

Dilemmas in Development Raised by a Teacher Training Project in Cambodia

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Introduction

The Cambodian Basic Education and Teacher Training Project (BETT) funded by the Belgian Technical Cooperation (BTC) programme and jointly implemented by BTC and the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) includes an Early Literacy Programme (ELP). Being involved, as a consultant, in this development project has raised a number of issues, many of which are common to all such projects and some of which are specific to teacher training.

The unique history of Cambodia contributes to the complexity of the situation (Chandler 2007). In outline, the Kingdom of Cambodia sought to become a French protectorate in 1863 following centuries of “bloody struggles among the rulers, civil wars, disasters and territorial loss” (Tan 2008). Prior to this, education, for boys only, was largely in the control of the Buddhist temples (wats) and under the French was mainly confined to educating an elite who would become administrators (see Sopheak and Clayton 2007; Dy and Ninomiya 2003). In 1953 the monarchy returned, to be overthrown in 1970 and in 1975 the notorious Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot took control. Under this regime schooling virtually ceased. Many thousands of Cambodians were dispersed to the countryside and more, often including the most highly educated, were massacred. It has been estimated that “two million out of a population of seven million were killed or died during this period” (Dy and Ninomiya 2003). Although Pol Pot was defeated in 1979 the first democratic elections were not held until 1993.

Cambodia is among the poorest nations in the world, the United Nations Development Programme 2008 puts Cambodia 136/179 in terms of poverty, with the highest infant and under-five mortality rates in the region (UNICEF 2008). Adult illiteracy is 26.4% (UNDP 2008). In 1993 the Constitution of Cambodia provided for free and universal primary education, but this is yet to be fully realised. The need for aid and development is very clear.

Dilemmas

Any development project must face issues of implementation and sustainability. Aid agencies, governments and NGOs are often interested in short term results, particularly where projects are time-limited. There is always a danger that when funding and personnel leave an area the activities leave with them. Education programmes in particular, also face issues of cultural perspectives and priorities, embodied in different views of teaching and learning.

a) Implementation

Duggan (1996) describes the recent history of education policy and aid to Cambodia. He suggests that investment in education has been directed to the retraining of unqualified teachers rather than providing resources for schools. He also suggests that impact is limited as most aid is concentrated in Phnom Penh, rather than the less accessible rural areas.

King (2009) reviews progress following the World Conference on Education for All in 1990 and the Dakar World Forum on Education in 2000 which set a number of Millennium Development Goals. He discusses the lack of infrastructure and the competing demands of basic education and technical and vocational skills development, as some of the reasons why programmes are not fully implemented.

To address some of these concerns the early literacy aspect of the BETT programme is deliberately targeted at remote and rural areas. It trains teachers of Grade 1 and 2 classes in basic literacy. There is also a substantial portion of the budget for the development of reading books which have been designed and written in collaboration with Cambodian educators.

It is also helpful to consider some of the micro-factors that inhibit implementation. Mohammed and Harlech-Jones (2008) describe an in-service training programme in Pakistan. They suggest that teachers often feel that teacher education programmes fail to understand the contexts within which they are working. Teachers in many developing countries are underpaid and operate with limited resources.

Certainly we found this to be true in Cambodia. Most schools work a split-shift system, with children attending either in the morning or the afternoon. Classes are large, often as many as 60 pupils with one teacher, and poorly resourced. Many teachers told us that they engage in 'supplementary tutoring'. "Thus when the official school day ends, the unofficial school day begins - with the same teachers and the same pupils occupying the same desks in the same classrooms" (Bray and Bunly 2005). The authors add that official "salaries are so low that on their own they are inadequate to maintain teachers and their families at levels above the poverty line". In the schools we visited many teachers relied on private tutoring to supplement their income.

Partly because salaries, particularly in the primary sector, are so low many teachers are poorly qualified and under-trained, "those who know little teach those who know nothing" (Gottesman, cited in Sopheak and Clayton 2007). Indeed, as Maskell (1998) points out, "Cambodian teachers often have only one or two years more education than the students they teach" and some of the teachers on our training courses found reading and writing laborious.

A study of school attendance in Cambodia and Yemen found a correlation between teacher quality and school attendance. "The higher the share of teachers with substantial experience, the lower is the probability that a child is working (by this they mean economic activity)... and the higher is school attendance" (Guarcello and Rosati 2007). MoEYS give teacher training a high priority and there were Ministry representatives on all our courses.

Mohammed and Harlech-Jones (2008) found that lack of intellectual stimulus and independence led to teachers, already restricted by rules and regulations, being more inclined to follow familiar

practices and rules than to introduce new ideas. Linked to this return to traditional practices is the lack of ongoing support in schools. Teachers who return after a period of training need encouragement and interest from colleagues and particularly from school directors in order to change their ways of working. For these reasons the BETT project set up a system of information, advice and support for teachers and directors through the trainers who were themselves regularly visited and guided by the central project team.

b) Sustainability

As well as enabling teachers to implement new practices, development partners want to ensure that following the end of a project responsibility for its continuation can be transferred. This requires that approaches and strategies are well understood and that decision-making structures are in place. Courtney (2007) points out that in Cambodia between 1994 and 1999 over 50% of the education budget came from outside sources. This creates a problem when time limited projects are completed and, in the case of Cambodia has often led to 'policy fragmentation' (Courtney 2007). Much is made of collaboration and partnership, but in reality this is complex and hard to achieve. A culture of dependency can be set up in developing countries whereby donors are relied upon to provide resources with limited responsibility given to local personnel.

To reduce this effect, in the BETT project the Cambodian central project team has been closely involved in all decisions and increasing capacity has been a key concern from the outset.

Courtney (2007) suggests that teachers need to feel that the programme is effective before they are willing to accept responsibility and change. Her analysis suggests the complexity of the collaborative/partnership arrangement and reflects suggestions by King (2009) and Mason (2009). King is critical of the lack of attention that has been paid to issues of sustainability, suggesting that it has been assumed that through education and training, awareness will be raised which will ensure continuation. He argues, drawing on complexity theory that more attention needs to be paid to the environment necessary to sustain projects. One difficulty with the contribution that complexity theory can make to the debate, at least at present is that, as Mason (2009) suggests, "it makes no claim to predict what is essential and what can be marginalized". He quotes Nordtveit who argues, using the example of literacy programmes, that there are too many factors, mostly associated with poverty, to identify success. But, on an individual project level, Courtney (2007) is able to identify key players; in this case school directors, whose 'understanding, motivation and commitment' was crucial to the sustainability of the project. While not underestimating its complexity, the BETT project has identified and involved key partners in the planning and delivery from its inception.

Some of the issues surrounding sustainability are structural. Maskell (1998) describes the sometimes tense relationship between NGOs and the Ministry in Cambodia. Power and patronage can influence interactions between NGO staff, teachers and MoEYS, leaving projects cancelled or seriously altered. He suggests that such 'dissonance' can lead to teachers returning to traditional practices when they get back to their communities and projects being unsustainable. The exit strategies for the BETT project include fully reporting outcomes to MoEYS and meeting donors and NGOs in an attempt to ensure some form of continuity. Cambodian trainers have a key role in maintaining links between the central project team and the teachers, and their expertise has already been recognised by districts and provinces beyond the original area.

c) Cultural relevance

Central to the BETT project is the role of western consultants who are charged with training teachers to 'improve the teaching and learning of literacy skills'. Implicit in this is an assumption that western methods can be successful and relevant in a Cambodian context. Education traditions in many parts of Asia differ greatly from Western Europe. This has been characterised by Suzuki (2008) as "permissive progressivism or oppressive essentialism". The development of education in much of Asia, founded on Buddhist precepts which value conformity and respect for authority make it difficult for teachers brought up in this tradition to change their paradigm to one which is meritocratic, questioning and learner-focused (Suzuki 2008; Tan 2008). Indeed attempts to introduce 'child-centred' education in Cambodia have sometimes resulted in irrelevant, and therefore unsustainable, practices (see Courtney 2008). As Mohammad and Harlech-Jones (2008) remark, "The bigger the problem, the greater the urgency with which it is regarded, and therefore the faster the pace of implementation." And yet the changes in understanding and behaviour that are required suggest the need for time and depth – a possible conflict between quantity and quality.

The curriculum in Cambodia was introduced as a matter of national urgency in order to define and reinforce the nation state and to, "develop the pedagogic, cognitive, mental and physical abilities of learners" (MoEYS 1999) following the devastation of Pol Pot. As a consequence it is a centralised system in which, due to the speed of its introduction, concepts are not always clearly articulated or understood. This appears to lead to the classic dilemma in which the demands of globalisation and technical and economic innovation conflict with social and cultural conservation (Bates 2008; Suzuki 2008). In Cambodia, as elsewhere, economic development is sometimes at odds with cultural maintenance. This is reflected in a curriculum which values correctness, precision and respect over risk-taking and creativity.

Education projects often claim to value the views and experiences of teachers and pupils while in practice imposing their own perspectives. They may be based on principles of openness, discovery and flexibility but in reality can rapidly become authoritarian and directive (see Mohammed and Harlech-Jones 2008).

The Early Literacy Programme trains teachers to introduce activities and practices which sit alongside, rather than replace, the existing curriculum. It asserts the importance of speaking and listening in a classroom context which is traditionally dominated by didactic teaching. The training provides teachers with an instruction manual and gives them opportunities to practise and discuss activities. In this way the value of talk is exemplified in the training process. Although it may be argued that Cambodian teachers lack the tradition or experience of discussing such concepts, being accustomed to a transmission model of teaching, we have found that they engage enthusiastically and are keen to talk about their understanding in order to extend it. Traditionally in Cambodia, reading is prioritised over speaking and listening but trainers on the ELP have embraced the place of speaking and listening within the development of literacy.

Conclusions

Aid agencies and others generally become involved in development projects for benign reasons. They wish to improve conditions. Education projects have a special appeal in that they can confer long-term and far reaching benefits. But the reality is that many projects have limited impact and fail to provide enduring improvement. The reasons for this are complex and vary from project to project.

Three dilemmas, implementation, sustainability and cultural relevance, have been highlighted. Funding for the BETT Programme will come to an end in 2010 but there are already signs that implementation may continue. A number of NGOs have bought into the materials and training, and the books and training manuals will have a use beyond the end of the project. From the outset a key concern has been to provide sustainability by training and giving responsibility to the Cambodian project team and to a group of teachers who worked in local schools. Their increased confidence and expertise will ensure that in this, or similar projects, skills continue to develop. The support of school directors and of those district and provincial officers who have been involved in the project will add to the likelihood of continuation.

The history of Cambodia is part of the cultural context within which change occurs. This has led to a highly centralised and conservative system in which innovation is sometimes viewed with suspicion. The enthusiasm of teachers and pupils for the materials and the pedagogy gives some cause for hope, but ultimately the government must endorse the programme and find donors to fund it.

In the BETT Early Literacy Programme we have attempted to anticipate questions of implementation, sustainability and cultural relevance from the start and to involve partners from the early stages. In this way the project ceases to be donor-driven and becomes recipient-led. The recipients will therefore decide on the future of the programme.

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