

Reflections on fees and curriculum

One interesting aspect of the payment of tutoring and other fees is that it is a daily ritual in schools. Teachers reported varied success with collection of fees on a monthly or term basis. They seemed to settle on collecting fees from students' pocket money which led them to collect the equivalent of about a nickel (200 riel = US\$0.05) from students on a daily basis. Including the various unofficial fees, parents bear a significant burden of the cost of schooling in Cambodia. According to the NGO Education Partnership (NEP) October Report, a family in Phnom Penh has to pay US\$157 to send one child to school which represents 8.1 percent of the family's annual income. While the figure is lower at US\$48 in a rural province such as Takeo Province, this figure still represents 6.8 percent of annual income for a family. The costs are put into perspective once one considers that an average family in urban areas has 5.7 children while rural families have 5.3 children (NEP, 2007B).

There are numerous fees in addition to tutoring such as registration and enrollment fees (officially abolished in 2001), water and energy fees, contributions for school ceremonies, gifts for teachers, bicycle parking fees, and any number of bribes to teachers. Students may pay teachers to receive attendance booklets, to purchase passing or higher grades, to buy notes, to buy exams in advance, to buy the right to cheat on an exam, or even to skip a grade. There appears to be no end to the list of fees that teachers and administrators

The facilities may be rather basic and the education system riddled with problems, but at least the students are keen and eager. Photos this page and next by the author.

can dream up to fill their wallets and school coffers. One could argue that the system of levying of fees in an economy like that of Cambodia where the taxation system is largely not functioning acts as *de facto* taxation. This characterization is interesting when we consider that several teachers in my study explicitly referred to the practice of allowing students from poorer families to attend private tutoring free of charge.

— *We do not charge them (poorer students) in private tutoring class because we understand their poor situation and we are also poor.*

'Baby-sitting' or exam prep?

Cambodian families have numerous challenges; therefore, the demand for private tutoring as 'baby-sitting' is not surprising or unique to the Cambodian case. Bray gives an example of a study in Malta which found that many working couples wanted supplementary tutoring for their children who they could not care for during after-school hours (Bray, 1999: 66). Bray further states that, "Supplementary tutoring provides a structured framework for young people to spend out-of-school time" (84).

Beyond economic factors, parents and teachers are concerned about children's safety in society at large. Cambodia is a society where child exploitation in prostitution and industry is a grave concern. Children are also vulnerable to violent and sexual crime as well as traffic accidents if left unsupervised. About 20 percent of parents in Phnom Penh mentioned the safety of their children as a reason for wanting them to attend private tutoring lessons. This can be attributed to the fact that children are the targets of physical and sexual violence in Cambodia and the high incidence of traffic deaths in the larger cities. Parents referred to proximity to home and studying with a teacher they are familiar with, preferably their own public school teacher, as factors which influenced them in making private tutoring choices.

Teachers referred to the "tricks of the teacher" such as withholding curriculum content in order to force students to attend private tutoring. Researchers also refer to teachers' efforts to "slow down their pace of delivery in order to ensure that they have a market for the after-school supplementary classes" in countries such as Bangladesh, Egypt, and Cambodia (Bray, 1999: 55). The results of this study showed that exactly 50 percent of the teachers referred to insufficient time to cover curriculum content as a reason for providing private tutoring. While Bray argues that these teachers have "an incentive to describe the curriculum as too full" there are other cases such as that of Morocco where teachers do offer private tutoring because of insufficient curriculum time (Bray, 1999: 55). There are clear cases where time is insufficient such as at three-shift schools in Phnom Penh where teachers must cover four hours of curriculum content in three and a half hours.

The MoEYS has diffused a "five-step teaching pedagogy" which includes: classroom management, review, new lesson, problem-solving, and assigning homework. This must all be accomplished during a 40-minute lesson and many teachers stated that it was not possible for them to complete the five steps in this time frame. One teacher explained the difficulty as follows.

— *We teach based on the schedules set by the MoEYS, but we cannot complete all the subjects accurately. For example, we must teach three subjects per day, but if we follow the five steps, we can only do one subject.*

Teachers take their own initiatives to expand the curriculum and the school year. The Head Start Program in the US represented a national program initiated by the Lyndon Johnson Administration to provide preschool education to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and rural areas. In my study I used the term 'false head start' to refer to the practice of providing private tutoring for the grade level content of primary education during the 2-month vacation, from August to September, before that grade actually starts. Private tutoring undoubtedly puts students with a 'head start' at an advantage in comparison to non-attending students and thereby creates demand and anxiety in the latter group.

Teachers reported in my study that about half of their students attend their private tutoring lessons. When asked why they were offering private tutoring, fully four out of five teachers mentioned their low salaries and a need to increase their income.

The importance of exams

High-stakes exams also play an important role in driving demand for private tutoring. The NEP October Report indicates that "those who cannot afford to pay for these extra classes often fail examinations and are required to repeat the grade" (26). Several scholars starting with Ronald Dore have decried the prevalence of the 'diploma disease' and the requisite examinations in developing countries (Bray, 1999: 67). As a result many examinations, such as the 6th grade leaving exam in Cambodia, have been eliminated in efforts to remove barriers to access and promote EFA. While increases in enrollments and promotions are lauded, the resultant effect on the quality of education is often not addressed. As two teachers from Phnom Penh related:

— *When they had the exam, they worked really hard to pass.*

— *The number of students who go to private tutoring has decreased since the elimination of the exam because they know that they must be promoted and because the MoEYS wants 100 percent of students in Grade 6 to be promoted to lower secondary schools.*

The promotion of EFA must be examined as it affects policy regarding shadow education, examinations, and quality of education in a country striving toward universal primary enrollment such as Cambodia. Nonetheless, with the elimination of the Grade 6 exit examinations, teachers are concerned that automatic promotion will lead to a decrease in the quality of education.

A hierarchy of corruption

The level of government corruption throughout the education sector in Cambodia must be considered as it contributes to the practice of private tutoring in Cambodia. Teacher salaries are determined by the government and low salaries keep teachers at the bottom of a bureaucratic hierarchy within which they must pay bribes to principals who in turn pay bribes to higher officials in the education bureaucracy.

The World Bank 2008 report shows that three out of every four teachers pay a 'facilitation fee' (informal cash payment) to receive their salary. The average fee of this type is 3,500 Riel or approximately 2 percent of their base salary. Despite this pay-off to school directors, almost 58 percent of teachers report never receiving their salary in full (53). One teacher in this study also reported that teachers are forced to pay 1,000 Riel to the school director every day, either from the fees they collect from students or from their own pockets.

At the next level up in the bureaucracy, about 64 percent of school directors report having to pay a facilitation fee to the district education office (DEO) officials in return for the disbursement of PAP 2.1 funds (EIC, 2006). It is apparent that there is a 'trickle-up' distribution of bribes starting with students and flowing all the way up to the district level, if not possibly higher levels of the government. In the USAID Cambodian Corruption Assessment, the "petrified" political system of government corruption is described as a "pyramid" within which "payments go up the system, generally becoming larger as they are passed to a few senior leaders" (USAID, 2004: 5). Teachers are forced to be complicit in this shadow economy of bureaucratic bribery which lowers their social status in society. Whether dedicated or complicit members of a corrupt system of education, teachers and parents raised the question of the effect that such a system has on the education of future generations. The nature of that education can be worrisome.

Students take part in a daily ritual of paying bribes to teachers from the age of 6 years old when they enter the primary school cycle in Cambodia. The NEP October report expressed community concerns about students learning from an early age that they must pay these bribes to have access to education. One parent expressed his consternation in saying, "how are we going to build a strong society on foundations like this?" (29). However, the fact remains that teachers cannot survive on insufficient salaries. As one said,

— *I have private tutoring because I am poor and the salary provided by the government is too low to support my family.*

The web of corruption in the education sector in Cambodia is a social structure which is not easy to uproot after many years of inattention by national and international actors. Some research presents a more alarming trend in showing that despite efforts to eliminate bribery, the fees collected at the school level appear to actually be rising rather than falling (NEP, 2007A: 1). While the system of 'informal school fees' was initially permitted as a temporary measure to meet shortfalls in school funding after the civil war, two decades later the system has become commonplace and accepted by all stakeholders in education (NEP, 2007B: 30). In such an

environment, stakeholders and policymakers may have missed the window of opportunity for eliminating the practice before it became an institutionalized shadow economy of the Cambodian public school system.

Unsound foundations

In my research I have attempted to situate private tutoring in the Cambodian public school system within the wider political context of the web of government corruption. In order to do that, it was necessary to problematize the characterization of the practice as 'corruption' with consideration toward the grossly inadequate income of state teachers and the problems inherent with curriculum time, content, and teaching methods in the system. Wider societal issues such as the market economy were included in the treatment as they affect the school and work lives of parents and teachers to explain the varied pressures which contribute to the practice. Dominant discourses on shadow education emphasizing political culture and global trends were also challenged in examining the failures of primary schooling in Cambodia to provide a coherent curriculum, a situation which defies defining private tutoring as either 'remedial' or 'supplementary'.

A portrayal of the political web of corruption in the education system has been presented to explain the widespread political and economic origins of private tutoring and its role in sustaining an education system which stands on unsound foundations. Further research is necessary to understand this political system if national and international actors intend to commit themselves to systemic reform in order to move beyond quantitative targets and aim toward quality education for all children in this war-ravaged nation as it comes to terms with the Khmer Rouge genocide.

A cruel irony of the Khmer Rouge period is that Pol Pot, and other early Khmer Rouge leaders who were state teachers, attracted followers to their cause because they were perceived to be above the petty corruption rampant in the Cambodian government (Ayres, 2000: 61). The tragedy which followed their ascendance to power is well documented and those historical memories and scars must not be forgotten in any efforts to reform the Cambodian political system as it moves toward further development and consolidation of democracy.

After 15 years of both domestic and international calls for the creation of an anti-corruption law, on March 11th of 2010, despite concerns expressed by the UN about lack of transparency, Hun Sen's CPP rushed through a law which ensured CPP control of a prime minister-appointed anti-corruption unit, which lacks public disclosure of politicians' assets, and which affords increased protection to Cambodia's corrupt political elite. It is apparent that future efforts to prevent corruption in education must develop from wider efforts to move Cambodia toward increased transparency in government and rule of law to bolster progress toward democratization.

Walter Dawson

International Christian University (Tokyo), Japan
dawson@icu.ac.jp

References

- Ayres, D. M. (2000). *Anatomy of a Crisis: Education, Development, and the State of Cambodia, 1953-1998*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Bray, M., & Bunly, S. (2005). *Balancing the Books: Household Financing of Basic Education in Cambodia*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong.
- Bray, M. (1999). *The shadow education system: private tutoring and its implications for planners*. Paris: UNESCO, International Institute for Educational Planning.
- Chhin, S. (2003). *Satisfaction Sources of Cambodian Urban Primary School Teachers*. Paper presented at the 2003 International Council on Education for Teaching/Australian Teacher Education Association Conference in Melbourne, Australia.
- Dawson, W. (2010). 'Private tutoring and mass schooling in East Asia: Reflections of inequality in Japan, South Korea, and Cambodia'. In *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 11, 1.
- Dawson, W. P. (2009). "'Tricks of the Teacher': Teacher Corruption and Shadow Education in Cambodia". In S. Heyneman (ed.), *Education and Corruption*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Economic Institute of Cambodia (EIC) (2006). *Local Public Services: Performance and Unofficial Fees*. Phnom Penh: Deline, S., Chamroeun, H., Sethy, Y.
- NGO Education Partnership (NEP) (February 2007A). *The Impact of Informal School Fees on Family Expenditures*. Phnom Penh.
- NGO Education Partnership (NEP) (October 2007B). *The Impact of Informal School Fees on Family Expenditure*. Phnom Penh.
- USAID (2004). *Cambodian Corruption Assessment*. Washington, D.C.: Calavan, M.M., Briquets, S. D., & O'Brien, J.
- World Bank (2008). *Teaching in Cambodia*. Washington, D.C.: Benveniste, L., Marshall, J., & Araujo, M. C.

