



ECIE6004

Essay

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BA Hons Inclusive Education

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“The transformative power of education” can move people from a state of simply surviving to thriving and “a future filled with endless possibilities” (Choing, 2024). However, for children in Cambodia, access to education has not always been easy or indeed possible; the well-documented genocide during the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime that occurred between 1975 and 1979 resulted in many teachers either being killed or fleeing the country to safety; similarly, “96% of tertiary students and 67% of all elementary and secondary pupils died” in those 4 years (Headley, 2018; Islam *et al.*, 2016; LWB, 2023). Schools were also demolished, and the education system was completely destroyed (Headley, 2018). Previously, Cambodia was renowned as “the model of education” in this part of the majority world through the merging of Buddhist and French practices, creating an educational system that steadily increased attainment (Headley, 2018). Subsequently, what was left of this generation of children was a future of illiteracy due to a lack of schooling and the need to help with agricultural work to support their families' survival (LWB, 2023; Islam *et al.*, 2016).

The 1993 Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia guaranteed all children access to free education at the primary and secondary levels, with compulsory education for at least 9 years (Bao, Martens and Windzio, 2025). This links in with Article 28 of the UNCRC (1989). The education system comprises a 1-year optional pre-school (ages 3-6 years), 6 years of compulsory primary (Grades 1-6), 3 years of compulsory lower secondary (Grades 7-9), and 3 years of optional upper secondary (Grades 10-12)(Bao, Martens and Windzio, 2025). Classes are taught in the country's official language, Khmer (Bao, Martens and Windzio, 2025).

In 2014, Cambodia sought to reform its education system at a national level through four distinct and progressive stages, with the expectation that “model school standards” and a fostering of “life-long learning” would be reached (Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2025). The question then is whether educational reform is sufficient if children cannot access education due to poverty, disability and/or other barriers? For example, children injured by landmines left over from the Khmer war have disabilities that affect access to education and educational attainment (Khun Lynda, 2025). Likewise, other disabilities or special educational needs are not

always adequately accommodated (UNICEF, 2024b). Disabled children in Cambodia are three times less likely to attend school, which supersedes poverty, location or gender as a barrier to accessing education (UNICEF, 2024b). Less than a third of teachers believe they have received appropriate training to meet the needs of children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2024b). There is a distinct lack of inclusion despite the policies implemented; children with disabilities often struggle to get a place or to fit in within mainstream schools, and some are placed in ‘special’ schools (UNICEF, 2024b).

Similarly, poverty prevents many children from completing secondary school; they are often under pressure to contribute to the family income (LWB, 2023). Cambodia is a predominantly rural population, and in some areas, schools are too far to walk safely due to the high risk of human trafficking (LWB, 2023). Urbanisation is rapidly increasing in concentrated areas due to an increase in service and industrial employment opportunities, creating a shortage of teachers, overcrowded classrooms and temporary schools in these areas (Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2025). In terms of higher education, standards of education are lower due to lower qualifications of tutors, fewer opportunities for further research and study, and many lecturers taking second jobs, usually in private tuition (Chhaing and Phon, 2023).

Access to good-quality, consistent education for children and young people in Cambodia has improved considerably over the past two decades (Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2025; IPCGE, 2026; LWB, 2023; Open Development Cambodia, 2023). Primary enrolment has expanded, gender parity at the primary level has largely been achieved, and national literacy and numeracy rates have risen (UNICEF, 2025). The 2023–2024 school year recorded a primary school admission rate of 97.25%, and targeted reforms such as the Early Grade Reading (EGR) programme have demonstrated measurable gains in literacy (NEP, 2025). Yet access to high-quality and consistent education remains uneven and deeply divided (UNICEF, 2025). Beneath headline enrolment statistics lie entrenched structural barriers: poverty, geographic isolation, gendered expectations, disability exclusion, linguistic marginalisation, digital divides, and climate vulnerability (Bao, Martens and Windzio, 2025; Open Development Cambodia, 2023; UNICEF, 2025). These barriers interact across national, regional, and global contexts and are shaped by policy frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNCRC), the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG4), and Cambodia's own Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2024–2028 (UNCRC, 1989; United Nations, 2025; Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2025).

Aside from disability, the most common and largest barrier to high-quality, consistent education in Cambodia is poverty (UNICEF, 2024b; NEP, 2025). UNICEF states that “approximately 30% of children 6-14 years are not enrolled in school due to financial constraints” (IPCGE, 2026). Although primary education is officially free, hidden costs, including uniforms, textbooks, informal fees, food, and transport, render schooling unaffordable for many households (NEP, 2025). Many families live below the poverty line, which means that children are often expected to contribute to household incomes rather than attend school (NEP, 2025; Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2025; LWB, 2023). Child labour in agricultural sectors or in informal household work, such as helping with siblings, directly interferes with school attendance and is associated with higher school dropout rates (IPCGE, 2026; LWB, 2023).

Children and young people living in more rural or remote areas have to travel a substantial distance to school, often in hazardous conditions (IPCGE, 2026; LWB, 2023). PISA data in 2022 found that 17% of Cambodian pupils felt unsafe travelling to school, which is 9% higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2023). Upon arriving at school, they frequently encounter unsafe buildings lacking basic equipment, electricity, and sanitation (Generis Global Legal Services, 2024). These factors not only increase dropout rates but also reduce educational quality (UNICEF, 2024c; NEP, 2025; IPCGE, 2026; Generis Global Legal Services, 2024). From a Maslow (1943) perspective, education presupposes the satisfaction of foundational needs. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy positions physiological and safety needs as prerequisites for higher-order cognitive engagement. Children experiencing food insecurity, unstable housing, or unsafe travel conditions are unlikely to achieve sustained academic focus or even a readiness to learn if their safety is compromised (Maslow, 1943). Thus, educational exclusion is not merely an issue of enrolment but of unmet basic needs.

Bourdieu (1984) deepens this analysis by conceptualising poverty not only as economic deprivation but as a lack of cultural and social capital. Families

experiencing generational poverty may lack familiarity with educational expectations. Schools that are structured around dominant cultural norms often give preferential treatment to the middle class. Consequently, children from low-income rural households enter schooling at a disadvantage, reinforcing patterns of social behaviour. Therefore, education can inadvertently breed inequality by ignoring unequal starting points.

Freire's (1972) critique of “banking education” further enlightens this interesting dynamic. When schooling positions students as passive recipients of knowledge without engaging with their lived realities of poverty, it fails to empower them (Freire, 1972). For Cambodian children whose daily experiences include labour and economic hardship, a curriculum disconnected from socio-economic realities risks alienation. Transformative education would instead enhance learning within community contexts, enabling critical reflection on structural inequality.

Geographic disparities compound poverty-related exclusion; children in remote regions often have to travel significant distances to school (UNICEF, 2024c; Center for Global Development, 2005). As previously mentioned, infrastructure deficits such as unsafe buildings, inadequate sanitation, and limited access to clean water undermine both attendance and educational quality (UNICEF, 2024c). UNICEF (2024b) reports improvements in school-based wash facilities benefiting 3,500 students, yet such initiatives cover only a fraction of the need. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, specifically the safety needs, indicates that unsafe school environments undermine psychological safety, a prerequisite for learning. Girls, in particular, are disproportionately affected by inadequate sanitation, which contributes to absenteeism during menstruation (Brozovich, 2020). Thus, infrastructural deficiencies create a gender divide.

Nationally, Cambodia's Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2024–2028 and the Education Roadmap 2030 align with SDG 4's call for inclusive and equitable education (Ministry of Education, 2019; United Nations, 2025; Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2025). However, implementation gaps remain pronounced in rural provinces (NEP, 2025). While policies articulate inclusion, uneven budget allocation and limited teacher availability exacerbate regional disparities (NEP, 2025). Interestingly, PISA results in 2022 showed that 59% of Cambodian students had

their learning “hindered by lack of teaching staff”, and the same amount also reported that their school was closed for over three months during the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2023). From Bourdieu’s (1984) perspective, rural marginalisation reflects spatial inequality in resource distribution; schools in urban centres accumulate more symbolic and institutional capital, thereby reinforcing the geographic divide.

In many majority world countries, including Cambodia, a historical gender norm has existed prioritising the education of boys over that of girls (Center for Global Development, 2005; Bonfert, Wadhwa and Divyanshi, 2024) . Often, girls are pushed into early marriage and domestic responsibilities, which significantly curtail their educational aspirations and achievements (Bonfert, Wadhwa and Divyanshi, 2024). However, recent efforts have led to notable improvements in girls' educational retention through targeted campaigns that address these issues (Bonfert, Wadhwa and Divyanshi, 2024; UNESCO, 2025; Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2025; UNICEF, 2024c). While these initiatives are crucial, they have inadvertently highlighted emerging challenges that boys face in today's economic climate, in which many are compelled to work to support their families (UNESCO, 2025). The balance has clearly shifted, and boys are increasingly experiencing levels of disengagement similar to those of girls (UNESCO, 2025). In recent years, Cambodia has experienced a higher increase in girls' enrolment in secondary education than boys, with a higher drop-out rate in secondary levels amongst boys (Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2025). Moreover, 17% of boys are dropping out of secondary school, compared to 13.8% of girls (UNESCO, 2025).

This shift complicates the simplistic narrative of gender inequality. Bourdieu's (1984) theory of habitus suggests that gendered expectations shape educational dispositions. Boys may internalise expectations of economic provision, particularly in contexts of poverty, prompting early workforce entry. Meanwhile, empowerment campaigns have strengthened girls’ educational aspirations. Policy must therefore respond flexibly to changes rather than assume static gender hierarchies. Freire’s (1972) emphasis on conscientisation is relevant here. Education should cultivate critical awareness of gender norms among both boys and girls. Without addressing underlying economic structures that compel boys into labour, gender-targeted policies risk redistributing rather than eliminating disadvantage (UNESCO, 2025).

Cultural barriers persist within Cambodia's education system, as Khmer remains the dominant language of instruction, disadvantaging ethnic minority learners (Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2015; UNICEF, 2018). Historically, limited institutional support for non-Khmer speakers created early learning gaps and increased dropout rates (Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2015). Although Article 29 of the UNCRC emphasises respect for children's cultural identity and language (UNCRC, 1989), the prioritisation of Khmer reflects a nation-building agenda that marginalises minority identities. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of linguistic capital explains how fluency in the dominant language confers institutional advantage, while minority students lacking recognised cultural capital experience systemic disadvantage. Freire (1972) similarly critiques linguistic exclusion as a form of silencing that perpetuates oppression. The Cambodian government has recently committed to creating a culturally responsive pedagogy and bilingual education, signalling progress towards more inclusive classroom environments (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2015).

Digital inequality further entrenches educational disparities. Children and young people report limited access to devices, affordable internet, and digital skills (NEP, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these divides, as remote learning disproportionately excluded rural and low-income students (NEP, 2025; Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2025; Bao, Martens and Windzio, 2025). Initiatives such as UNICEF's Stay Safe and Local Life Skills Education (LLSE) programmes promote digital literacy and climate awareness (UNICEF, 2024b). However, unequal access to technology risks reproducing class-based inequalities. Bourdieu (1984) would view this as digital capital, creating an additional dividing resource; while Freire (1972) underscores the need for participatory, communicative approaches to ensure technology supports empowerment rather than exclusion.

Climate vulnerability presents an additional structural barrier. Cambodia is highly susceptible to flooding and other environmental shocks, which disrupt schooling through displacement and economic instability (UNICEF, 2024b). Article 29 of the UNCRC links education with environmental responsibility (UNCRC, 1989). While climate education initiatives aim to prepare young people for sustainable livelihoods (UNICEF, 2024b), climate-induced poverty increases the risk of dropout, particularly among rural youth dependent on agriculture (UNICEF, 2024b; Ministry of Education

Youth and Sport, 2025). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs suggests that environmental insecurity undermines the safety and stability required for learning. Education systems must therefore integrate resilience planning and flexible delivery models to safeguard continuity.

Adolescents face heightened dropout risks due to labour demands and early marriage (UNICEF, 2024b). Additionally, vocational initiatives support orphaned and vulnerable youth; however, stigma and trauma still limit sustained engagement with education (UNICEF, 2024b; Khun Lynda, 2025). Maslow (1943) highlights adolescents' need for belonging and esteem, while Freire (1972) advocates participatory models that amplify youth voice. Programmes such as the Adolescent Development and Participation Programme (ADAP) reflect this ethos (UNICEF, 2024b).

The UNCRC (1989) establishes education as a universal right, yet critiques suggest it reflects Western normative assumptions that may not fully align with local cultural contexts (Ekundayo, 2015). Some regions have addressed this tension through complementary frameworks. For example, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) strengthens children's rights while incorporating culturally specific responsibilities (Center for Global Development, 2005; Ekundayo, 2015; ACRWC, 1990). Such adaptations highlight the importance of contextualising international standards within local traditions.

Both the UNCRC (1989) and ACRWC (1990) affirm education's role in poverty reduction. Evidence indicates that schooling increases lifetime earnings, reduces disease prevalence, and improves maternal and child health outcomes (Center for Global Development, 2005). Women with six or more years of education are significantly more likely to seek prenatal care and immunise their children, contributing to lower mortality rates (Center for Global Development, 2005). Education thus produces intergenerational social and economic benefits.

Cambodia's commitments to SDG4 and national education reforms reflect alignment with a rights-based framework (Bao, Martens and Windzio, 2025; NEP, 2025; United Nations, 2025; UNCRC, 1989). Article 28 mandates free and compulsory primary education, as well as measures to reduce dropout (UNCRC, 1989). However, Freire (1972) cautions against imposing externally derived models without dialogue,

underscoring the need to balance global rights standards with culturally grounded implementation.

Targeted interventions demonstrate measurable impact. School-based washroom improvements benefited 3,500 students, of whom 1,770 were female, in 24 schools, resulting in reduced sickness absence and increased engagement with education (UNICEF, 2024c). Additionally, children with disabilities have benefited from these initiatives, which have enabled them to access improved vocational and technical education and training (UNICEF, 2024c). UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport have also expanded early grade reading and mathematics programmes, inclusive classroom initiatives, gender equality efforts, digital safety education, and vocational pathways for children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2024b). The Policy on Inclusive Education reinforces this commitment (Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, 2018). Nevertheless, stigma, limited specialist capacity, and infrastructural barriers constrain full participation. Maslow (1943) highlights how unmet physiological, safety, and belonging needs compound educational exclusion, while Bourdieu (1984) illustrates how disability and poverty intersect to reproduce layered disadvantage.

Progress on educational targets is evident. Cambodia achieved a 97.25% primary admission rate in 2023–2024 (NEP, 2025). The 2024 Early Grade Reading programme demonstrated 20.5-word-per-minute improvements among Grade 2 students and 19.7-word-per-minute improvements among Grade 3 students (UNICEF, 2024c). The proportion of Grade 12 students achieving A–C grades rose by 6% between 2023 and 2026 (UNICEF, 2024c). However, only 55% of students meet basic proficiency in Khmer and 25% in mathematics (UNICEF, 2024b), revealing a gap between access and quality. Bourdieu (1984) would interpret this as credential expansion without structural transformation, while Freire (1972) would question whether pedagogical reform fosters critical consciousness or sustains rote learning. Moreover, sustained economic growth has historically been associated with achieving at least 40% adult literacy, underscoring the broader developmental stakes (Center for Global Development, 2005).

Cambodia's educational landscape reflects both progress and persistent structural constraints. While there are examples of holistic, whole-school approaches

promoting inclusive education that have resulted in higher enrolment levels and improved literacy and numeracy rates, it is pertinent to note that poverty, geographic isolation, gender issues, disability exclusion, linguistic marginalisation, and climate vulnerability continue to undermine completely equitable access (UNICEF, 2024a; Ministry of Education, 2019). Maslow (1943), Bourdieu (1984), and Freire (1972) collectively highlight how unmet basic needs, unequal cultural capital, and an authoritative, non-dialogic pedagogy sustain inequality. Therefore, achieving SDG4 and fulfilling UNCRC commitments requires a shift from solely quantitative, blanket access to sustainable, equity-driven reform, including sustained rural investment, inclusive teacher training, bilingual provision, digital equity, and climate resilience (United Nations, 2025; UNCRC, 1989; UNICEF, 2024a; UNICEF, 2025). Education must extend beyond enrolment to enable children to flourish socially, critically, and economically. As Choing (2024) states, “hope is the one thing that pushes us all to do things beyond our expectation.” In Cambodia, hope can be established through equitable policy implementation, community partnerships, and transformative pedagogy that ensures every child not only attends school but also thrives within it.

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