

Causes of students' dropout at lower secondary level in Rural Cambodia: Parental Insights

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Abstract. This qualitative study explored the effects of home environment and academic attitudes of lower-secondary students in rural Cambodia on their decisions to leave school from the perspectives of their parents. The data from semi-structured interviews of 32 parents from 32 different households and field notes revealed that numerous undesirable behaviors combined with low cognitive development and home environment, which was greatly determined by family socio-economic resources, were among the primary reasons for which lower secondary school students decided to drop out. The empirical evidence from this study has yielded some policy implications for relevant stakeholders working towards achieving equity and quality of education at lower-secondary school level in Cambodia.

Keywords: dropout, parents, attitudes, home environment, Cambodia.

INTRODUCTION

High rate of school dropout remains a major challenge for achieving Education for All (EFA) in Cambodia, especially in rural and remote areas, where a significant number of school children continued to drop out. Despite numerous policy interventions taken by the Royal Government of Cambodia to tackle this high rate of dropouts, the prevalence of dropout cases at lower secondary level remains stagnant. Secondary school dropout rate had slightly declined for many years; however, this rate has started to increase gradually for the past few years, especially in lower secondary school (year 7 to year 9) and upper secondary school (year 10 to year 12). Secondary school dropout rate was 19.60 % in lower secondary school and 11.80% in upper secondary school in 2011 (Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, MoEYS, 2012). This rate has slightly increased to 21.2% and 14% in lower and upper secondary school, respectively (MoEYS, 2014). More importantly, high school dropout is oftentimes seen to concentrate in rural areas in Cambodia (World Bank, 2005). The succinct figures from these reveal that the actual rate of secondary school dropouts in rural Cambodia could be much higher than

the aforementioned national dropout rate.

Disproportion or disparity of education between urban and rural areas may keep widening the gaps between the rich and the poor in Cambodian society since the relationship between education attainment and income is strongly associated in this era of globalization. In Cambodia, for example, people with lower secondary education were likely to have more stable income than those having solely primary schooling (World Bank, 2006). Those having secondary education degree, moreover, can go to college, which in turn can bolster their human capital while those who possess no secondary education degree have no chance to go to college. The income gap between those having higher education and those without higher education substantially widens in this global competitive epoch or knowledge economy since job markets now demand for highly productive and skilled labors. The rate of return for investment in secondary education in Cambodia, for example, has decreased slightly from 3.6 percent in 1997 to just 2.5 percent per year in 2008 compared to 20.7 percent for those having tertiary education

(Montenegro and Patrinos, 2015). Foreseeing little return of investment in education at this level, many parents may encourage their children to leave school early. Although the return of investment of education seems to be significant at tertiary level (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2015), the current enrollment rate for tertiary education in Cambodia is about 13 % (WB, 2019), most of whom are from the two highest quartiles of the income groups. This makes parents who could not afford to send their children to colleges decide to pull their children out of school since the return of such an investment is too little compared to the costs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the effects of the academic attitudes in the family environment of those who dropped out of lower secondary school in their decision to discontinue education from the perspective of their parents?

LITERATURE REVIEW

School Dropout Studies

Dropout phenomenon was a social, cognitive and psychological and economical process which gradually evolved over a period of time. Numerous reasons, which forced students out of schools, have been studied to expound this phenomenon. Some studies examined the causes of dropout from cognitivists' perspectives. These studies tend to look at the relationship between school dropout and the level of school achievement and motivation of the students. For instance, a longitudinal study on the causes of dropout in lower secondary schools in the Netherlands revealed that low academic performance and cognitive abilities combined with low motivation and negative school perception significantly increased the likelihoods of dropout (Traag and Velden, 2011). School performance and motivational model, which includes perceived competence and self-determined motivation, accounted for 27% and 17 % of variance in the odds of high school dropout, respectively (Hardre, and Reeve, 2003). Furthermore, students' self-determined motivation was a significant predictor of the student' intentions to leave school one year before (Alivernini, & Lucidi, 2011). Students' decision to drop out of high school could also be derived from a lack of motivation and social support from inside and outside school (Drewry *et al.*, 2010). Thus, academic achievement, motivation, cognitive ability and social support from inside and outside school significantly forecasted students' intention to drop out. However, there are many other factors that contribute to this phenomenon.

Other studies tried to grapple with the causes of school dropout from behavioral perspectives. These studies examined the relationship between dropout phenomenon

and the behaviors and experiences that students exhibited either inside or outside school in addition to academic outcomes and motivation. A longitudinal study on dropout conducted in Canada, for example, found that school disengagement, in the short run, could predict the odds of dropout better than motivation (Archambault *et al.*, 2009). This study, however, showed that, in the short run, emotional and cognitive engagement in academic work had no spillover effect on the likelihoods of dropout. In spite this, the study concluded that a decline in motivation, school interests and willingness to learn ultimately led to school disengagement and misbehaviors, the consequence of which would have substantial effects on the decision to leave school. Negative perceptions of school and school disengagement, both of which were a significant predictor of school dropout, had been found to stem from misbehaviors, including delinquency, absenteeism and truancy (Battin-Pearson *et al.*, 2000; Finn, 1989). Thus, although cognitive and emotional engagement in school, which tend to have a substantial effect on students' behaviors, in the short run, showed no effect on the intention to give up schooling; however, in the long run, the effect increasingly emerged.

In addition, some studies examined the relationship between genders and school dropouts. For instance, the study of school dropout in the Netherlands by Traag and Velden, (2011) pointed out that boys are almost twice as likely as girls to leave secondary school. However, a research review on dropout in the last 25 years by Rumberger and Lim (2008) found a mixed result of the relationship between genders and dropouts, leaving the issue of gender-dropout relationships on this issue remain inconclusive.

Apart from students' achievement, motivation, behaviors and genders, other studies examined the relationship between school dropouts and family socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in developing countries. Most of these studies found that family resources and structures significantly predicted children education outcomes. The study of Traag and Velden (2011) revealed that children from a family with limited financial resources had higher risk of dropout than their affluent counterparts. For a one-year increase in parental education, for example, the study found a 7 % percent decrease in the risk of dropout and a 50 % decrease if enough parental support was given (Traag and Velden, 2011). In addition, children from a single-parent family had greater risk of discontinuing schooling than those living with both parents (Rumberger and Lim, 2008; Traag and Velden, 2011).

School Dropout in Cambodia

In Cambodia, very few studies have been conducted to find out the reasons why students decided to leave school

before graduation. The study of Keng (2003), which compared non-dropout primary school girls and dropout primary school girls, found that the major reasons that forced primary school girls to give up schooling were high absenteeism, late school entry, grade repetition, poor academic motivation, low parental education and low aspiration for formal employment. However, her study found no relationship between family resources as well as family child labor such as household chores and the likelihoods for girls to drop out of primary school. This may reflect the fact that direct and indirect costs of education at primary school level were still so minimal that they displayed no effect on the odds of dropout at primary education. Although most school children living in rural areas are involved in child labor in order to share the portion of the family incomes, primary school girls may not contribute much, given that their age remains too young, so the opportunity costs or child labor may not be robust enough to prevent primary school girls from attending primary school. However, both direct and indirect costs of education increased exponentially in both lower and upper secondary school (World Bank, 2005).

In their longitudinal study, No and Hirakawa (2012), conducted a study on non-dropout students in both primary and secondary school and followed them for three consecutive years to see who dropped out. This study also found that late entry, overage, grade repetition, parental education and academic results were the primary reasons to push the students off school. The regression analysis from this study, for example, showed that a student who enrolled in school one year late had 1.43 times higher dropout rate than those who began school on time. This finding, furthermore, indicated that school factors were strongly related to school dropout at secondary school level while at primary level, school factors did not show any effects on the phenomenon. Surprisingly, the statistics from the study showed no relationship between the odds of dropout at secondary school level and family resources and child engagement in wage employment. However, according to World Bank (2005), the relationship between economic situations and dropout likelihoods in Cambodia remained significant. In a large-scale study on the reasons why children in Cambodia discontinued schooling using data from commune household survey and data from World Food Program, World Bank (2005) found that poverty, stunning, engaging in domestic work and wage employment were the major barriers for secondary school students to remain in school until graduation.

In addition to the impact of family socio-economic situations on both children physical health and chances to attend school on a regular basis, high direct costs of receiving free public education has widened a considerable number of school children out of school. Public secondary school in Cambodia is typically run alongside the private tutoring. This private tutoring is

generally not offered to provide supplementary scaffolding for the academically poor performing students, but exclusively to those who could financially afford it. To make the situation worse, a numerous number of public-school teachers, who offered this private tutoring, according to Dawson (2010), tried to promote the demand of their private tutoring classes by excluding some important lessons from the official curriculum, leaving those who missed the private tutoring suffered academically and emotionally. Brehm and Silova (2014) also found that the average test scores of the private tutoring attendees and non-attendees constituted 11 percent point difference. The private tutoring attendees, for instance, scored at least 6 points out of 10 or higher while the score of non-attendees hardly exceeded 5 points out 10 (Brehm and Silova, 2014). This has helped expound the fact that academic achievement of the students in Cambodia was significantly determined by family financial resources to afford the cost of private tutoring.

In conclusion, literatures on dropouts to date have provided some greater insights into the causes of this phenomenon. However, there remains to be some literature gaps in the study of dropout since most of the study tend to look into this issue from measuring the variables relating to the dropouts. However, different interpretations may emerge from this phenomenon if this issue is observed from the parents' standpoints. Parents play significant role in determining whether their children will stay in school until graduation as most of the financial resources, social and emotional supports and instrumental motivation, all of which are the greater determinant of the school success, rely predominantly on parents. Finally, looking into dropout phenomenon solely from the perspectives of the dropouts may not reveal their genuine behaviors and attitudes as the dropouts may escape the blames and attribute their education failure to others such as school factors or teachers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interview method was used to interview 32 parents (22 mothers and 10 fathers) from 32 different households of 15 dropout girls and 17 dropout boys in two villages in the same commune in a southern province of Cambodia in November 2019 to find out their perceptions on the reasons why their children decided to drop out of lower-secondary school. These interview data were complemented with the data from the field notes. Purposive sampling method was used to recruit the participants since this method allows the researcher to select a sample in a systematic and purposive way, depending on our knowledge about our target population and the purpose of our study (Tranter, 2010). Thirty-five dropouts from two villages in the same commune were identified through a field visit to both villages, during which

their parents were contacted and requested for participation in the interviews. However, only 32 parents of the dropouts were interviewed as the other three parents were busy on the interview days and could not spare their time for the interviews. Four criteria had been used to select and recruit the participants for the study. All the participants were the biological parents of the dropouts, and they had lived with their children until their children left school. Their children were between 13 and 16 years old and their children had dropped out of school. Their children had not enrolled in any other vocational training programs. Semi-structured interview was then used to generate the primary data for the study, realizing this kind of data collection method allows the researchers to ask supplementary questions, which are relevant to interviewees' responses in order to achieve more elaborate and in-depth data for the study (Basit, 2010). With the prior consent from the interviewees, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. These interview data were then analyzed through a thematic analysis method, as this method allows the researcher to identify themes emerging from within data for interpretation (Willis, 2010). The data about the parents' perceptions on academic attitudes and behaviors of their children and their decisions to discontinue schooling were then organized into different categories. The relationships between these categories were explored in order to develop themes for interpretations and discussions.

RESULTS

Dropout Stories

32 parents from different 32 households were interviewed during November 2019. However, only two stories of dropout families were narrated as these two stories provided rich and in-depth depictions of the normal characteristics of the dropout situations in this study. Pseudonyms were given to these narratives. The pseudonyms presented in this finding include, Bunthorn, Buntha, Pitou, Sothun, Ponlok, Thol, Lim (dropout boys), Sreang, Ratha, Pisey and Sopheap (dropout girls).

Dropout Story#1. Bunthorn is 15 and the youngest in the family of five children. His mother is a housewife and his father is a laborer in the village as the family does not have any agricultural land for cultivation. Bunthorn's mother got 6 years of education while his father got 5 years of formal schooling. All of his brothers and sisters had dropped out of school and got married. Bunthorn just left school six months ago when he was in grade 8. The reason for which he decided to leave school was his poor exam results and his laziness. He failed his monthly exams every month, yet he was passed to the next grade. He was frequently absent from school. One of the teachers for his class used to contact his mother a few

times informing about his poor progress in his study and disengagement in class. The teacher also advised his parents to help him with his study at home. After school, Bunthorn would help look after cattle in the family and sometimes he helped carry the monk's bowl when the monk had to beg food from home to home and he sometimes missed the school because of this. Bunthorn's mother described him as an apathetic learner who never organized his books or read any books. A part from study and looking after cattle, Bunthorn went out with friends.

Dropout Story #2. Sreang is a 15-year old dropout girl. She gave up school at grade 7 to work as a household servant in Phnom Penh. She is the third daughter among 6 siblings in her family. Her oldest sister got married and worked with her husband in Thailand and her older brother also got married and worked as security guard in Phnom Penh. Her other two younger brothers remain in primary school and her other younger sister is in secondary school. Sreang's father is a construction worker and her mother is a house wife and casual laborer in the village. Sreang's father is a drunken man who usually worked to pay his drink and with small portion to support the family. Sreang's mother described Sreang as an average student who would go to school most of the times. After school, Sreang would help household chores and looked after cattle for other families in the village for some money. With this money, Sreang occasionally attended private tutoring classes. Foreseeing the hopelessness about further study due to limited family resources, Sreang decided to leave school and got a job as a household servant in Phnom Penh.

Reasons for Dropouts

Three major themes emerged from the open and axial coding of the data from the field notes and the semi-structured interviews with the parents about their children's academic attitudes and behaviors at home and why their children decided to discontinue schooling. The theme that appeared across most of the interviews was the negative academic attitudes of their children exhibiting at home, which resulted in poor academic outcomes and lower self-esteem about schooling, the consequence of which forced them out of school. Second, family resources combined with wage or non-wage employment presented a major obstacle for the children to remain in school until graduation. Finally, lack of social supports from family, school violence and negative peer culture were also among other factors expelling some students out of school.

Negative Academic Attitudes

The dominant discourse of discussions during the interviews with the parents was academic apathy that the

dropouts displayed at home and academic underachievement at school. Parents talked widely about numerous undesirable attitudes of their children towards study, which their children exhibited at home, ranging from “getting up late for school, frequent absenteeism, laziness to truancy”. As Thol’s mother noted:

“I think the reason why my son decided to give up his study is because he was lazy about study. I never saw him read a book or did any homework at all. After school... he would throw his books and bag away and took the cattle to the field or went out with friends.”

Being late for school, frequent absenteeism and unwillingness to go school were oftentimes mentioned by the parents as a major attribute for which the decision to leave school was based. As Buntha’s father noted, “my son sometimes got up late for school, and he did not want to go to school and he sometimes did not go to school.”

The descriptions of these pervasive negative behaviors coexisted with the poor learning outcomes and poor perception of self-worth. Generally, the parents recalled the memory of their children moaning to them “*Rean Ot Ches*,” Khmer language, whose connotation refers to inability or poor cognitive ability to learn or understand the lessons. Many times, parents would recall the memory from their children moaning to them “I felt shameful and shy to go to school,” and other parents precisely indicated “failing monthly exams” as the significant factor for their children to leave school.

Family Resources and Child Employment

Another important theme that was raised up during the interviews was involving household chores and wage labor while family resources for purchasing motorbike and bicycles and for paying debt also emerged. Many participants talked about the combination of study and work that their children had to cope with while they remained in school. As Ratha’s mother explained, “my daughter had to look after her siblings because I had to go to work in the city, so after some time she decided to stop.” A large majority of the parents, furthermore, talked about their children’s engaging in household work, including helping family with farm work, looking after cattle and catching snails or fish while some talked about engaging in wage labor. As Punlok’s mother noted:

“my son had to work for other families in the village to earn some money and he sometimes missed the class, and he sometimes missed examinations, so he decided to stop.”

Family resources were also brought into discussion as the causative factor for feeling hopelessness about the prospects of further study and achievement. “Having been aware about my limited financial resources to support her further study, my daughter decided to quit her study and looked for a job,” Sreang’ mother recalled. Family resources were occasionally perceived by some participants as the major factor for determining the academic achievement of the children. “My daughter did not participate in private tutoring classes because I did not have enough money for her, so she could not learn (*Rean Ot Ches*),” as Sopheap’s mother recalled. Seeking for wage employment in city or at a factory was frequently mentioned as the reason for school departure whereas getting apprenticeship as a car mechanic was also raised up by a few participants. While describing their children’s desire to look for wage employment, the parents usually expressed desperate hopelessness about the prospects of remaining in school until grade 12 since many times they expressed their concern about the poor cognitive growth or poor learning outcomes of their children against the possibility of having employment.

“My daughter kept telling me she could not study (*Rean Ot ches*) and she wanted to look for job instead,” as Pisey’s mother noted.

Lack of Family Supports and Other Factors

Finally, across the interview data, parents expressed their desire for their children to remain in school at least until grade 12 and felt remorseful that their children had to depart school so early. The major concerns that the participants raised about the possible consequences from this decision ranging from getting involved in drug, gang, physical hard labor, low paid jobs and no bright future as they remained young. However, participant’s low level of education and their unawareness of the effective supports made the situation worse. When discussing about the intervention methods, which they had used to prevent their children from denouncing schooling, an overwhelming majority of them just described “encourage or explain” whereas occasionally some participants used instrumental motivations, such as “buying a bicycle.” However, Lim’s mother stated:

“his father was furious and hit him a bit when his father learned that he wanted to stop schooling and his father took him back to school for a few days, yet he still stopped after all.”

The depictions of a visit by a school teacher and friends in an attempt to persuade the dropout to go back to school were raised up a few times, but this intervention remained defective.

Violence and negative peer culture appeared occasionally across the interview data as the determinant

occasionally across the interview data as the determinant factor sparking the dropout phenomenon. As Sothun's mother stated explicitly that "my son told me that he feared of a gang group who would attack him if he went to school again." Another parent raised frequent truancy her son committed due to the influences of his friends. "He would stay away from school and went out with friends, to the whereabouts I had never known," as Pitou's mother noted.

DISCUSSIONS

Academic apathy that the dropouts revealed outside school became widely evident from the overall depictions and appeared to be a major contributor for the students' decision to depart school. This lack of self-interest in learning coupled with poor cognitive development resulted in many deviant attitudes towards schooling, which, in turn, fostered their self – fulfilling prophecy about their decision to escape schooling. The intertwined and inextricably complex causal relationships between amotivation towards study and evidently unsolicited behaviors could help expound their academic self-efficacy, self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 2002) and academic achievement and self-esteem (Legault *et al.*, 2006) that influence the locus control, which the students usually developed over a long period of time prior to their official declaration to depart school. As students' behaviors become in align with their perception about their inability in pursuit of their academic goals, they come to be self-evident about their own study goal. Undesirable behaviors and attitudes towards study of middle-aged students have much stronger effects on their academic progress than those of primary-aged children since the overall academic achievement of the middle-aged school students with "variance of 73%" (Pov *et al.*, 2020), depends substantially on what students bring to classroom, including motivation, engagement, cognitive ability, personal goals and economic resources. However, compared to a developed country like New Zealand, the variance of achievement scores from the student side generally "accounts for only 50%" (Hattie, 2003), leaving a huge gap for Cambodian secondary school students to fill in.

The interplay between family resources, engaging in household chores and wage employment could, furthermore, predict with a great deal of accuracy about one's fate of education in rural Cambodia. Evidence of combination of work (both wage and non-wage labor) and schooling (Tan, 2007 and Kim, 2011), which reflects family economic resources, could help explain the motivation about study and frequent absenteeism, which is consistent with current evidence of absenteeism rate at least once within two weeks among 51.5% of the lower secondary students in rural Cambodia (Pov *et al.*, 2020). Students who frequently engaged in wage labor tend to

make cost-benefit analysis about the opportunity costs of their study versus work and this analysis is oftentimes reinforced by their desperate hopelessness, poor cognitive progress and shamefulness about being in school. Given the benefits of work greatly surpass the costs, there is no point for them to remain in school. Evidence from this finding also revealed a strong association between dropout desire and private tutoring, given that attending private tutoring exclusively serves as the primary prerequisite requirements (Brehm and Silova, 2014; Nguon, 2012) for cognitive development, healthy relationship in school environment and meaningful recognition in education process in Cambodia. Provided that the dropouts in this study could not even afford time to attend the public-school instructional hours regularly, regardless of the chances attending private tutoring classes, achieving education success in Cambodia is only feasible for those who can afford both public and private classes.

Finally, the overall home environment of the students appeared to fail to provide any necessary assistance to the concurrent issue of the dropouts in this study. None of the parents in this study had finished secondary education themselves, making it hard for them to nurture preferable home environment for the educational success of their children, given that "the amount of schooling that parents received" largely reflects the overall home environment in promoting academic success (Davis-Kean, 2005 & Muola, 2010; Lessard *et al.*, 2009 & Nguon, 2012). Although many times, they expressed their regret for the failure of their children education, they would attribute this failure exclusively to their children or other factors, perhaps in so doing, they could scapegoat their children for this failure. Home environment of the students, in addition, reflects the overall relationships, expectation, social and emotional supports that parents bestow to the children. The absence of meaningful interactions or family social capital made it extremely tough for the students to persist in their academic goals (Bickerstaff, 2010; Drewry *et al.*, 2010; McNeal, 1999). This poor home environment may in greater extent reflect the low motivation and deviant behaviors that resulted in low academic performance, which led to the decision to drop out as already discussed.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Given the nature of social constructionist position in this study, the findings presented here inherently did not yield any possible generalization beyond the interpretation per se and would have some constraints on policy implications. However, any attempts to grapple with this phenomenon from positivist standpoint could not explain much about the inherently complex nature of the issue, given that knowing about the statistical relationships between various variables did not tell much about the

issue. The generic descriptions in this study appeared to support the revisionist views of schooling or critical theory, which perceives the role of public school as a means for preserving the status quo of existing social classes (Ornstein *et al.*, 2011). While the overall effect of academic attitudes, cognitive ability, and home environment of the economically disadvantaged families on children education is greatly far stronger than the effect of school, any policy interventions to improve the quality of teaching and learning at secondary school level may generate hardly any effect on improving the achievement outcomes of the poor children. The dropout genes that the parents have transferred to their children intensifies as children age, and unless the environmental interventions were given on time to mitigate the effects from these genes, it would be very hard for the children who have received these dropout genes to break the vicious cycle. Moreover, the complex and inextricable association between learning attitudes and cognitive development, which may emerge as early as preschool age, and are predominantly affected by home environment (Ornstein *et al.*, 2011) means that possible policy responses to tackle the cognitive gaps of the children from the disadvantaged background should focus on early childhood and primary education rather than at lower or upper secondary school, the level of which is supposed to be too late. In addition, any education success miracles to date have never excluded the roles of parents and community as the success of education depends largely on the commitments and dedications of the parents and community. Thus, increasing the roles of parents and community in education process would help promote the academic success of the students and prevent the dropout prevalence. Finally, since the common justification of leaving school was immediate economic needs and return of such surpasses the costs to be remaining in school, the policy responses to offsets the effect should take into consideration more promising curriculum and special programs that prepare the potential dropouts for particular employment after they leave secondary school. The contemporary secondary school curriculum in Cambodia, which solely focuses on cognitive growth, may not be robust enough to offset the academic apathy that most secondary students bring to the class. Given adolescent or teenagers are in process of identity and personality development and are undergoing rapidly physical, emotional and psychological changes (Buckingham, 2008), leaving school so early in this unstable state of identity and personality development could generate numerous possible risks for delinquency and juvenile crime. For the society as a whole to truly benefit from peace and harmony, secondary education remains one of the prerequisite requirements because the externalities of basic education (year 1 to year 9) could transcend beyond the economic return on such an investment and peaceful and harmonious community, on which all well-being and welfare societies are based is genuinely crucial for a nation to flourish.

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