



# Cambodian teachers' responses to child-centered instructional policies: A mismatch between beliefs and practices



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers do not totally shed conventional beliefs to embrace child-centered pedagogy.
- Teachers do not fundamentally change their conventional teaching practice.
- Classroom realities hinder the adoption of child-centered instruction.
- Teachers select and put into practices only some superficial aspects of reform.

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## ABSTRACT

Cambodia and her international development partners have been promoting child-centered pedagogy for almost two decades. However, classroom instruction remains predominantly front-oriented and textbook-based. Drawing on questionnaire and interview surveys with primary school teachers in two districts of Cambodia, this study analyzes teachers' beliefs in and classroom implementation of child-centered pedagogy. It has found that teachers fail to adopt this new pedagogy in their classrooms despite their overwhelming support for it. Teachers' failure to act on their beliefs stems from two major reasons: constraining classroom realities and their superficial understanding of the principles underlying child-centered pedagogy.

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## 1. Introduction

In 1996, Cambodia launched a large-scale educational reform. The Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) installed a new 6th grade into the existing 11-year (5+3+3) education model, developed a new curriculum, wrote textbooks and teacher manuals accordingly, and prescribed a modern teaching and learning approach broadly identified as “child-centered” pedagogy. The reform reflected the spread to developing countries of the child-centered pedagogy, which migrated from Western nations in the early 1990s. This widespread pedagogical migration has apparently stemmed from two interrelated global forces: globalization and human rights movement.

After the end of Cold War, many developing countries showed commitment to liberal democracy and market openness consistent with Western industrialized countries (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2009). National education programs started to be significantly influenced by educational agendas promoted by major international organizations and donor agencies such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) and USAID (United States Agency for International Aid) as well as regional and international financial institutions such as ADB (Asian Development Bank) and the World Bank. With their world views of how children should be educated, these organizations prescribe educational reforms to developing countries, the prescriptions that give policy makers of those countries little choice but to implement the reforms in exchange for access to needed fund (Anorve, 1999).

Child-centered pedagogy has also been promoted through human rights ideals. Many developing countries have ratified a number of rights-based conventions on education, including Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the World Declaration

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on Education for All (1990) and the UN Millennium Development Goals (2000). An exemplar of rights-based education is the worldwide movement of “child-friendly” schools (CFS), which have been vigorously promoted by UNICEF. Explicitly linked to child-centered pedagogy is the movement’s principle of “child-centeredness,” which states, “[Classroom instruction] should be an interactive process in which children are active participants in observing, exploring, listening, reasoning, questioning and ‘coming to know’” (UNICEF, 2009, p.13). Meyer and Ramirez (2010) observe that human rights emphasis of education are associated with the globally rising child-centered pedagogy.

To some scholars, these transnational forces have resulted in a worldwide convergence of patterns of educational organization, of school curricula, and of patterns of expansion taking place on all levels of educational systems (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000). However, studies which investigate the changes at local level consistently suggest that the global prescriptions neither replace already existing models, nor mean the same thing in various cultural contexts (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Even the globalization-minded researchers acknowledge that education appears to have changed little at classroom level in most countries (e.g., Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002).

This paper aims to investigate primary school teachers’ responses—beliefs and classroom practices—to educational reform on child-centered pedagogy. Previous studies (e.g., Courtney & Gravelle, 2014; McCormick, 2012) show that global educational agendas have significantly influenced educational policies in Cambodia. However, little is known about how much these imported educational ideals have changed teaching at classroom level. To narrow this gap, this paper will provide some evidence of how primary school teachers implement child-centered instructional policies in their classrooms.

Implementation of learner-centered education policies at classroom level has been a recurrent research theme starting with the work in 1990 by the California Study of Elementary Mathematics conducted by scholars at Michigan State University (See Cohen & Ball, 1990a, for a review of the project). However, the predominant mode of analyses in developing countries still focus on how the principles underlying this constructivist approach to education are embedded in national educational reform (Schweisfurth, 2011). Relatively few studies investigate how learner-centered education policy works out in classrooms—where the national policy is translated to practice. This study attempts to make an important contribution to the limited knowledge on educational policy implementation that is based on local voices and to inform the global debate on how to best promote learner-centered education by bringing evidence from a least-studied country: Cambodia.

## 2. Pedagogical reform and teacher guidance

### 2.1. The reform and its ideals

Like other developing countries, Cambodia is not immune to global forces. In the post-Cold War years, Cambodia, a former ally of the socialist Eastern Bloc, shifted to a nation governed by liberal democracy and market economy as enshrined both in the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements between the warring factions of the country and in the 1993 constitution (Royal Government of Cambodia, 1993, Articles 1 and 56). Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies such as UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), USAID, SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), and financial organizations such as Asian development Bank were in the line to help Cambodia, which had been tormented by wars for two decades (Ayres, 2000, p.157).

UNESCO and UNDP financed a national education seminar in January 1994, attended by international consultants and ministry officials, to map out the national policy for the development of quality education and training in Cambodia (MoEYS, 1994). The Asian Development Bank intensively reviewed the education sector in 1994 (ADB, 1996), while UNICEF tried to enhance instructional quality by improving both pre-service and in-service teacher training, revising curriculum, and providing instructional materials such as textbooks and teacher manuals (MoEYS, 1994).

The assistance and recommendations of these international organizations were incorporated into the MoEYS’s Education Investment Plan 1995–2000 and served as the bases for the reform of Cambodian education in 1996. In 2007, the MoEYS issued the Child-Friendly Schools Policy, again based on the experiences of UNICEF and other development agencies such as SCN (Save the Children Norway), which had supported pilot projects to promote children’s rights to education in several provinces since 2002 (MoEYS, 2007a). MoEYS aimed to make 94% of the country’s primary and lower secondary schools “child-friendly” by 2011 (MoEYS, 2007b).

As part of the 1996 reform package, MoEYS instructed the country’s schools at all levels to use child-centered pedagogy as teaching and learning approach. Child-centered pedagogy is defined as the following:

A teaching and learning approach which is based on pupils’ activities. In child-centered pedagogy, pupils are expected to be active participants in the learning process while teachers are just facilitators or catalysts. Pupils can learn by themselves individually, in small groups, or whole groups in or outside the classroom. (MoEYS, 2001a, p.18)

A former director of the Department of Teacher Training of the MoEYS wrote about the reform, “the new curriculum will inspire [pupils] to better understand their surrounding environment, apply methods of problem solving and enrich their spirit of innovations” (Bunroeun, 1999, p.16). From these policy statements emerges a new perspective on teaching and learning, which emphasizes problem solving skills and children’s participation in the instructional process. The emphasis on the role of children as active problem solvers is also advocated in subsequent educational policies. According to Cambodia CFS policy issued in 2007, child-centered education is characterized by participation and cooperation; problem solving; and research, analysis, and critical thinking (MoEYS, 2007a). Another guideline for textbook development dictates, “textbooks should be written to promote pupils’ higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, application, synthesis, and evaluation” (MoEYS, 2012, p.27).

Policy statements of education in Cambodia consistently depict a new type of teaching and learning: an educational perspective that underscores pupils’ active involvement in classroom activities and the development of higher-order thinking.

### 2.2. Teacher training on child-centered pedagogy

Teachers learn about child-centered pedagogy through various means: by attending teacher training centers/colleges, through workshops and seminars organized by MoEYS and NGOs, and through curriculum materials such as textbooks and teacher manuals they use for their classroom teaching.

Fig. 1 shows the process through which instructional policy making and implementation in Cambodia take place. From the highest level where technical consultants prescribe reform ideas to policymakers down to classroom level where teachers translate those ideas into concrete activities, the process involves several transit points, especially with regard to in-service teacher training.

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