CAN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL APPROACHES WORK IN CAMBODIA?

A Practitioner's Guide to Understand Competing Models of School Development in Cambodia

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Abstract

The educational scene in Cambodia today is dotted by numerous school development approaches that are each distinct and, in many cases, diametrically opposed. This setting often creates a partisan landscape of proponents for this approach or that where the latter are not always aware of how their preferred development model came about or why others may be so against what they believe to be the best way to develop Cambodia's schools. The Effective Schools Movement has in particular frequently been a lightning rod that tends to polarize educators into opposing camps, especially among those who are more comfortable with rights-based approaches to development. Herein lies the rationale for the present paper's focus on Effective Schools. The polarization among educators with regards to school development approaches has increased markedly in Cambodia as the Cambodian Government has moved to elevate Effective Schools into an official policy. Regardless of one's own development preferences, the purpose of this paper has been to help education practitioners better understand the origins of the Effective Schools Movement, its key tenets, and why it often conflicts with the beliefs of educators who have other preferences.

Disclaimer:

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions or policy of the New Generation Pedagogical Research Center or Kampuchea Action to Promote Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Goals of this Paper

The educational scene in Cambodia today is dotted by numerous school development approaches that are each distinct and, in many cases, diametrically opposed in terms of their educational philosophy and implementation methodology. This setting often creates a partisan landscape of proponents for this approach or that where the latter are not always aware of how their preferred development model came about or why others may be so against what they believe to be the best way to develop Cambodia's schools. Such partisanship cuts across numerous constituencies including government officials, development partners, civil society, and local stakeholders. The Effective Schools Movement has in particular frequently been a lightning rod that tends to polarize educators into opposing camps, especially among those who are more comfortable with rights-based approaches to development. This polarization with regards to school development approaches has increased markedly in Cambodia as the Cambodian Government has recently moved to elevate 'Effective Schools' into an official policy. Regardless of one's own development preferences, the purpose of this paper is to help education practitioners in Cambodia better understand the origins of the Effective Schools Movement, its strengths and key tenets, and why it often conflicts with the beliefs of educators who have other methodological preferences.

1.2 The Origins and Definition of the Effective School Movement

The *Effective Schools Movement* has been around for at least several decades. Some theorists trace its origins back to the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, though the refinement of its theoretical framework had taken very clear shape by the 1980s. The term 'Effective Schools' was first coined by American researchers in the late 1970s when the first statistical analyses of the school characteristics associated with high learning outcomes were carried out.[1] It is important to note in this regard that the rise of Effective Schools coincided with the increased use of statistical modelling techniques in the education sector, which helped to provide an empirical basis for concluding that specific factors correlated with improved student performance. To be sure, there have been many criticisms of the quality of the research that has been done to validate correlates to the factors that proponents claim will lead to school effectiveness.[2] Most Effective School proponents hold that there are 7 key factors that will correlate with an 'effective school.'[3] These factors are summarized in Box 1. Ultimately, 'effectiveness' is generally defined by changes in students' learning performance, which is in turn usually operationalized in terms of changes in test scores. This definition of school effectiveness explains the very heavy focus that one often sees on testing in most Effective School oriented projects.

> **Box 1: What are the key tenets of the Effective Schools Movement?**
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> The Effective Schools Movement argues that school effectiveness correlates with 7 factors:
>
> 1. Clear school mission
> 2. High expectations for success
> 3. Instructional leadership
> 4. Time on task
> 5. Safe and orderly environment
> 6. Positive home-school relations
> 7. Frequent monitoring of students' academic progress
>
> The definition of an effective school is mainly operationalized in terms of measurements of terminal learning performance, usually student test scores.

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[1] For example, Edmonds, R. (1979). *Effective Schools for the Urban Poor,* Educational Leadership, Vol. 37, pp. 15-24.

[2] Goldstein, H. and Woodhouse, G. (2000). *School Effectiveness Research and Education Policy,* Oxford Review of Education. (https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cmm/migrated/documents/school-effectiveness-critiques.pdf)

[3] Lezotte, L. W. (1991). *Correlates of effective schools: The first and second generation.* Okemos, MI: Effective Schools Products, Ltd.
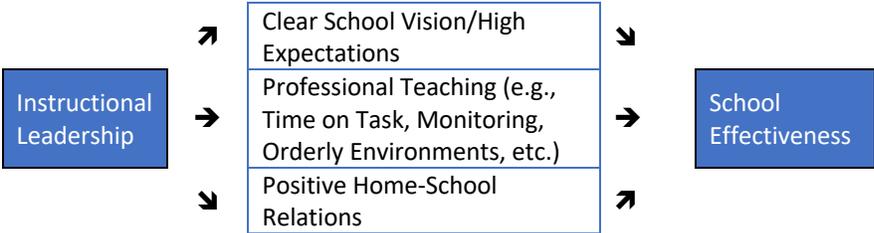
One of the key features of Effective Schools is its focus on school leadership. Effective School proponents focus very heavily on the management role of school principals and their ability to lead the school effectively; thus, defining school leadership clearly and using the school principal as an institutional catalyst is a prominent part of the Effective School implementation approach; indeed, some would argue that the leadership role of the school principal is the core element of the Effective School approach that drives all the others (see below).[4] In the Effective School context, school leadership is distinguished by a strong focus on 'instructional leadership,' which is defined as *the proper management of curriculum and instruction.* Nevertheless, the role of the school principal in an Effective School is still largely defined as guiding the school towards achieving quantitatively set standards of student performance.

1.3 What Are Some of the Key Strengths of the Effective Schools Approach

Although there are many commonalities in the research defining Effective Schools that all seem to coalesce around the factors identified in Box 1, there have been many permutations in the evolution of this approach to school development that make it difficult to generalize about specific strengths. Indeed, the formulation of Effective Schools in places like Cambodia seems in many ways far different from some of the earlier formulations that emerged in the United States and United Kingdom back in the 1980s. For example, some of the earliest writings on Effective Schools envisioned a multi-dimensional approach to school development that leads to 'transformational' change of the whole school.[5] This characteristic, which is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of Effective School philosophy, seems at odds with the more uni-dimensional methodologies employed in Effective Schools today where there is a singular focus on student testing and accountability as the central features of school development. Nevertheless, the idea of 'transformational change' in a school through a focus on a wide array of key factors such as leadership, visioning exercises, and frequent monitoring is a key strength of the Effective School approach.

The other key strength of the Effective School approach relates to the centrality of instructional leadership as the driving force behind many of the other activities that make a school effective, a point noted earlier. Instructional leadership in this case refers primarily to the key role of the school principal to both communicate and animate the school's vision to all teachers, promote linkages with communities and parents, encourage teachers to improve their classroom practice, and ensure frequent monitoring and student assessment. Without the school principal playing this animating role in the school, it is likely that many of these conditions for effectiveness would not occur. Thus, we can say that the now accepted conventional wisdom of the centrality of the school principal's role as instructional leader of the school first began with the Effective School Movement (see Figure 1.1).

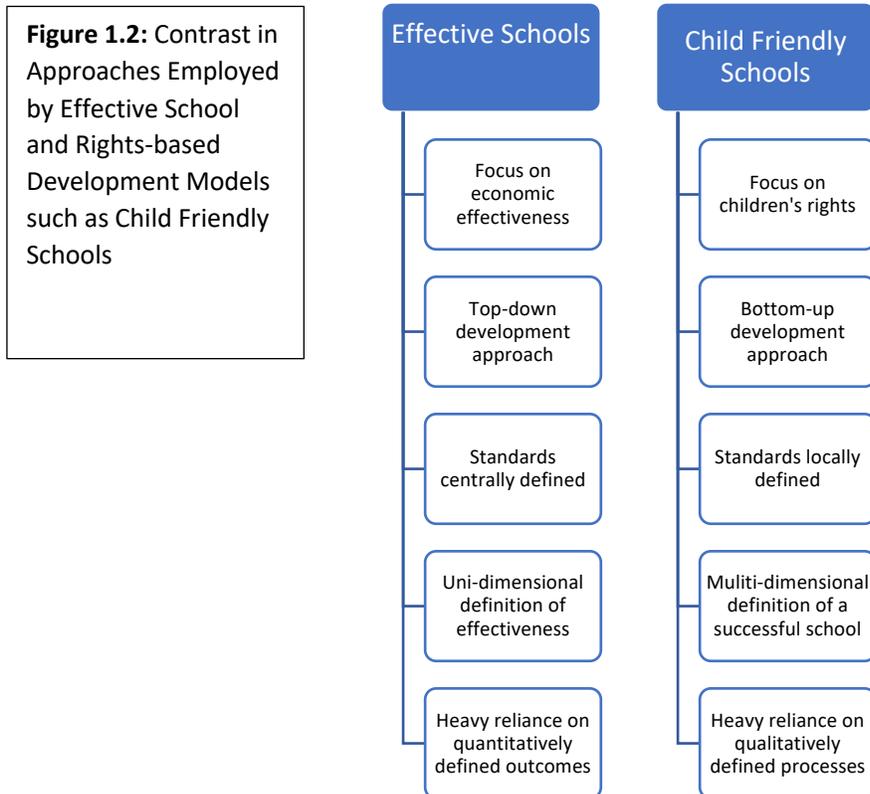**Figure 1.1:** The Primacy of Instructional Leadership in Effective Schools

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[4] For example, Kirk, D.J., & Jones, T.L. (2004). *Effective Schools: Assessment Report,* Pearson Education. http://images.pearsonassessments.com/images/tmrs/tmrs_rg/EffectiveSchools.pdf?WT.mc_id=TMRS_Effective_Schools
[5] Levin, H.M. and Lockheed, M.E. (1993). *Effective Schools in Developing Countries,* London & Washington DC: Falmer Press.
(https://books.google.com.kh/books?hl=en&lr=&id=FqCXAPS2grEC&oi=fnd&pg=PP5&dq=Effective+Schools+by+Routledge+Press&ots=6SBBdQg2XH&sig=KOQfGvyXA8Ez3_MxY8Ny62y0nhY&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Effective%20Schools%20by%20Routledge%20Press&f=false)

1.4 Reactions to Effective School Concepts among Development Agencies

The World Bank was and continues to be one of the strongest advocates of the Effective School Movement.[6] International development banks often see strong synergies between their desire to impose 'economic' models of educational development on school systems in developing countries and the propensity of Effective School proponents to focus on quantitative analysis of factors associated with an effective school, especially the prominent use of student test scores. The 1990s, therefore, saw the beginning of intensive investment by the World Bank and similarly minded agencies in the Effective Schools approach in many developing countries.[7]

Figure 1.2: Contrast in Approaches Employed by Effective School and Rights-based Development Models such as Child Friendly Schools

Effective Schools	Child Friendly Schools
Focus on economic effectiveness	Focus on children's rights
Top-down development approach	Bottom-up development approach
Standards centrally defined	Standards locally defined
Uni-dimensional definition of effectiveness	Muliti-dimensional definition of a successful school
Heavy reliance on quantitatively defined outcomes	Heavy reliance on qualitatively defined processes

It was not long, however, before there was a counter reaction to the economic model of school development, which the Effective Schools approach implied. Development agencies such as UNICEF and Save the Children with a more 'rights-based' approach to educational development began to express strong objections to the Effective Schools approach.[8] The basis of these objections was that the overreliance of Effective School approaches on quantitative measures of effectiveness (i.e., test scores and other quantitatively defined standards) generally ignored any consideration of children's rights. By the end of the 1990s, rights-based development agencies had put forward a practical alternative to Effective School approaches that eventually became known as *Child Friendly Schools (CFS).* Whereas Effective School proponents placed a very strong focus on quantitative measures to assess centrally set standards, Child Friendly School proponents put forward a totally different approach that stressed a multi-

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Bredenberg, K. (2009). *The Child Friendly School Movement and Its Role in Promoting Stakeholder-driven Development throughout the Southeast Asia Region,* Paper presented at *Comparative and International Education Society,* Charleston, SC (USA). http://www.kapekh.org/files/report_file/58-en.pdf

dimensional development framework characterized by a focus on educational processes such as educational inclusion, child protection, child friendly learning environments, stakeholder engagement, and other aspects of children's rights. A 'successful' school was, therefore, defined as one that promoted children's rights rather than a uni-dimensional focus on test scores and other quantitative measures of learning. Ideally, activities to promote these rights would be 'locally' (and not centrally) defined using more qualitative data such as case studies and learning portfolios and a focus on gradual but continuous change relative to a starting point, rather than fixed, absolute standards that are centrally formulated. Thus, by the Year 2000, development practitioners in Cambodia were confronted with two starkly different approaches to educational development (see Figure 1.2).

1.4 How Is the Effective Schools versus Child Friendly School Dichotomy Playing Out in Cambodia?

Historically, Cambodia has been very vulnerable to succumbing to donor-driven agendas. The result has been that multiple models of educational development are now quite prominent in Cambodia today to the point that there are in place education policy frameworks accommodating both Effective School and Child Friendly School development approaches, despite the stark contrasts in methodology that each imply. This suggests some serious contradictions in the policy framework that education practitioners at local level are supposed to be implementing. It is not clear how local practitioners resolve these contradictions or whether they are even aware of them.

Donors and development partners in Cambodia have also neatly aligned themselves with one ideological camp or the other with UN agencies, Save the Children, and large national organizations such as Kampuchea Action to Promote Education (KAPE) subscribing to more rights-based programming, whereas the international development banks have been advocating strongly for approaches more closely aligned with Effective Schools. For the first decade of the 21st Century, Child Friendly Schools seemed to be the ascendant development model in Cambodian schools but has gradually been supplanted by a transition to Effective Schools, as the World Bank started to re-engage in Cambodia's educational development in 2018. To some extent, the decline of Child Friendly School models has been a function of its checkered success. Although the Child Friendly School model was highly successful as a pilot (2001-07), its rapid transition from a pilot to immediate nationalization in 2008 was ill-advised.[9] The model has not been well-understood by local stakeholders and the government has followed a centralized methodology for implementation rather than a more organic approach (i.e., bottom-up) as CFS purists generally advocate. Thus, many schools did 'what' they were told to do but often had no idea 'why' they were doing it leading to an environment of 'mindless' implementation.[10] Such issues tended to undermine the effectiveness of CFS implementation and made it less compelling as a development approach.

As Child Friendly School reforms ran out of steam in the 2010s, a successor program sought to re-invigorate the rights-based, bottom-up approach to educational development. This successor program, known as *New Generation Schools* (NGS), began in 2016 as a key government reform to promote educational quality and good governance. NGS has followed a more bottom-up development approach with each New Generation School defining the things that it wants to excel in (multi-dimensionality) with little interference from central level. Schools are given autonomy to promote innovation and there is a strong focus on governance and accountability. While there is an accreditation framework in place to ensure school accountability, this framework focuses on 'processes' of functioning (e.g., the availability of science labs, access to varied library services, etc.) rather than centrally set terminal measures of

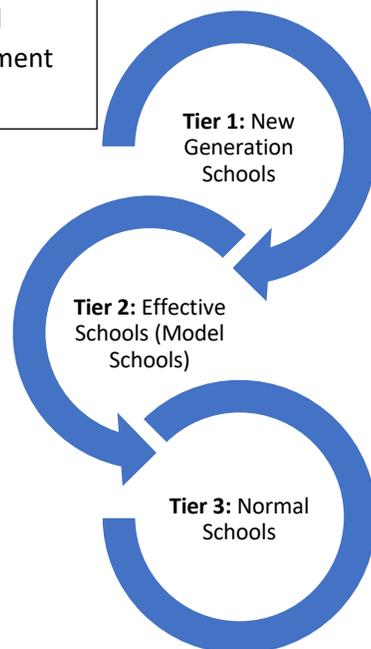[9] Bernard, A. (2009). *Child Friendly School Evaluation Report,* Phnom Penh: UNICEF.
[10] Ibid.

performance such as test scores.[11]

To accommodate these competing models of school development, the government has created a policy framework that describes a three-tiered typology of school efficacy (see Figure 1.3). The highest level of the typology (Tier 1) is occupied by 'New Generation Schools,' which follow a rights-based, bottom-up development model emphasizing autonomy, good governance, and innovation and where success is defined by process-oriented accreditation standards. Next in this typology come 'Effective Schools' (Tier 2), which are also sometimes referred to as Model Schools. Schools in this category follow a top-down development model focused on centrally set performance standards and terminal learning outcomes (i.e., test scores) as the key criteria of success (i.e., effectiveness). 'Normal schools' (Tier 3) are those schools that generally do not have access to intensive development assistance and have no explicit guidance about development

Figure 1.3: Policy Typology of School Development Models

Tier 1: New Generation Schools

Tier 2: Effective Schools (Model Schools)

Tier 3: Normal Schools

approaches *per se* other than existing policies describing Child Friendly Schools, which are still not generally well-understood by local stakeholders. Ideally, the hope is that Normal Schools will gradually evolve into Effective Schools and then eventually into New Generation Schools. A potential challenge in this model is that transition from one tier to the next could be highly problematic because the development approach implied in each tier of the typology is fundamentally different, as the above discussion has sought to demonstrate.

2. NAVIGATING SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT MODELS THAT ARE DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSED

2.1 Understanding the Partiality of Certain Constituencies to Effective School Approaches

To better understand the prospects for smooth implementation of Effective Schools in Cambodia, one has to be aware of its constituency of supporters and why it has proven popular within this constituency. As noted earlier, Effective School approaches have been championed by the international development banks because of their proclivity for facts and figures and quantitative definitions of efficiency (e.g., pass rates, completion rates, dropout rates, etc.). With its emphasis of quantitatively defined standards and affinity for statistical modelling as the basis for assessment, Effective Schools seem made to order for the typical donor bureaucracy. These methodological attributes make it easy to justify funding to superiors and advocate for more of the same.

Government bureaucracies are also very fond of Effective School approaches because of their methodological simplicity and 'formulaic' recipes for success. Especially when one is dealing with thousands of schools across the nation, there is a compelling attractiveness to the easy aggregation of facts and figures required for needed conclusions based on the proverbial checklist. Bureaucrats frequently have little patience for the complexities of educational progress that are not so easily

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[11] Bredenberg, K. (2022). *Progress with Secondary Education Reform in Cambodia* in 'Education in Cambodia: From Year Zero to International Standards,' (MacNamara, V. and Hayden, M., eds.), Singapore: Springer Press.

quantified. And just like their counterparts in international donor bureaucracies, educational officials see Effective School approaches as providing an attractive means through which to justify investment decisions. Thus, it is easy to see why Effective School approaches have such a strong constituency among educational and donor bureaucracies.

2.2 Empirical Critiques of Effective Schools

Despite its popularity among certain constituencies in large donor bureaucracies and government, there has been a growing number of researchers who have been highly critical of Effective Schools.[12] These research studies tend to echo an anti-Effective School constituency who are very antagonistic towards the top-down methodologies promoted by donor and government bureaucracies as well as the statistical modelling techniques used to validate a school's success.[13] This constituency generally includes child rights groups and organizations, civil society, and grassroots education practitioners, among others. Research critiques of Effective Schools can broadly be classified into the five categories that are summarized in Box 2, each of which are discussed in more detail below.

2.2.1 Oversimplification of Education Issues & Uni-dimensionality

Simplification of the approach to school development is at the same time one of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of Effective Schools. As noted above, it is a strength because it very much facilitates the work of large institutional bureaucracies, which seek to avoid complexity. However, some would argue that the way children learn and schools function are actually quite complex processes that cannot be so easily simplified.[14] Oversimplifying these processes

Box 2: Key Critiques of Effective School Approaches

Critiques of Effective Schools can generally be grouped under five headings:

1. Effective Schools promote an **oversimplified view** of how schools work that is essentially uni-dimensional in outlook.
2. Effective Schools take a **top-down approach** to development that is fundamentally unsustainable.
3. The prominent use of **standardization stifles innovation.**
4. The extensive use of student testing and other quantitative standards in an Effective School model creates a **distortionary feedback loop** that has unintended consequences on stakeholder behaviors.
5. Relatedly, the strong focus on quantitative standards lends itself to **data falsification** and obfuscation of the real situation in a school.

through the extensive use of quantitative standards that do not capture the operational complexity of a school results in a uni-dimensional approach to school development focusing primarily on narrowly set standards, such as test scores. Such an approach potentially ignores real problems that really matter.[15] For example, compressing the entirety of students' learning performance into a solitary test score gives little idea of whether students are simply learning the basics or whether they are solving problems in real world contexts; and because paper and pencil tests tend to focus on the lower-order cognitive skills, it is more likely to be the former than the latter. Quantitative learning measures also say little about the inclusiveness of the learning environment or other issues relating to learning complexity. Thus, an oversimplification of the school development context creates significant challenges for real-life implementation as well as understanding the institutional dynamics of what is really happening at a

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[12] Op. Cit., Goldstein, H. and Woodhouse, G. (2000).

[13] Coe, R. and FitzGibbon, C.T. (1998). *School Effectiveness Research: Criticisms and Recommendations,* Oxford Review of Education, 24, 421-438.

[14] Op. Cit., Goldstein, H. and Woodhouse, G. (2000).

[15] Ibid.

school.

The tendency of Effective School approaches to oversimplify the process through which a school becomes successful also suggests that there is a 'formula' for a successful school, which many educators might question.[16] Some would hold that schools become successful when they develop sets of activities that effectively match their context and the needs of their students rather than when they are meeting centrally set standards.[17] Because every school is different, the idea that there could be a standard formula applicable to all settings is likely a fallacy that educational planners should beware of, attractive though it might be to many educational bureaucracies. Such an idea implies that schools are 'static' institutional settings in which they reach a point of excellence (as defined by a quantitative standard) and then stop developing. Such a belief is likely to be challenged by many who would alternatively argue that educational institutions are continually evolving and that there is always room for improvement.[18] Formulaic approaches to school excellence are, therefore, another oversimplification of reality that does not reflect the real experience of many educators.

2.2.2 Top-down Approaches Are Unsustainable

Many education development projects in Cambodia that are affiliated with Effective School approaches embrace the idea that centrally set standards of school performance and student learning are an essential starting point for the implementation of inputs. One of the key standards of performance in this regard are often test scores, as noted earlier. Schools must then organize all of their activities around satisfying these standards, which as pointed out above are set by the educational bureaucracy at central level. In development parlance, such methodologies result in decidedly 'top-down' approaches to development and institutional change.

The success rate of large institutional bureaucracies both in the corporate and public sector to create positive organizational change through centrally set mandates has been found to be quite low. Indeed, some researchers have found this rate of success to be as low as 30%.[19] Although top-down approaches to development are attractive to large institutional bureaucracies because they are expedient and simple to design, they generally fail to result in sustained change for a number of reasons. First, such approaches often overlook the role of local stakeholders in identifying either the problem or the solution. Thus, they have little ownership of the activities that are put in place to meet mandatory standards. When projects end, the activities often stop, too, because stakeholders have not internalized the values of the project nor have they any ownership of its centrally set goals. Indeed, local stakeholders may actually resent the pressure to drop everything and focus on standards-driven activities such as centrally set monthly tests.[20]

A second reason that top-down development approaches often fail is that the activities that they mandate to meet centrally set standards do not match the real context of a school. As noted above, school contexts tend to be highly variable from location to location such that centrally set activities often offer a poor fit for locally defined problems. This challenge was the crux of the conclusion offered by William Easterly in

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[16] For example, Robertson, B. (2020). *The Teaching Delusion: Why Teaching in Our Schools Isn't Good Enough,* Suffolk, UK: John Catt Educational.

[17] Carlyon, T., (2018). *Educational Change: A view from the bottom up*, New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Vol. 15, Issue 2, 105-23. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329839980_Educational_change_A_view_from_the_bottom_up
[18] Ibid.

[19] De Smet, A., Schaninger, B., and Smith, M. (2014). *The Hidden Value of Organizational Health – and How to Capture It*, McKinsey Quarterly, April, 1-11.

[20] Op. Cit., Carlyon, T., (2018).

his masterful analysis as to why large-scale top-down development projects often fail.[21] In his analysis, Easterly points out that development aid is usually implemented by two groups of agents one of which he calls the 'Planners' and another group, whom he calls the 'Searchers.' The key strategy of Planners is to use central plans and standards to effect change while Searchers favor home-grown, bottom-up solutions. In his research, Easterly found that implementers who base their approach on centrally driven plans and standards often fail largely for the reasons mentioned above, i.e., stakeholders do not internalize the values of the program and the mandated activities do not match real problems in the local context.

In contrast to the top-down approach used in most Effective School programming, critics argue that development assistance should focus on creating the conditions for successful empowerment to enable local stakeholders to find their own solutions to perceived local problems. For example, New Generation Schools empower local schools by giving them the power to set their own goals, control budgets, hire their own teachers, change the curriculum, and other forms of institutional freedom that leads to dynamic and organic change that is owned and directed by stakeholders.[22] Such bottom-up approaches while more complex in their organization and roll-out are more likely to achieve sustained change.

2.2.3 Standardization Stifles Innovation

The tendency of Effective School programming to rely on highly standardized implementation templates misconstrues the school as a 'static' institutional context. This mode of implementation is another aspect of the observation above that top-down implementation characterized by high levels of standardization disempowers stakeholders and undermines any effort for a school to become a 'dynamic' setting that promotes institutional change and innovation.[23] The struggle to achieve a balance between 'structure' on the one hand and 'freedom' on the other is a dilemma that faces all projects in the education sector during the period of their design. Too much structure stifles creativity and innovation while too much freedom can lead to anarchic conditions of implementation. Trying to achieve a balance of 'freedom in structure' is often easier said than done, but it is in general better to err on the side of more freedom than structure. Empirical research studies suggest the need for some structure when executing cognitive tasks but that without freedom, creativity is likely to be limited.[24] Because Effective School programming tends to be highly standardized (i.e., overly structured), it is unlikely to promote a dynamic environment that will lead to educational innovation.

The observation that bureaucratic systems and their penchant for standardization stifles innovation raises a conundrum for government, since large national projects will always need to be implemented by the educational bureaucracy. Some researchers, however, have observed that not all bureaucracies are the same. For example, one study has made a distinction between what they call 'Enabling' Bureaucracies and those that are 'Coercive.'[25] Enabling bureaucracies have been found to take measures that reduce the deadening effects of standardization by redefining their role so that there is more emphasis on providing

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[21] Easterly, W., (2006). *The Whiteman's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good,* New York: The Penguin Press.

[22] Op. Cit., Bredenberg, K. (2022).

[23] Heick, T. (2019). *12 Realities That Are Reducing Innovation in Schools,* in Teach Thought, September 2019. https://www.teachthought.com/education/reducing-innovation-schools/

[24] Sagiv, L., et al., (2009) *Structure and Freedom in Creativity: The Interplay between Externally Imposed Structure and Personal Cognitive Style,* Journal of Organizational Behavior, Vol. 10. https://faculty.runi.ac.il/jgoldenberg/pdf/structure%20and%20freedom%20in%20creativity.pdf

[25] Adler, P.S. and Borys, B. (1996). *Two Types of Bureaucracy: Enabling and Coercive,* Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol 41, No. 1, 61-89. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2393986

guidance and oversight clarifications rather than rigid requirements relating to performance and assessment. The Cambodian government has made some movements in this direction by taking actions to outsource project implementation of some initiatives to smaller, less bureaucratic entities while redefining the government's role to one of oversight and problem resolution when issues arise.[26] This suggests that the government does have options when it comes to a choice between structure and freedom in the projects that it designs and implements.

2.2.4 Distortionary Feedback Loops

The phenomenon of 'washback' effects resulting from high stakes evaluations such as tests and other forms of assessment has been well documented.[27] In this respect, "washback" is a term used in education to describe the influence, whether beneficial or damaging, of an assessment on the teaching and learning that precedes and prepares for that assessment. Thus, washback describes an unintended effect on teachers and other stakeholders, as they change their behaviors to avoid blame by ensuring good student test performance.[28] Often this effect takes the form of 'teaching to the test,' which may necessitate abandoning certain kinds of teaching methodologies if these do not serve the purpose of helping students to do well on paper and pencil tests, even if these methodologies have been prioritized by government. And since conventional tests tend to focus on lower-order thinking skills as noted earlier, the use of methodologies such as Project Work and Problem-based Learning, which emphasize higher-order thinking is very likely to fall by the wayside. This is a good example of an unintended consequence of extensive testing. Indeed, there is also a well-established body of research that demonstrates that teaching to the test actually hurts student learning and dumbs down the curriculum.[29] It is in this sense that the high stakes evaluation used in Effective School settings has a distortionary feedback effect on the behavior of stakeholders.

It should also be noted that washback effects can be felt more broadly than from just testing, particularly if the standards governing other forms of performance (e.g., lesson planning, meeting frequency, etc.) are quantitatively expressed. That is, once stakeholders become aware of the centrally set standards for which central level bureaucracies will hold them to account, they start to alter their behavior in non-optimal ways to meet the standard(s). This often results in dysfunctional behavior such as 'teaching to the test' as noted above, falsifying data (see below), diverting attention from other key school functions for which there are no standards (e.g., extracurricular activities), and other behaviors that do more damage than good. Thus, the singular focus on centrally set standards that one sees in Effective School approaches is very prone to undermining any tendency among school level stakeholders to focus on homegrown solutions if these are not mandated by centrally set standards.

2.2.5 The Danger of Data Falsification

The falsification of educational data reporting has long been a common problem in Cambodia.[30] Research

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[26] Op. Cit., Bredenberg, K. (2022).

[27] For example, Tsagari, D., Cheng, L. (2016). Washback, Impact, and Consequences Revisited. In: Shohamy, E., Or, I., May, S. (eds) Language Testing and Assessment. Encyclopedia of Language and Education. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02326-7_24-1.

[28] Smith, M.L. (1991). *Put to the test: The effect of external testing on teachers,* Educational Researcher, Vol. 20, Issue 5, 8-11.

[29] Singer, S. (2016) *Why Teaching to the Test Is Educational Malpractice,* in Gadfly on the Wall. https://gadflyonthewallblog.com/2016/11/03/why-teaching-to-the-test-is-educational-malpractice/

[30] KAPE (2013). *Enrollment Trends in Phnom Penh: A Needs Assessment,* Phnom Penh: Save the Children. http://www.kapekh.org/files/report_file/47-en.pdf

studies have mentioned that local level administrators often interpret centrally set targets as quotas, leading to pressure on schools to 'modify' data to meet the national target.[31] Given this culture of educational data reporting in Cambodia, it would seem to be an extremely risky strategy to create project designs that rely heavily on quantitatively set performance standards. For example, one Effective School project in Cambodia has posited 73 performance standards for schools to report on, all quantitatively expressed with little flexibility in the way that the data is reported. If schools feel pressured to report on standards in a way that satisfies bureaucratic imperatives, there are likely to be very real concerns about the validity of the data collection processes observed in projects that rely heavily on centrally set quantitative performance standards. Thus, even if one accepts the dubious proposition that quantitatively set performance standards can capture the real situation at a school (see Section 2.2.1 above), there are likely to be serious questions about whether one can really believe the data that is being reported given the data reporting culture in Cambodia.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The arrival of meaningful educational reform in Cambodia in the last decade has opened many possibilities for achieving educational change and innovation. In its efforts to make an important breakthrough in educational quality, the Cambodian government has shown its flexibility in accommodating many different school development models to achieve its educational reform agenda. Effective Schools, Child Friendly Schools, and New Generation Schools are among the school development models that are currently in circulation in Cambodia, all of which have their own policy frameworks.

Nevertheless, the liberal accommodation of starkly different school development approaches may invite multiple challenges, since the typology of school development models allowed by the government promote very different stakeholder mindsets, which may impede the transition of a school from one model to the next. For example, Effective Schools focus on compliance with centrally set standards of performance while New Generation Schools foster non-uniform performance standards that are set locally. Similarly, the former seeks to define effectiveness in terms of economic efficiency models that tend to be quantitatively expressed and terminal outcome-based while the latter defines success in terms of promoting children's rights, stakeholder empowerment, and performance 'processes' (as opposed to terminal learning outcomes). Thus, there does not appear to be an easy path of transition from one developmental tier to another, even though the policy typology developed by the Cambodian government does seem to favor an evolutionary transition from one tier to the next as schools develop. But because of the lack of any developmental relationship between tiers in terms of their philosophy and methodology, it would appear that the school development model typology is really non-linear in nature. Thus, it might be possible for a Tier 3 school to transition directly to Tier 1 if it can meet investment criteria, thereby making the Tier 2 stage one of questionable relevance.

To some extent, the problem described above stems from the continuing predominance of donor-driven agendas. As long as the Cambodian government hopes to receive financial support from international development banks and other donors, it is going to have to demonstrate buy-in for economic models of school development regardless of whether there is a conviction that such models really work. On the other hand, the rights-driven and more holistic school development models embraced by the Cambodian government in the early 2000s do seem to have much more grassroots support, particularly among Cambodian civil society groups. And while rights-driven approaches also have their advocates among certain institutional donors such as the UN, there seem to be many more national groups who also support

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[31] For example, Bredenberg, K., (2000). *Student Repetition in Cambodia: Causes, Consequences, and Its Relationship to Learning,* Phnom Penh: UNICEF. http://www.kapekh.org/files/report_file/1-Student-Repetition-In-Cambodia.pdf

such approaches out of a heart-felt conviction for their effectiveness rather than a desire to appease a donor.

Advocating for more home-grown solutions to Cambodia's school development needs that also have grassroots support would seem to be the advised path for the country's education system going forward. Such development models are more likely to be internalized by stakeholders and provide a better match for the real needs in the education system. Stronger relevance and easy pathways for internalization for a school development model are in turn more likely to provide Cambodia with sustained pathways for school improvement, in contrast to imported development models that are imposed from the top-down. It remains to be seen, however, whether more 'Made in Cambodia' school development models will emerge to displace imported, donor-driven strategies.

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