

Out-of-school children and the role of social reconstructionism in education in the context of Cambodia: an implication for reform policy

Quality Education
for All

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Received 4 October 2023
Revised 3 June 2024
5 November 2024
Accepted 11 November 2024

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the factors contributing to the out-of-school children (OOSC) issue at the primary level in Cambodia and related initiatives in addressing the challenges, drawing upon the application of social reconstructionism in addressing the issue.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews and analyzes relevant, existing literature, including scholarly articles, reports, policy documents and books.

Findings – Despite efforts by the government, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and non-government organizations, the issue of OOSC remains a challenge. Integration of social reconstructionist principles offers a transformative approach to address the OOSC issue, as well as systemic educational disparities.

Research limitations/implications – This review paper lacks empirical findings of its own and relies solely on the availability and quality of the relevant sources, setting direction for future research to explore empirical findings.

Practical implications – The findings underscore the importance of adopting a holistic and socially conscious approach to education, incorporating social reconstructionist principles in reform policy.

Social implications – Addressing the OOSC in Cambodia is crucial for promoting social equity and breaking the cycle of poverty, highlighting the need for inclusive education policies.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the existing literature and builds upon it to offer a novel perspective of applying social reconstructionist principles in reform policy to address the OOSC issue, as well as the potential of a transformative approach to dealing with systematic educational disparities.

Keywords Out-of-school children, OOSC, Educational system, Social reconstructionism, Policy, Reform

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The number of out-of-school children (OOSC) is a global issue. The issue is particularly acute in developing countries. At the same time, Her Highness Sheikh Moza bint of “Education Above All (EAA)” Foundation states that “The chance of an education is a



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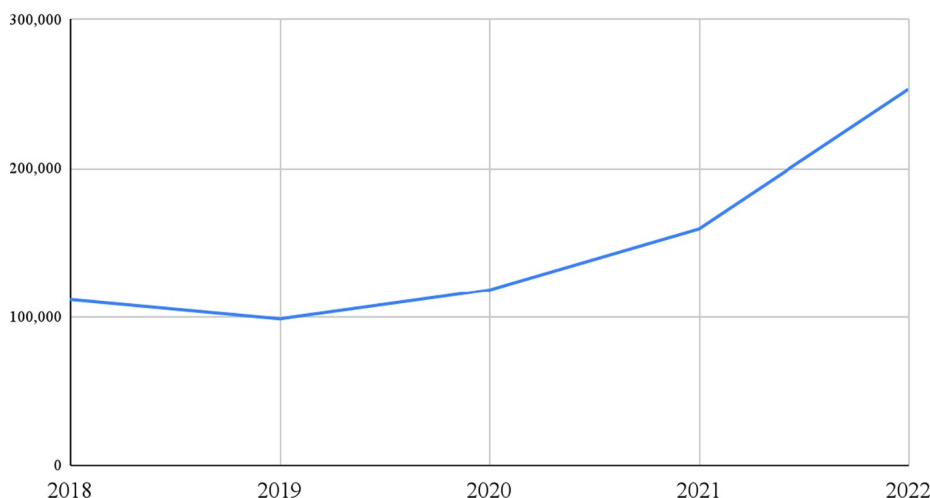
Quality Education for All
Vol. 2 No. 1, 2025
pp. 3-20
Emerald Publishing Limited
2976-9310
DOI 10.1108/QEA-10-2023-0006

chance to escape poverty, to improve health and to enhance opportunities” (EAA, 2023). Her Highness Sheikha’s visionary leadership in promoting education very well aligns with the fundamental human right to education that is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to education and education should be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages (United Nations, 2023). The principle is further echoed in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, which guarantees the human right to education for all its citizens. Article 68 of Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia states that “The State shall provide free primary and secondary education to all citizens in public schools; citizens shall receive education for at least 9 years” (Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, 2004; Open Development Cambodia, 2021). Quality education is in “Goal 4,” which is one of the sustainable development goals of the United Nations Development Programmes, ensuring that all children complete free primary and secondary schooling by 2030 (UNDP, 2023). To align with the NU’s Goal 4, Cambodia’s Sustainable Development Goal Phase 4 (SDG 4) on the education roadmap 2030 also aims to ensure quality, equity and inclusivity of education and to promote lifelong learning for all [Ministry of Education and Youth and Sport (MoEYS), 2019]. Reiteration of the SDG 4 has also been made by [Ministry of Education and Youth and Sport (MoEYS), 2021a] in a policy document on “Understanding Social Exclusion in the Cambodian Context and Planning for Inclusive Education.” To realize the children’s right to education, significant efforts have been interestingly made. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), as well as the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), development partners and non-government organizations (NGOs) have been taking steps to improve education in Cambodia including developing relevant policies supporting education, building more schools in remote areas, providing scholarship to children of poor families, providing financial assistance to their families, training teachers, providing education in nonformal settings and advocating for the rights of children to education. The MoEYS has pushed and promoted basic education enrollment across the country, especially for the marginalized groups and those living in the rural and remote areas, achieving a high enrollment rate of 86.8% for the 2021–2022 school year, specifically with 1,664,925 rural children and 345,361 urban children enrolled in public primary education (Open Development Cambodia, 2023; Ministry of Education and Youth and Sport (MoEYS), 2021b). Despite the steps taken by the RGC, MoEYS and NGOs, however, it has not been enough to eliminate the problem of children staying out of school. Based on the statistics released by The World Bank (2023a), the number of children staying out of primary school in Cambodia has shown an upward trend in the past five consecutive years, from 2018 to 2022 as shown in Figure 1 below.

This article seeks to analyze factors contributing to the prevalence of OOSC in Cambodia by examining actions taken by the RGC, MoEYS, NGOs and development partners, and evaluating progress and remaining challenges, aiming to inform future intervention. The article also explores the potential of social reconstructionist concepts for policy reform to address the OOSC issue, as well as to promote educational equity in Cambodia.

Literature review

This section reviews and discusses relevant literature, including public documents from NGOs and the Ministry of Education (MoEYS), academic articles and books, to identify factors contributing to the OOSC problem in Cambodia. It also examines existing strategies implemented by NGOs and MoEYS. In addition, this section also explores social reconstructionism as a leadership philosophy for addressing the OOSC issue and dealing with systematic educational disparities through policy reform.



Source: Author's own work

Figure 1. OOSC in primary school, Cambodia ([the World Bank, 2023a](#))

The selection criteria of sources prioritized relevance to the Cambodian context. Credibility and relevance of the sources were carefully evaluated. To ensure the richness of information due to the scarcity of sources, particularly academic research papers, on the specific issue in the specific context – namely Cambodia, old academic articles from 2010 up to the most current ones in 2023 were included. The literature search primarily used two main databases, Google Scholar and JSTOR. Google Search and Consensus App were basically used for initial exploration of the topic and identification of relevant information. In addition, the Internet Archive, which is a public digital library, was also used to access related historical books on social reconstructionism for consultation.

While selected sources provide valuable insights into the issue of OOSC in Cambodia, it is also important to acknowledge a lack of academic peer-reviewed research examining the OOSC issue specifically in Cambodia, which highlights the need for future empirical studies. Given the limitation, relevant information incorporated in this article can be sufficient to broaden perspective on the OOSC issue, particularly in the Cambodian context, which would likely be a primary source of literature for future study of the same topic.

Definition of out-of-school children

First, it is worth looking at what it means by the term “out-of-school children.” UNESCO’s definition of OOSC, including adolescents and youth, is the number of children or young people in the official age range for the given level of education who are not enrolled in preprimary, primary, secondary or higher levels of education, or not enrolled in any formal or nonformal education program (UNESCO, 2004; [UNESCO, 2014a](#); [Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2023](#)). However, [UNESCO \(2014b\)](#) said that the definitions of out-of-school vary and then provided the definition which is said to be inspired by UNICEF/UIS that goes:

An out of school child is any child of compulsory school age – generally of primary or basic education school age - who is not attending a formal primary or basic school.

The document further explains that OOSC are those who attended school but dropped out, and it does not include those who are attending school but who are at risk of dropping out. However, it does include those children who never attended school but may attend in the future or may never attend at all. According to the website of “Education Above All,” a nonprofit organization, the term OOSC is abbreviated to OOSC (EAA, 2023). The abbreviation OOSC, therefore, may appear more frequently than the full word in the study report.

How to calculate the number of out-of-school children

According to UNESCO (2014b), to compute the number of OOSC, it can be performed directly by subtracting the number of age group children enrolled in a primary or secondary school from the total number of children belonging to that age group. The document suggests that the number of children enrolled can be available in the administrative school data while the total number of children belonging to that age group can generally be taken from the survey projection data.

Overview of the out-of-school children

While SDG 4 ensures that all boys and girls complete free primary and secondary schooling by 2030 (UNDP, 2023), UNESCO (2020) noted 263 million children, adolescents and youth being out of school globally. Based on the UNESCO Institute for Statistics data for the school year ending in 2018, 258 million children and youth were out of school, 59 million of them were children of primary school age, 62 million of lower secondary and 138 million of upper secondary UNESCO (2023b). Right to Education (RTE) states that leaders have set an ambitious global education goal to achieve universal primary and lower secondary education for all by 2030, yet many countries struggle to provide even primary education to marginalized children (RTE, 2023). Cambodia is also one country that has been working hard to provide education to marginalized children. RTE also warns that leaders need to fund the goal or lose another generation to poverty.

According to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Ministry of Interior, Cambodia has a total of 6,109 associations and non-governmental organizations (Khmer Times, 2023), 2,623 among which are associations and the rest are NGOs. Out of the large number of NGOs and associations, many have been contributing to the efforts of the RGCs and MoEYS in addressing educational issues in Cambodia including the OOSC issue. They have been providing education to children, in particular marginalized ones. Some have even been providing support to children from primary up to higher education. Some popular NGOs, to name just few, are such as Kampuchea Action to Promote Education (KAPE), Cambodian Children’s Fund (CCF), Pour un Sourire d’Enfant (PSE), World Vision, Save the Children, Plan International Cambodia, Taramana, Caring for Cambodia, Khmer NGO for Education, Action Education (former Aide et Action) and many more. Even with a great number of NGOs and the great effort of the RGC, as well as MoEYS, it is still not enough to address the OOSC issue.

Factors pressuring children to stay out of school

In Cambodia, many marginalized families rely on their children to work to make ends meet, which forces children to prioritize work over school, making them fall behind in their studies. In addition, the high cost of living in cities can force families to move to the

provinces, where educational resources are fewer ([Indochina Starfish Foundation Cambodia, 2021](#)). An article on the website of MoEYS states that children's access to primary school has improved with a high enrollment rate. However, acknowledgment has also been confirmed that geographical disparity still limits children's access to school leading to late school entry or school incompleteness ([Ministry of Education and Youth and Sport \(MoEYS\), 2024](#)). [Ministry of Education and Youth and Sport \(MoEYS\) \(2021a\)](#) states that children and youth in Cambodia are still failing to reach learning standards appropriate for their age due to a number of exclusionary factors, such as access to secondary education showing inequalities across gender, geography and socioeconomic groups and large numbers of girls and boys remaining out of school at all levels of education, as well as many children dropping out of school before completing basic education. The top one factor that is commonly reported to cause school dropouts is a socioeconomic reason, which forces the student to stay out of school to help the family earn a living ([USAID, 2010](#)). Adding to USAID, [Sisouphanthong \(2017\)](#) confirmed that Cambodia and Laos have a significant number of OOSC and school dropouts compared to other regions due to the impact of employment demand leading children to drop out of school to help adults in the household make additional income. Sisouphanthong added that the employment demand also attracted potential teachers to choose other professions causing teaching shortage and further contributing to the OOSC issue. The OOSC issue and financial burden of low-income families are found associated ([Idei et al., 2020](#)). The financial burden, which is found to be associated with children's schooling, includes expenses for uniforms, study materials, and private tutoring or what a popularly termed shadow education.

In addition to the economic factor, other factors such as the issue of curriculum, instruction, school distance and student performance are also noted, according to USAID. However, school distance is found not to be directly associated with school attendance but an improved road condition is reported to be related to household motivation to get vehicles to facilitate their children's schooling ([Idei et al., 2020](#)). The root cause of the problem can be a complex issue. In the Korea International Cooperation Agency report, the listed factors of dropouts in Cambodia are such as low academic achievement, lack of emotional attachment or a sense of belonging to school, parents with low educational background and aspirations, lack of homeschooling or guidance and support from parents, large family size, arguably low value placed on education in the family, history of dropping out in the family, child labor and domestic violence ([Heng et al., 2016](#)). More girls than boys are noted to be out of school due to four perceived excuses, according to [Nair \(2019\)](#). Those 4 are such as girls' responsibilities for household chores, costs of transportation and schooling, neglecting future impact on lost income and well-being and presumptions that sons will more likely support parents later on in life. Poor school condition is also found to be one of the main factors ([Harold, 2022](#)).

Highlight of effort of the government and relevant non-government organizations

The RGC, as well as MoEYS, with great support from development partners and NGOs, have been putting lots of effort to reform the quality of education at all levels in Cambodia. Education policies and regulations have been created and adopted to enforce the quality, accessibility, efficiency, equity, inclusiveness, effectiveness, transparency and accountability ([Open Development Cambodia, 2023](#)). [Kimmarrita \(2023\)](#), in "The Phnom Penh Post," wrote that a spokesperson of MoEYS said that positive cooperation from ministries, institutions, development partners, civil society organizations, the private sectors, educators, parents, students and local authorities that contribute to improving the quality of education, including encouraging students to attend classes, is welcome. According to Kimmarrita, with financial

support from “Educate A Child – EAC”, which is a global program of the EAA, its partner Action Education, formerly Aide et Action (AEA), implemented the Cambodian Consortium for OOSC (CCOSC) project and helped to maintain more than 23,000 OOSC nationwide and train more than 3,000 teachers.

The CCOSC project supported OOSC in Cambodia by providing them with remedial classes, space to learn and scholarship materials. They also renovated or built 50 classrooms and improved nonformal education, which allowed almost 3,000 marginalized children to access education ([Action Education, 2022](#)). OOSC are identified through community mapping campaigns and then enrolled in formal education through a mix of supply- and demand-side interventions ([EAA, 2021](#)). According to EAA, supply-side interventions are such as building new schools and training teachers, and demand-side interventions are such as providing financial assistance to families and providing transportation to school. While progress has been made, however, EAA noted that push and pull factors and other access barriers such as poverty, lack of infrastructure and quality are still major challenges. The aforementioned concept of push and pull factors is based on the original theory of migration by an American sociologist Everett S. Lee; the push factors are factors such as poverty, unemployment, insecurity and so on, which make life hard and unpleasant for the individual in question, whereas the pull factors are factors such as freedom, employment, security and so on, which are perceived to be good for the individual in question ([Herm et al., 2024](#), p. 90). For that theory, [Bruzzone \(2020\)](#) puts it simply in a policy document whereby the push factors describe the reasons why individuals might migrate from a particular place, and the pull factors describe the reasons why individuals might settle in a particular place. In the context of education, however, push and pull factors are described as push and pull effects by [Jordan et al. \(1994\)](#) in their exploratory research on the complexity of early school dropout. The authors refer to the push effects as factors located within the school impacting the connection students make with the school environment causing them to reject the context of schooling, while the pull effects are external factors, such as the family, neighborhood peer groups, community organizations and religions, legal and health institutions, which may usurp an emphasis on education.

It is worth noting that the population aged 14 years and younger accounts for more than 30% of the population, according to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UNESCO, 2023). Among more than 6,000 associations and NGOs in Cambodia, many are providing education support to children. In addition to the CCOSC project of Action Education in partnership with EAA, a small number of the NGOs as highlighted below have also been working to ensure education for OOSC or underprivileged children in Cambodia.

Pour un Sourire d’Enfant. PSE was founded in the 1990s in Cambodia by a retired French couple Christian and Marie-France des Pallières who came to Cambodia on a humanitarian mission ([PSE, 2024](#)). Regarding education support, according to its website ([www.pse.ngo/](#)), PSE offers three programs as shown in [Table 1](#) below:

Cambodian Children’s Fund. CCF was founded in 2003 by Scott Neeson, and is now running 65 programs including education, healthcare and housing for more than 2,000 children and their families ([CCF, 2016](#)).

Save the Children. Save the Children is an international NGO, started working in Cambodia in 1970, even before the genocide, according to an article on its website ([Save the Children, 2024](#)). Based on the article, the NGO has helped 79,670 children in Cambodia by 2021 alone and 116,502 children from 2019 to 2021.

World Vision. “Since the early 1970s World Vision has implemented a diverse range of relief and development programs to benefit vulnerable children in Cambodia. In 2020, we

Table 1. Programs offered by PSE (PSE, 2024)

School support	PSE support program	
	Remedial school	Vocational training
This program offers support classes to children who are most at risk of dropping out. This is to contribute to their education in public school. The support classes take place on a half-day basis in addition to the other half-day the children spend in public school	This program provides education to disadvantaged children who have never enrolled or have dropped out of school. This program allows the children to study the curriculum of two academic years in one year for them to catch up faster	This is a high-quality vocational training program which includes 3 schools: Hotel and tourism school, business school and trade and technology school. It offers about 20 vocational training courses to train children for the Cambodian labor market

Source: Author's own work

employ over 600 staff that work in nine provinces and the capital city, Phnom Penh, reaching 2.7 million children” (World Vision, 2023). World Vision has found out that only 40% of children ages 3–5 years old are enrolled in preschool. Each year 300,000 youth drop out of school looking for work. “Education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty,” said World Vision. Education programs being provided by World Vision include early childhood, primary school and education and life skills. At the Primary Department of MoEYS, World Visions and Action Education (AEA) have recently signed a partnership agreement with each other with the aim of addressing the student dropouts in ten provinces, projecting support in the next three years which includes building eight new standard schools, enrolling more than 15,000 OOSC and providing professional development for 5,000 teachers (Sarivadh, 2023).

Cambodia Assistance to Primary Education Project. According to its website, Cambodia Assistance to Primary Education Project (CAPE) was established in April 1996 to improve instructional quality in school clusters. Following the closure of the project, a group of committed CAPE staff persisted with their efforts, formed a committee and later evolved into a nonprofit local NGO known as KAPE and was registered with the Ministry of Interior in 1999 (KAPE, 2024). According to KAPE, 42 preschools, 172 primary schools, 110 high schools and 6 higher education institutions are its direct beneficiaries:

KAPE is a local non-profit NGO working primarily in the formal education sector in 13 provinces in Cambodia. KAPE implements projects at all levels of the education process with beneficiaries in preschools, primary schools, secondary schools, tertiary programs and Master’s Degree of Education in Mentoring (KAPE, 2022).

The Consortium. Based on Roland *et al.* (2018), the Cambodian Consortium for Out of School Children, referred to as the Consortium, was initiated as a required coordinated approach to address the challenge of reducing the number of OOSC in Cambodia. The consortium operates through a multipronged operational structure, comprising over 20 medium-sized local NGOs and large international NGOs, with MoEYS representatives participating in both the advisory board and the consortium technical committee. They managed to enroll more than 50,000 OOSC across 23 out of 25 provinces in Cambodia over the course of Phase I, during 2014–2017. Those numbers include children with disabilities, ethnic minority children, poor and remote children, street children and over-aged children. However, among the successes that have been made by the consortium, Roland also noted the following for a lesson learned:

- The focus on enrollment targets sometimes deprioritized quality.
- Collaboration was not sufficient.
- The opportunity to share best practices for OOSC enrollment and retention was missing.
- Failure to leverage leadership to engage the government to secure funding, to influence policy, leading to limited potential impact.

So much effort has been put by NGOs, the government and development partners. In the spirit of Cambodia's Constitution about education, many strategies, program initiatives and measures have been implemented and relevant policies have been developed. Rectangular Strategy Phase I 2004 attempted to strengthen the quality of education, Phase II 2008 aimed to improve the quality of teaching and learning including providing in-service training to teachers and to increase a net enrollment in primary schools by 95%, Phase III 2013 aimed to increase the enrollment in primary schooling by 100%, and Phase IV 2018 aimed to maintain the net enrollment rate of 100% in primary school and reduced dropout rate to only 2% and to increase the proportion of girls in primary school to 55% by 2030. However, the aimed 100% enrollment rate has not been achieved yet and neither has the dropout rate been. Nonetheless, the OOSC issue in Cambodia has not been resolved. To realize the Cambodia Vision 2050, partly to respond to the OOSC issue, the Pentagon 1 in the "Pentagonal Strategy-Phase I" document which has recently been released after the Prime Minister of Cambodia of the seventh legislature of the National Assembly has been elected, focuses on developing human capital which aims to enhance the quality of education including sports, science, technology and technical training (RGC, 2023). Moreover, many NGOs in Cambodia are providing education support to children such as the aforementioned NGOs (PSE, CCF, Save the Children, World Vision and KAPE) which have been offering a variety of programs to help children access education, ranging from school support, remedial education, vocational training and early childhood education. Their work is essential to ensuring that all children in Cambodia have the opportunity to learn and reach their full potential. However, the OOSC problem has still been alarming. Perhaps, only when educational disparity is fixed will further perpetuation of the cycle of problems be broken.

Education and sustainable development goals

Impacted by educational disparity, children are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed as adults, which can lead to poverty, and so they are less likely to be able to contribute to economic development. Even though [Unicef \(2018a\)](#) remarked Cambodia as one of the nonemergency affected countries in terms of highest out-of-school rates, [Unicef \(2018b\)](#) said "Cambodia has made terrific progress in educating its children," stating that most children drop out before reaching secondary school, and those from disadvantaged groups are struggling to realize their potential due to difficulties getting to, and staying in, school. [Unicef \(2018a\)](#) warned that every young person who is not in education is at risk of being unprepared to contribute to his or her country's economic and social development, and is likely to face a life of limited opportunity and uncertain futures. While [The World Bank \(2023b\)](#) has observed that Cambodia's economy has been positively growing for two decades, reaching lower-middle income status in 2015, the same source also suggested that boosting investment in human capital would be of utmost importance to achieve Cambodia's ambitious goal by 2030. The RGC aims for Cambodia to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050

(RGC, 2018). However, the RGC has also acknowledged that student learning outcomes and school completion are among other challenges such as insufficient trust of people in public and judicial services, high interest rates and low domestic savings and rising household debt in the financial sector, the quality of healthcare services, and so on. In addition, former Prime Minister of Cambodia, Samdech Hun Sen, asked researchers to re-study Cambodia's goal for 2030, implying that the likelihood of reaching the goal is uncertain (Sereyath, 2022). Heng (2022) suggested that Cambodia should look back to move forward in a sense that goes beyond the recent past to examine the role of education in bringing development and glory to the Khmer Empire. Recognizing the importance of education for national development, therefore, the RGC of the seventh legislature of the National Assembly released the Pentagonal Strategy-Phase I outlining Cambodia's vision for 2050, prioritizing human capital development, which fundamentally centers on education.

Highlight of influential social reconstructionists and their thoughts on education

There have been many popular and well-respected social reconstructionists whose work has been very influential in shaping the way education is today, in particular in their respective society. Incorporating these perspectives into the educational reform processes would effectively address the OOSC issue and beyond. The perspectives of a few of the most popular figures are highlighted below.

John Dewey (1859–1952) believed that education is not preparation for life but life itself. He said in his book “Democracy and Education” that “What nutrition and reproduction are to a self-renewing process, education is to social life” (Dewey, 1916, p. 11). This idea of Dewey is underscored by a Khmer proverb saying that learning or knowledge is a treasure that follows its owner everywhere like a shadow and it cannot be stolen, and the more it is spent the more it is gained. That really emphasizes the lifelong nature of education and its importance for personal growth and well-being. The emphasis on democratic education as put by Dewey is really valuable and compelling. However, the nature of the Cambodian education system is more centralized. Therefore, incorporating Dewey's concept will be a great challenge and careful consideration is strongly needed taking into consideration the traditional culture in education in the Cambodian context. While the centralized nature of the Cambodian education system does present the challenges to implementing Dewey's vision of democratic education, it is of crucial importance to explore ways to centralize decision-making and empower both teachers and students.

Paulo Freire (1921–1997) claimed that education is the practice of freedom. He made this statement in his book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, “Conscientização, by making it possible for men to enter the historical process as responsible subjects, it enrolls them in the search for self-affirmation” (Freire, 1970). The practice of freedom in Freire's idea of education just relates closely with the Cambodian historical context where overcoming oppression and striving for self-determination still can be felt among generations in the population. Overcoming the Khmer Rouge regime is an example, during which education was completely destroyed. That really highlights Freire's concept which suggests to empower individuals to challenge the system. Freire's concept that emphasizes critical thinking empowering learners really promotes active citizenship, a popular concept in global education systems nowadays. Integrating Freire's concept of empowering individual learners, however, will challenge the system to a great extent due to the Cambodian education culture emphasizing memorization and compliance. Adopting Freire's approach could be transformative. However, it requires careful consideration and

development of appropriate pedagogical strategies as it can be viewed as a new model in a traditional culture.

George S. Counts (1889–1974) believed that education is a powerful tool that can be used to either maintain the status quo or to create a more just and equitable society; he said in his book “Education and the Promise of America” that “When confronted with difficult personal and social problems, we are inclined to turn to education as an unfailing solution” (Counts, 1945, p. 17). This assertion of Counts echoes the complex history of Cambodia. The recent past of the Khmer Rouge regime is an instance, during which a cruel form of education was applied to indoctrinate children while the traditional knowledge was removed, which points out the potential of education to be used as a tool of oppression. After the regime collapsed, on the contrary, the education system has undergone major reforms aiming to promote peace, democracy and human rights. Therefore, it has shown that education can really be a transformative power for social change. Recognizing that, the current RGC of the seventh legislature has also noted education reform in the priority list. Counts’ vision of education as a force for social change aligns with the aspirations of Cambodian society to build a just and equitable future. Critically examining the role of education in shaping societal values and behaviors, therefore, can help to harness the power of education to create a more prosperous and inclusive nation. Nonetheless, it requires careful consideration of how education should be reformed further in the present context of Cambodia. Thus, open critical dialogue about the goals, purposes and values of education in Cambodian society could be highly encouraged as a starting point among policy makers, educators, scholars and leadership of the country.

Theodore Brameld (1904–1987) said that education is not simply about preparing students for the world as it is but about helping them to create a better world. On the first page of his book “Education as Power,” he stated that “Only the power of education is capable of controlling the other powers that man has gained and will use either for his annihilation or for his transformation” (Brameld, 1965, p. 1). As Brameld has noted, Cambodia needs an education system that equips children and young generations with knowledge, skills and attitudes. These are very essential for the future progress of every individual and society. Brameld’s claim that education can empower man to create a better world is particularly relevant to Cambodia, as the country has been through decades of civil wars which have completely destroyed human resources and left the country with devastated infrastructure. Brameld’s vision of education is so inspiring that it should be considered and translated into actions, which might involve rethinking curriculum and the overall goal of education. Following Brameld’s concept, therefore, young generations should be empowered in such a way that they become change agents with a sense of social responsibility so that they will create a more just and more equitable future for themselves and the country. That being discussed, incorporating Brameld’s vision of education from the policy reform stage, youth will be empowered in such a way that they become a source for positive change to help address the OOSC problem as well as other systematic educational issues in Cambodia.

“bell hooks” (1952–1921) was well known to be a feminist, anti-racist and social educator who wrote extensively on the role of education in social justice. It has fairly been known that “bell hooks” spelled her name in all lowercase letters with an intention to shift the attention from her name to her work. In her book “Teaching to Transgress,” “bell hooks” said that Freire’s thoughts gave her the support that she needed to challenge what Freire called a banking system of education (hooks, 1994). She referred to Freire’s word “conscientização” as conscientization in English which is often used in the context of social justice and education. The concept of bell hooks which focuses on feminist, racist

and social justice, as well as her critique of the banking system of education where students are passive recipients, is also relevant in the Cambodian context, as Cambodia does need a more participatory and empowering approach to education. That is close to the idea of empowerment submitted by Freire and Bramelt. Adapting her idea emphasizing critical pedagogy and social justice, that would also foster critical thinking and active citizenship. Similar to Bramel's vision too, by adopting a critical pedagogy approach of "bell hooks," youth will be empowered to challenge social inequalities and advocate for educational policies that foster educational equality for all children, which will subsequently address the OOSC issue.

The most contemporary social reconstructionists are such as Ira Shor (1945–present) and Michael Apple (1942–present), who are well known to be living critical pedagogues, whose ideas on the role of education in social change has been continuing to be relevant today. In his book "Empowering Education," Ira Short harshly criticized hierarchy and social classes, such as wealth, positions, gender, race, religion, etc. saying that it denies equal power for all to develop themselves (Shor, 1992, pp. 201–202). What resonates with the Cambodia context is in Ira Shor's critique of social hierarchies as the country has been working hard to ensure social justice, equality and inclusivity of all ethnic groups. Although Cambodia has made a lot of progress in the last few decades, education issues still persist. Quality education is still a major concern of the government of Cambodia. As [Ministry of Education and Youth and Sport \(MoEYS\) \(2023\)](#) admitted in its report, a lack of education officials who are willing to lead and live up to the education revolution is just among other challenges the Cambodian education system is facing. If Cambodia is able to consider the concept of empowering education as submitted by Shor and Apple, it would be so powerful. It would empower learners from all backgrounds to challenge the traditional structure in schools and promote a student-centered approach so a more participatory culture would be created. However, embracing the idea would mean something like a paradigm shift for Cambodia from the status quo, due to its traditional culture of education. But if it could proceed that way, equity and equality in education would be truly highly promoted. Ira Shor's vision for education also reinstates the vision of "bell hooks" and Brameld's in that by embracing social reconstructionist approach to education, Cambodia will be able to empower students to challenge ideas and advocate for educational policies that prioritize the needs for education of children and ensure equal access and quality education for all. Such an approach will ultimately help to resolve the OOSC issue, as well as similar systematic educational disparities.

Social reconstructionism and education reform

Within the context of education, "social reconstructionism and education" should literally refer to an ideology or philosophy that intends to reconstruct the society by means of education. [Counts \(1932\)](#) said:

We are convinced that education is the one unfailing remedy for every ill to which man is subject, whether it be vice, crime, war, poverty, riches, injustice, racketeering, political corruption, race hatred, class conflict, or just plain original sin.

Harold Rugg (1886–1960), who called for social studies and believed that the best way to engage students was to approach the material from a social justice perspective, advocated focusing the curriculum on students' investigations of social problems ([Burton, 2023](#)). [Counts \(1941\)](#) noted, Jesse Newlon (1882–1941) was an American who believed in the brotherhood of man, in democracy and the freedom of mind, and that the individual human being is sacred regardless of condition, ancestry and color. John Dewey (1859–1952), an

American philosopher, believed that education should focus on the individual and should be student-centered. Dewey's work was influential on the social reconstructionist movement. George S. Counts (1889–1974), an American educator, who was considered to be one of the most influential social reconstructionists, believed that education should be used to address social problems. His book "Dare the School Build a New Social Order?" argued that school should build a new social order by focusing on a more equitable and just society (Kharbach, 2023). Theodore Brameld (1904–1987), an American philosopher and educator, presented the philosophy in his book "Education as Power" as an approach to empower students and teachers to create a democratic and just society, emphasizing the importance of critical-thinking ability and social responsibility among students. Paulo Freire (1921–1997), a Brazilian educator and philosopher, in his book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" stressed on critical consciousness and the transformation of the oppressed society. Henry Giroux (1943–present), an American-Canadian scholar, has developed a critical theory of education emphasizing crucial intersections between the role of education in schools and universities with that of culture and public life, and advocates for the need to make pedagogy central to politics itself, which is conducive to the development of a formative culture that provides the foundation for developing critical citizens and a meaningful and substantive democracy (Giroux, 2023). An American labor leader and civil rights activist, Cesar Chavez, once said that "You cannot uneducate a person who has learnt to read." That is so true that when a person has the ability to read, he/she will be able to access more knowledge as well as important information that is useful for their lives. Once the reading ability is possessed, in other words, it cannot be withdrawn.

In a nutshell, "reconstructionism" or "social reconstructionism" is an ideology or philosophy that seeks to create a better society or seeks to reform a society democratically. Social reconstructionism in education emphasizes the importance of addressing social issues with a curriculum that focuses on critical thinking and problem-solving skills of the students, encouraging student participation in all decision-making processes, preparing them to become a real active citizen. Applying the philosophy in education, therefore, means that the curriculum is expected to teach the students about real social problems such as poverty, human rights, social inequalities and so on. However, whether all issues in society could possibly be resolved by means of education alone has still been in the skeptical mind of the critics.

The implications of social reconstructionism for reform policy, on the other hand, should go beyond the curriculum perspective. Curriculum is very important. Teachers are very important. Methodology is crucial. Nonetheless, while problems in society are many, educational disparity alone is already multifaceted. Applying the remedy to the surface may be effective for a wounded skin that is caused by minor cuts and scratches. If the wound on the skin is caused by an inner cancer, treating the skin is 100% *not* sufficient to cure the underlying cancer. Building an ecosystem in place for treating the real issues is vitally important and will be more effective, as it will be like applying the remedy to the root causes of the issues. Then curing the surface wounds can be done along the way, or in many cases, the surface wound will just evaporate automatically by itself.

Waiting for individual education officials to be willing to lead the education revolution, as MoEYS said the country is facing, would be akin to farmers waiting for rain to plow their fields. A wiser strategy would be to proactively build an irrigation system – a comprehensive plan and infrastructure – to ensure education reform. Social reconstructionist ideas, as discussed, all believed that by empowering the education system can lead to its revolution or reform. Similarly, John Dewey's idea in his book "Democracy and Education," looked at the role of education as a social reformer and not the role of society as an education reformer. In

other words, education is a means to change the status quo, meaning the society. Empowering the education to reform itself would closely mean treating the root cause of the problem. That would be akin to applying medicine to the root cause of the cancer.

Social reconstructionism offers a powerful framework for addressing the complex issue, particularly in education, by means of educational reform. By emphasizing critical thinking, social justice and democratic values, not only social reconstructionism can help to eliminate the OOSC issue that is caused by such multifaceted problems but also it can empower all children to become active citizens and contribute to societal development. To achieve this, it is crucial to have the right policies in place to promote such an ambiance where both teachers and students are empowered to become active citizens and change agents. By critically evaluating and embracing the social reconstructionism concepts, Cambodia can leverage the power of education to address all issues beyond the OOSC.

Social reconstructionism and leadership beyond out-of-school children

It is worth noting that it is always greater to learn from the success of others. If social reconstructionism in education has made some countries successful, why cannot it make the others just as successful? As an example, the current Finnish education system has been known to be one of the best in the world. To that fact, [Sahlberg \(2021\)](#) stated that the pedagogical innovation in Finnish classrooms and the inspiration for education policies also have their origins in other countries. [Gao \(2016\)](#) asserted that Finland provides an equal education for everyone, which is contrary to the practice elsewhere, for example, in the USA, where a good education generally means sending kids to a private school. Developing an education system that benefits society and humanity, therefore, countries do not have to start from zero; or in other words, given that good examples have been done by countries with well-known education systems, it may not necessarily mean that other countries should take centuries for their education system to evolve to an advanced stage. The question is whether or not they are able to adopt or adapt the system in a manner that it is contextualized for the best suitability and best interest of their society. The importance of adapting educational systems to fit the specific cultural, social and economic context of a given society can be echoed by [UNESCO \(2015\)](#) that emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education relevant to all learners. And in highlighting the importance of adapting education systems to the local context to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability, [World Bank \(2018\)](#) states that “A more iterative approach to system change can be a way to adapt interventions inspired by global experiences to local contexts.”

By examining the principles of social reconstructionism and the experiences of other countries, Cambodia can identify strategies to improve its education system. Key elements of social reconstructionism, such as critical thinking, social justice and democratic participation, can be applied to address the specific challenges faced by Cambodian education, including the OOSC issue and beyond, to ultimately create a more equitable and effective education system that can have a great impact on social change. Nonetheless, the leadership mechanism to resolve educational issues should be implementable as an ecosystem, devoid of undue influences or unnecessary obstacles. In the aspect of social change, it takes the right person to do the right thing. That is leadership. This is particularly necessary in a developing country like Cambodia that has been working hard to reform the education system and struggling to raise the quality of education. [Bass \(1985\)](#) claims that leadership is transformational, which can bring about changes in a society (p. 17). [Kotter \(2011\)](#) also asserts that “The function of leadership is to produce changes, while the function of management is to produce orderly results”

(p. 41). In that respect, the Cambodian Ministry of Education and the government are the leadership, while schools are the management.

Conclusion

The MoEYS has been very committed to improving the quality of education in Cambodia, trying to ensure access for all children, in particular OOSC, and working with development partners and NGOs to have necessary supporting policies and programs. However, the OOSC issue in Cambodia remains a significant challenge despite the efforts made by the stakeholders. The statistics released by the World Bank and UNESCO indicate a concerning trend and highlight further actions to address the OOSC issue more effectively.

Recommendation, implication and limitation

The significant number of OOSC in Cambodia has a wider socioeconomic implication. As quoted earlier, if a chance to education is a chance to escape poverty, then a lack of education is a high risk of continuation of the poverty cycle. That would further exacerbate the challenge being faced by the government in trying to ensure overall development and long-term prosperity. The OOSC issue highlights the importance of equal access to education for all children, regardless of their background and geographic location. Therefore, ensuring equitable and inclusive quality education for all children in the society is very essential. The OOSC issue also emphasizes the complexities of policy implementation. There is a need for more comprehensive strategies to address the root causes of the educational issues, particularly the OOSC. Therefore, ensuring effective policies and interventions is very essential to promote educational outcomes and opportunities for all children. In addition, the persistent OOSC and broader educational issues also call for a more critical examination of education reforms through the lens of social reconstructionist concepts. The philosophy emphasizes the transformative power of education in fostering social change, promoting equity and addressing systematic inequalities. Integrating social reconstructionist perspectives into policy and practice, therefore, would pave the way for a more equitable and socially just education system. It would ultimately benefit all children and the Cambodian society as a whole.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources, including documents and reports from the government and NGOs, and limited literature that is existing. As a result, it may not fully capture the nuances and complexities of the OOSC issue in Cambodia. Therefore, empirical restudy is recommended for future research to gain a deeper understanding of the OOSC phenomenon in the Cambodian context. While this study lacks original empirical data, the conclusions and recommendations are based on a thorough review of reputable sources, including reports from UNESCO and the World Bank, which provide valuable insights into global best practices and lessons learned from other contexts. Nonetheless, further research is needed to validate and contextualize these findings.

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