

Highland Children's Education Project (HCEP)¹ Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia

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Abstract

In the remote province of Ratanakiri, in the north-west of Cambodia, the majority of the inhabitants belong to one of seven ethnic minority groups, each with its own language. The official language of Cambodia is Khmer, a language that most of the ethnic minority peoples do not speak or understand. In addition to the fact that the majority of government schools are not accessible to minority groups, the language of instruction in the schools is Khmer and the majority of teachers cannot speak the minority languages. Consequently, enrolment and retention rates of the indigenous population are amongst in the lowest in Cambodia and their illiteracy rates are the highest.

In a unique example of cooperation between government and NGOs, the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and CARE are piloting a three-year programme of multi-lingual, multi-cultural primary education, delivered in community-governed schools in six villages which have never had any formal or non-formal education before.

By building the ability of communities to establish and manage their own schools and select teachers from their own villages, the programme is enabling communities to take ownership of their children's education, using their own languages, for the first time. So far, community commitment and ownership have resulted in high enrolment and low drop-out rates.

Work with communities is supported by extensive pre-service and in-service teacher training and curriculum and material development in two ethnic minority languages, Tampuan and Krueng. The goal is that this community-based bilingual education programme will enable ethnic minority children to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap between their communities and mainstream education.

Description of the project

In a cooperative effort between the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) and CARE, a three-year pilot project is underway to trial a model of bilingual, multi-cultural primary education, delivered in community-governed schools in six remote villages which have never had any formal or non-formal education before.

This 3-year project provides the first three years of primary education to indigenous children in their own language. Communities have established their own school boards following traditional decision-making processes. Once the schools are operational, the school boards take responsibility for their management. The school boards select community teachers who participate in an intensive teacher-training programme. A trained project staff team of indigenous people is supporting these community-based activities. The national curriculum for primary education is being adapted to local conditions thereby making it relevant to indigenous people. During the three years, a transition will be made to Khmer (the national language) as the primary language of instruction in order to enable the children to integrate into the government school system.

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Background

Ratanakiri province has approximately 100,000 inhabitants. About 65% of the population is indigenous: Tampuen, Jarai and Kreung are the largest ethnic groups in this province. Khmers make up only 25% and are recent immigrants from the lowlands.

Not only are highland minority cultures distinct from mainstream Khmer culture, their languages are distinct as well. With the exception of Jarai, most of the languages belong to the Mon-Khmer group.

Objectives

The Highland Children's Education Project aims to address the educational needs of marginalized ethnic minority children. Five interdependent components facilitate the achievement of this goal. The components are:

1. Building a team of ethnic minority resource people to support the establishment and operations of community schools
2. Support for community governance and management of schools
3. Production of culturally appropriate curriculum materials in language, mathematics and socio-cultural studies, adapted from the MoEYS curriculum, in two minority languages
4. Establishment of a stable teaching force of 21 community teachers, increasing in competence during the project
5. Linkages with the provincial and national systems of the MoEYS

Community participation

When surveyed, 98% of families in the six target villages believed that education is important for their children. They also felt that it is important for children to learn about their own culture in school (94%).

The six school boards have been pivotal in realising the aim of the project. School board members include traditional village chiefs and elders who are highly respected in their communities. The schools were built by the villagers. In one village, each family contributed a woven bamboo panel for the walls.

By building the ability of communities to establish and manage their own schools and select teachers from their villages, communities are taking ownership of the education of their children for the first time and in their own language. Community commitment and ownership have resulted in high enrolment and low dropout rates. In these community schools, the participation of parents and elders is visible: learning also takes place outside the classrooms and parents and elders frequently visit the school.

Methods used

From the beginning, the role of the Highland Children's Education Project was that of an enabling factor for the self-development of indigenous people in the target villages. School boards receive on-going support and training by indigenous staff members so that they are better able to manage the schools and deal with issues like enrolment, dropouts and the management of teachers—all new subjects for community members. Nevertheless, the school boards make all decisions regarding education and schools independently. Often this is a lengthy process but a more sustainable and worthy one—reinforcing community ownership of and responsibility for the schools and the education of their children.

Language

The Highland Children's Education Project advocates the use of the highlanders' own language as the initial language of instruction. In the target villages 92% of families felt that it is important for their children to learn to read and write in their own language (Tampuen/Kreung) but that it is also important for them to learn Khmer (88%). During the three years, a transition will be made to Khmer as the primary language of instruction in order to enable the children to integrate into the government school system.

Indigenous languages have no written form; therefore, the Khmer script has been applied to these languages incorporating re-instated Khmer letters from the Angkorian period.

In grade 1, approximately 80% of the instruction is in the students' first language, Kreung or Tampuan. When students begin grade 2, instruction in and about Khmer will have increased to 40%. To prepare students for a total Khmer grade 4, 70% of grade 3 will be taught in Khmer.

While the students' first language and Khmer are not *taught* at the same time, they can be *used* at the same time. Teachers use the students' first language to give instructions about Khmer language activities. They also use it to introduce new Khmer words and expressions and explain what they mean and when they are used. Students use their first language to talk about reading and writing in Khmer. The use of their first language to support the learning of Khmer is an important 'transition to Khmer' strategy. In addition, socio-cultural studies is taught in the students' first language.

Curriculum

Curriculum development has been rooted in the daily lives of highland minority people. Villagers' knowledge and experience are being used in setting curriculum content and context. This has made the curriculum more accessible and relevant. With local topics being taught, schools become closer to the communities, serving their socio-economic development.

Local topics also contribute to the maintenance and development of traditional culture and lifestyle of ethnic minority groups. The curriculum centres on three subjects: language (Tampuan or Kreung and Khmer), mathematics and socio-cultural studies. HCEP uses the national curriculum of the first three grades of primary education as a model. This is adapted to be more culturally appropriate and written in Kreung and Tampuan languages.

Teacher training

Selecting villages that have never had any form of education before has meant that the selected community teachers have had little or no formal education. It is important for villages that their teachers come from their village, ensuring the responsibility of the teachers to the community. Therefore, an intensive and extensive teacher training programme was developed in cooperation with Australia's Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. Teachers receive an initial 6-month pre-service training, which is supported and built upon by a 2-year in-service programme. The aim is to upgrade community teachers to a grade nine equivalency and to have them confident and knowledgeable in student-centred teaching and learning.

This methodology is advocated in the MoEYS, 'Curriculum for Primary Level', 1996. Action Research techniques and the Do-Talk-Record methodology are also incorporated.

The 'student centred approach' to teaching requires the teacher to employ a number of teaching strategies or techniques:

1. Using questions - One of the main aims of primary education is to foster intellectual curiosity and a desire 'to find out'. Questioning is a basic tool for 'finding out'.
2. Classroom management - The use of a variety of "arrangements of students" allows students to have a variety of learning interactions, which encourages students to be active learners.
3. Using the environment as a teaching resource - The use of the environment as a starting point for learning enables teachers to contextualise new ideas in terms of the students' known environment. Elements from the environment become teaching and learning materials. Teaching starts from the known then moves to the unknown.

4. Using children's language - Using children's language brings together the other three techniques. The teacher facilitates students in exploring their environment in their own words and through their experiences.

The subject areas of the curriculum are taught using these techniques, which integrate subject-specific learning activities and reflect local community events and activities.

Materials

Since the project is the first to introduce bilingual schooling within the formal education system in Cambodia, learning materials in the indigenous languages that are appropriate to the formal system were needed. The materials produced by the project team reflect student-centred methodology. Their colourful appearance and interesting subjects from the children's day-to-day environment are very appealing to the students. Two basic readers and supplementary teaching materials have been produced. The adaptation of the national curriculum textbooks was slower than expected because of the lengthy revision and formal approval process of the orthography by the MoEYS.

Outcomes to date

Six school boards (37 members, of whom 13 are women) have been established and trained. They were instrumental in establishing and are managing community schools in their village.

The first cohort of 13 teachers successfully completed a 6-month pre-service training programme. They are now teaching and are receiving in-service training and support at the schools. A new cohort of teachers has been selected.

In February 2003, six community schools opened their doors to 280 students (47% girls). Education has started in villages that never had education before. The average PTR (pupil teacher ratio) is lower than 25:1.

Student materials have been created in two languages: Tampuan and Kreung. The materials consist of two basic readers, some storybooks and supplementary reading material. The adaptation of the MoEYS national textbooks for language and mathematics is in process in both languages.

Research on social-cultural studies has been conducted, and the first chapters for Grade 1 have been developed in three languages (including Khmer).

Impact on women

In indigenous communities, the workload, especially for women and girls, is very high. Due to the strength of community commitment to education, all the girls that were in the age group for this intake are enrolled in school. Girls make up 47% of the enrolled students. This is markedly higher than 39% girls' enrolment rate in the government schools (MoEYS statistics 2001-2002 for Ratanakiri province).

Only two of the 13 Community Teachers (15%) are women. One of the criteria to be eligible for training is proficiency in the Khmer language. As we recruited in villages that have never had education before, women who speak Khmer are rather the exception than the rule.

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