

Future of Students Relies on School Principals' Leadership

CHIN Sam Ath, PhD

Deputy Director of the Department of Policy, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport,
Cambodia

KUOK Fidero, PhD

Under Secretary of State of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, Cambodia

Introduction

John Dewey, a philosopher and educator, believed that the content introduced in the school curriculum should be relevant to children's social lives to facilitate the learning process and promote ethical teaching practices. In this type of classroom environment, children construct their knowledge through their experiences, rather than being directly instructed by the teacher. Learning through hands-on activities and observations in these classrooms is thought to enhance children's problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. In addition, a strong relationship between students and school principals is also crucial for student success in this type of learning environment.

Since 2014, the Royal Government of Cambodia introduced education reform initiatives to enhance students' cognitive abilities and critical thinking skills by prioritizing schools as the reform stations. At the policy level, the core values of the 21st century's concept-based curriculum embedded in the Curriculum Framework of General Education and Technical Education (2016) was introduced in 2016 aiming to embed new forms of teaching and learning which improve knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Moving forward to promote STEM-based education at school, the 'New Generation Schools program' or NGS, a new, dynamic school system, was introduced to promote school autonomy and good governance.

These school-oriented reform initiatives demand high leadership capacities of the school principals to supervise and lead the overall school operations for better school outcomes. As the Cambodian government progresses towards realizing its Vision of becoming an upper-middle income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050, the influence of school principals' leadership on student success has been publicly acknowledged. The government has recognized this factor as having the most significant impact on policy implementation since the early 2000s. To facilitate effective curriculum implementation, school administrators must possess a strong sense of effective school management and leadership in leading and translating curriculum and textbooks into actions.

Relation Between School Principals' Leadership and Students' Achievement

The impact of school principals' leadership on students' learning outcomes may not be direct, but it can significantly affect teachers' motivation, instruction, and commitment to their jobs. This, in turn, affects how teachers prepare for classroom instruction, assess student work, and use learning and assessment data to modify their teaching methods. Simply put, the quality of school principals' leadership is critical in determining students' and perhaps the nation's success. Therefore, it is essential to carefully define criteria and procedures for recruiting school principals and implement them based on merit for our shared future.

Improving school leadership is crucial for enhancing student achievement, making the role of school principals essential for education reform. In our recent study published in the Forum of International Development Studies, we examined the impact of principals' leadership on student achievement in Cambodian primary schools. Our findings revealed a positive correlation between strong school leadership and student achievement. Using a multi-level modelling (MLM) approach, we investigated the relationship between student achievement and various factors, including individual student characteristics, classroom environment, school leadership, and teaching quality. The study sample consisted of 1,878 sixth-grade students and 38 principals from selected primary schools in Phnom Penh. As a result, we found that an increase in the scale of school leadership behaviors was associated with an improved average student performance at both the classroom and school levels. These findings highlight the crucial role that principals play in creating an environment conducive to student success. Additionally, our analysis of the pairwise correlation matrix of various dimensions of school principals' leadership showed that, in terms of improving student achievement, school principals must lead and participate in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, define a vision for improving the instructional program, initiate school activities, and inspire and engage teachers in planning and evaluating professional development activities.

How Current Policy Reforms Shape School Principals' Leadership

Currently, school principals have not only gained a better professional image but they are also socially and academically recognized as a key agent in school reform. Taking this into account, a composed six quality standards under the School Director Standards (2017) are the prerequisite selection criteria which prepare school principals beyond just administrators but educators and leaders for schools. They are (1) academic qualification and professional working experience, (2) professional competency, (3) critical thinking and innovation, (4) managerial leadership, (5) instructional leadership, and (6) community and school engagement.

School principals are seen actively engage in strengthening instructional quality which is directly associated with the improvement of students' learning outcomes. Classroom instructions can be enhanced when teachers are encouraged, motivated, and supported well to do their jobs with satisfaction. This is achievable when schools are led by principals who have a far-sighted vision and a comprehensive understanding of school development. In addition, to make significant changes to the school system, the current and next generation of school principals should be highly competent and qualified, capable of tackling unprecedented challenges that arise during reform transition periods. As Cambodia's school system progresses

towards digital education transformation, it's essential to enhance the professional skills of school principals.

Conclusion

This paper provides clear evidence which demonstrates the impacts of school principal's leadership on students' learning achievement. With this evidence, the future direction of policy development and implementation should be necessarily focusing on designing effective education and training program for not only school principals but also other administrators to be competent in promoting students' learning outcomes using effective instructional leadership.

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