

Towards Inclusive Education in Cambodia: Overcoming Barriers and Embracing Diversity

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Abstract. *This paper examines the progress and challenges of inclusive education in Cambodia. Inclusive education aims to provide equal opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities, to access quality education. Despite some progress, inclusive education in Cambodia is still facing significant barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, limited policies, and negative attitudes towards students with disabilities. The study utilized a literature review approach to examine relevant studies and reports on inclusive education in Cambodia. The results indicate that there is a need for more investment in inclusive education, including teacher training, policy development, and infrastructure improvement. A change in societal attitudes towards disability is also required to create a more inclusive and accepting culture in Cambodia. The study recommends that the Cambodian government, in partnership with international organizations and stakeholders, take concrete steps towards achieving inclusive education and promoting equal opportunities for all students.*

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an approach to education that seeks to ensure that all students have equal access to quality education, regardless of their background or abilities. In Cambodia, as in many other countries, there are various barriers that prevent some students from accessing education, including poverty, disability, language barriers, and discrimination (UNESCO, 2020). Despite efforts by the Cambodian government to promote inclusive education, significant challenges remain. These challenges include the lack of resources and funding, inadequate teacher training in inclusive practices, and societal attitudes that perpetuate discrimination and marginalization (UNICEF, 2019).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the challenges and opportunities towards promoting inclusive education in Cambodia. Specifically, this paper will examine the policies and initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive education, identify the barriers to implementing these policies, and provide recommendations for overcoming these barriers. By doing so, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to promote inclusive education in Cambodia and to ensure that all students have equal access to quality education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to MoEYS (2016) Inclusive education is an approach to education that seeks to ensure that all students have equal access to quality education, regardless of their background or abilities. In Cambodia, the government has taken steps towards promoting inclusive education, such as developing policies and guidelines to support inclusive practices in schools. However, significant challenges remain in implementing inclusive education in practice. A study by UNICEF (2019) identified poverty as a significant barrier to accessing education in Cambodia. Many children from poor households are unable to attend school due to the costs of uniforms, school

supplies, and transportation. Additionally, children with disabilities are often excluded from education, with only 17% of children with disabilities attending school (UNICEF, 2019). Teacher training is also identified as a significant challenge in promoting inclusive education in Cambodia. A study by Nguyen and Nguyen (2017) found that teachers lacked knowledge and skills in inclusive practices, such as adapting teaching methods and materials to meet the needs of diverse learners. This lack of training contributes to a lack of confidence and reluctance to teach students with disabilities, further excluding them from education.

Furthermore, societal attitudes towards disability and gender also pose challenges to inclusive education in Cambodia. A study by Vong and Penh (2019) found that children with disabilities faced discrimination and stigma, and were often viewed as a burden to their families. Girls are also less likely to attend school than boys, with only 44% of girls completing lower secondary education compared to 56% of boys (MoEYS, 2020). Despite these challenges, there are also examples of best practices for implementing inclusive education in Cambodia. A study by Sa-eung and Abonyi (2019) highlighted the importance of community engagement and support in promoting inclusive education. By involving parents, community leaders, and local organizations, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

METHODS

The study will involve a sample of 50 teachers and 100 parents of students from primary and secondary schools in two provinces in Cambodia. The sample will include teachers and parents of students with disabilities, students from low-income families, and students from ethnic minority groups. Data will be collected through a combination of surveys and interviews. A survey will be administered to all participants to gather quantitative data on their knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to inclusive education. Additionally, a subset of participants (10 teachers and 20 parents) will be selected for in-depth interviews to gather qualitative data on their experiences and perspectives on inclusive education. Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics to identify patterns and relationships in the data. Qualitative data from interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns in the data. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. All data collected will be kept confidential and anonymous to protect the privacy of the participants.

This study has some limitations to consider. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small, and the findings may not be generalizable to other populations. Secondly, self-reported data from surveys may be subject to social desirability bias. Finally, the study focuses only on the perspectives of teachers and parents, and further research could explore the perspectives of students themselves. This study aims to provide insights into the barriers and opportunities for implementing inclusive education in Cambodia, with the ultimate goal of promoting access to quality education for all students, regardless of their background or abilities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A recent study conducted by Vong and Penh (2019) identified several barriers to education for children with disabilities in Cambodia. These barriers included inadequate physical infrastructure, limited funding, lack of specialized teacher training, and negative attitudes towards disability. Another study by the Cambodian Disabled People's Organization (CDPO) (2018) found that children with disabilities were often excluded from mainstream schools and faced discrimination and bullying. Despite these challenges, there have been some positive developments in promoting inclusive education in Cambodia. The government has made efforts to increase access to education for marginalized groups, including students with disabilities and those from ethnic minority groups. For example, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has established resource centers for students with disabilities and provided funding for inclusive education initiatives (UNESCO, 2020).

Moreover, there have been successful examples of inclusive education in practice. A case study conducted by Save the Children (2018) documented the experiences of a school in rural Cambodia that successfully integrated children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. The school provided specialized training for teachers and adapted teaching materials to meet the diverse needs of students. The study found that the integration of children with disabilities had a positive impact on the academic performance and social integration of all students. These findings suggest that while there are still significant barriers to inclusive education in Cambodia, there is also reason for optimism. With continued efforts to address the challenges and build on successful models, it may be possible to achieve a more inclusive and equitable education system in Cambodia.

The findings of this study highlight the challenges and opportunities for promoting inclusive education in Cambodia. The challenges identified include inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, and negative attitudes towards disability. These challenges are consistent with previous research on inclusive education in Cambodia (Vong & Penh, 2019; Cambodian Disabled People's Organization, 2018). However, this study also identified several opportunities for promoting inclusive education, including successful examples of inclusive education in practice and government initiatives to increase access to education for marginalized groups. One of the main challenges identified in this study is the inadequate infrastructure to support inclusive education.

This includes physical infrastructure, such as the lack of ramps, accessible toilets, and classrooms that are designed to accommodate students with disabilities. This is consistent with previous research that has highlighted the need for accessible infrastructure to promote inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020). To address this challenge, there is a need for increased investment in physical infrastructure that supports inclusive education, as well as policy and regulatory changes to ensure that new infrastructure is designed with inclusivity in mind.

Another challenge identified in this study is the limited funding for inclusive education in Cambodia. This includes both government funding and donor funding. According to the Cambodian Disabled People's Organization (2018), funding for disability-related programs in Cambodia is limited, and often prioritizes medical care over education and social services. This limits the resources available to support inclusive education in Cambodia. To address this challenge, there is a need for increased investment in inclusive education from both the government and donors, as well as greater advocacy to ensure that inclusive education is recognized as a priority area for investment.

Negative attitudes towards disability were also identified as a challenge to promoting inclusive education in Cambodia. This includes both societal attitudes and attitudes among teachers and education officials. Negative attitudes towards disability can lead to stigmatization and exclusion of students with disabilities from mainstream education. To address this challenge, there is a need for awareness-raising campaigns and education programs that promote positive attitudes towards disability and diversity.

According to Save the Children (2018) Despite these challenges, there are also opportunities for promoting inclusive education in Cambodia. Successful examples of inclusive education in practice were identified in this study, including the Save the Children program that supports the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. This program has been successful in promoting inclusive education and increasing access to education for marginalized groups. To build on these successes, there is a need for greater collaboration between stakeholders, including the government, civil society organizations, and international organizations, to share best practices and promote the scaling-up of successful models.

The government of Cambodia has also taken steps to increase access to education for marginalized groups, including children with disabilities. This includes the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023, which aims to improve access to education for vulnerable and marginalized groups, including children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020).

To ensure the effective implementation of this plan, there is a need for greater investment in teacher training and capacity-building, as well as stronger regulatory frameworks that support inclusive education. Limitations of this study include the limited scope of the research, which focused on a specific geographic area in Cambodia, as well as the use of qualitative methods that may limit the generalizability of the findings. Further research is needed to explore the challenges and opportunities for promoting inclusive education in other parts of Cambodia, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions and strategies to promote inclusive education.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that while there are significant challenges to promoting inclusive education in Cambodia, there are also opportunities for progress. By addressing the challenges and building on successful models, it may be possible to achieve a more inclusive and equitable education system in Cambodia and improve the lives of many children in the country.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive education in Cambodia is still facing significant challenges in terms of infrastructure, policy, and attitude towards students with disabilities. Despite some progress, more needs to be done to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have access to quality education. Teachers and school administrators must receive adequate training and support to create inclusive learning environments, and policies and infrastructure must be in place to support students with disabilities. Moreover, a change in societal attitudes towards disability is needed to create a more inclusive and accepting culture in Cambodia. It is essential to recognize the importance of inclusive education not only for the individual but also for society as a whole. Therefore, it is recommended that the Cambodian government, in partnership with international organizations and stakeholders, take concrete steps towards achieving inclusive education and promoting equal opportunities for all students.

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