Journal of Learning and Educational Policy
Vol: 04, No. 02, July-Dec 2024
ISSN: 2799-1121, DOI: 10.55529/jlep.44.46.56

Research Paper

Global perspectives on education: A cross-cultural comparison in the Philippines and Cambodia

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Article Info

Article History:
Received: 01 May 2024
Revised: 05 July 2024
Accepted: 13 July 2024
Published: 25 August 2024

Keywords:
Education
Innovation
Localization
Standardization
Comparison
Education Equity

ABSTRACT

Education is a central pillar for economic growth and societal development in any country. Many developing nations such as the Philippines and Cambodia face extensive barriers in establishing high-quality, equitable education structures to meet the needs of all citizens. The objective of this case study is to offer the examination of education systems in the Philippines and Cambodia and analyzes persistent inequities in access, variable quality and lack of inclusion, especially for remote, poor and minority groups. As methodology, the related information and documents will be collected and reviewed to draw the main constraints, challenges and socio-economic disparities in accessing to the education. Results showed that strategies like decentralized governance, multilingual instruction and community school models that catalyze localized innovation are highlighted as means to enhance access and belonging within wider quality assurance frameworks. The core recommendation promotes integrated community-driven education enabling contextual decision-making on key functions while still meeting national benchmarks. This balances flexibility and consistency. Progressive decentralization stages include localized piloting, legal expansions of school authority, budget direct allocations, integrating informal programs, phased function transfers based on assessments, ongoing monitoring and evaluations driving improvements. Key insights spotlight how innovation and cooperation aid localization that respects diversity while quality depends on appropriate standardization and supports. Based on the comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities within the education systems of the Philippines and Cambodia, a set of strategic recommendations is needed to propose to advance towards more inclusive and community-driven models of education. This approach empowers communities to take ownership over key functions based on contextual needs while upholding minimum quality standards. It balances localization and flexibility with wider systemic consistency.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a central pillar for economic growth and societal development in any country. However, many developing nations face extensive barriers in establishing high-quality, equitable education structures that meet the needs of all citizens. The Philippines and Cambodia exemplify some of these difficulties as well as areas of success across different educational domains. Persistent poverty, inequality, conflict legacies and limited resources hamper reform efforts even as governments expand access and implement innovative programs [1]. Education systems around the world have varied histories, structures, challenges and outcomes. Gaining international perspectives and cross-cultural understanding of different educational approaches can provide important insights for policymakers and educators seeking reforms and progress.

For instance, the University of Mindanao's Center for Education Research and Development (UM-CERD) stands as a beacon of scholarly inquiry and transformative action in the realm of education. With a resolute mission to enhance the quality and inclusivity of education in the Philippines and beyond, UM-CERD spearheads research and development initiatives that address the multifaceted challenges faced by learners across diverse communities. Anchored in a visionary pursuit of educational innovation, UM-CERD envisions a future where equitable access and excellence in learning are not mere aspirations but tangible realities shaping the fabric of society [2]. Within UM-CERD, the Inclusive Education Division serves as a vital locus of inquiry and advocacy, dedicated to unravelling the complexities of educational inequities and fostering environments where every learner can thrive. Charged with conducting rigorous research, analysing data, and distilling insights, the article was tasked with unravelling the intricate threads of educational disparities that pervade local, national, and international contexts. From remote villages in the Philippines to urban centres in Cambodia, from policy chambers to classroom settings, the research navigates the diverse landscapes of educational challenges, seeking pathways to meaningful change.

By delving into the cultural contexts, political landscapes and grounded realities facing students, families and policymakers in these two countries, this case study illuminates the multiplicity of factors that interact to shape education. It analyses challenges in areas such as early childhood programs, primary curriculums, secondary school systems, gender imbalances as well as post-secondary and technical vocational frameworks. Government initiatives, community partnerships and international aid interventions are also examined to extract cross-cutting lessons [3], [4].

In a world marked by unprecedented global challenges and opportunities, the imperative for inclusive education resonates with heightened urgency. Locally, learners grapple with resource constraints, cultural barriers, and systemic inequities that hinder their educational journeys. Nationally, policy gaps, socioeconomic disparities, and political dynamics shape the contours of educational access and attainment. Internationally, the intersection of globalization, technological advancement, and cultural diversity underscores the need for innovative approaches to education that transcend borders and boundaries. In this complex milieu, UM-CERD's mission to promote inclusive education emerges as a beacon of hope, guiding our endeavours towards a future where every learner, whether in the Philippines, Cambodia, or beyond, can realize their full potential [4], [5].

This case study aims to offer a detailed examination of the education systems in the Philippines and Cambodia – two countries in Southeast Asia undergoing substantial changes and propose the strategic recommendations to advance towards more inclusive and community-driven models of education.

2. RELATED WORK

2.1 The System of Education in the Philippines

The current system of education in the Philippines has undergone several changes over the years, but it still faces several challenges. The country's education system is currently composed of six years of primary education, four years of junior high school, and two years of senior high school, followed by tertiary education. Despite the efforts of the government to improve education in the country, there are still several issues that need to be addressed. One of the major problems is the lack of educational resources such as books, classrooms, and facilities. This is particularly true in rural areas where access to education is limited. Another challenge that the education system faces is the low quality of education. The curriculum tends to focus on rote learning, and critical thinking skills are not emphasized enough. As a result, students are not able to apply what they have learned in real-life situations. Moreover, the educational system is also plagued by issues related to equity. Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have access to quality education. The high cost of attending university is also a barrier for many students who cannot afford to pay tuition fees. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the weaknesses of the country's education system. The move to online learning has highlighted the stark digital divide between students who have access to technology and those who do not. Access to the internet in rural areas is limited, making it challenging for students to participate in online classes [3], [4].

In conclusion, the current education system in the Philippines faces several challenges. The lack of educational resources, poor quality education, and equity issues must be addressed to ensure that all students have access to quality education. The government must take urgent action to strengthen the education sector and ensure that students receive the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in life.

2.2 The System of Education in Cambodia

Cambodia's current education system is divided into four major streams: (a) pre-primary education or early childhood education, (b) general education, (c) technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and (d) higher education [6]. Pre-primary education caters to children aged three to five and is provided at three distinct types of preschools: public, private, and community-based [7]. Following that, general education follows the 6+3+3 structure, comprising six years of primary education (Grades 1-6), three years of lower secondary education (Grades 7-9), and another three years of upper secondary education (Grades 10-12). A combination of primary and lower secondary education (Grades 1-9) constitutes the country's compulsory basic education. After completing lower secondary education, students can either advance to regular upper secondary education or enrol in secondary-level TVET programs to qualify for TVET certificate types C1, C2, and C3 [6]. Holders of TVET certificate type C3 can pursue advanced TVET programs: two years for a TVET diploma and four years for a bachelor's degree in TVET-specific disciplines. Those holding a TVET bachelor's degree may also gain admission to a regular master's program that is aligned with their TVET disciplines [6]. TVET programs at both secondary and higher education levels are predominantly offered by institutions under the purview of the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training (MoLVT) [8]. Moreover, those who complete regular upper-secondary education can either progress to TVET programs at the higher education level or pursue mainstream higher education programs for regular qualifications such as associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. In Cambodia, higher education is offered by both public and private universities and institutions, with a significant majority under the supervision of MoEYS [9].

In addition to the four major streams, RGC also offers non-formal education to school dropouts as well as adults in disadvantaged areas [10]. This system is officially recognized as part of the country's education framework [11]. According to [11], non-formal education in Cambodia focuses on seven priorities: (a) functional literacy for youth and adults; (b) primary and lower secondary equivalency programs for out-of-school children, youth, and young adults; (c) short-term income generation skills training for youth and adults; (d) post-literacy programs that sustain and expand levels of literacy; (e) family education for early childhood development; (f) an integrated community-based learning approach; and (g) capacity building for effective management. Priorities one to five are program-specific, targeting

specific populations, while the last two priorities focus on supporting the programs. The latest education congress report showed that seven non-formal education programs were implemented across the country, including vocational literacy, post-literacy, re-enrolment, primary school equivalency, lower secondary equivalency, and complementary education programs, benefiting 50,255 students (26,677 females) in the academic year 2021-2022 [12].

In general, the education systems of the Philippines and Cambodia are confronted with persistent and multifaceted challenges that hinder the realization of equitable access and quality education for all learners. Authors Santos [5] and Rodan & Hughes [1] have extensively documented these challenges, shedding light on the intricate dynamics at play within both countries' educational landscapes. Despite efforts to expand access to education, marginalized groups such as rural, indigenous, and economically disadvantaged students continue to face barriers to enrolment, retention, and completion. The legacies of historical injustices, socioeconomic disparities, and political complexities further exacerbate these challenges, perpetuating cycles of inequality and marginalization within the education systems of both nations.

Within the Philippines, Pinky Larcelle Lang-ay Gas-ib & Jessie Grace Sannadan [2] have highlighted the persistent disparities in access to quality education, particularly for indigenous and rural communities. Similarly, in Cambodia, Pearson [13] has underscored the enduring obstacles faced by marginalized groups, including linguistic minorities and those living in remote areas. Despite strides in expanding basic education infrastructure, disparities in educational attainment persist, reflecting deep-rooted structural inequalities that require comprehensive and targeted interventions. The year 2018 serves as a critical juncture for understanding the ongoing challenges and complexities within the education systems of both the Philippines and Cambodia, necessitating concerted efforts to address these issues and foster inclusive and equitable learning environments [14].

3. METHODOLOGY

Since this is an overview study on the global perspective on education in two countries, the research results are mainly based on the published information collected from published materials such as scientific journals, books, statistics, newspapers, and online documents from the education systems of the Philippines and Cambodia. Both countries are confronted with a multitude of internal and external factors that hinder the delivery of quality education and perpetuate inequalities. The related information and documents will be collected and reviewed to draw the main constraints, challenges and socio-economic disparities in accessing to the education.

Internally, resource constraints pose significant challenges, with limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and shortages of trained personnel hindering the provision of quality education. Additionally, capacity gaps, such as insufficient training and professional development opportunities for educators and administrators, limit their ability to address the diverse learning needs of students effectively. Moreover, curricular limitations, including frameworks that fail to incorporate cultural diversity, linguistic variations, and the unique contexts of marginalized communities, further exacerbate disparities within the education systems.

Externally, socioeconomic disparities play a crucial role in shaping access to education, with economic inequalities impacting the ability of disadvantaged communities to enrol, retain, and complete their education. Furthermore, historical legacies, such as the lingering effects of conflict, colonialism, and historical injustices, contribute to educational disparities, particularly among minority groups. Moreover, global influences, such as international trends in education policies, funding priorities, and development agendas, shape national education strategies and resource allocations, influencing the trajectory of educational reforms and initiatives.

In response to these challenges, various alternative courses of action have been proposed. These include centralized governance with increased investments, decentralized governance with regional autonomy, integration of non-state initiatives into national policy, and the promotion of community-driven education models. Each alternative presents its own set of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and

threats, requiring careful consideration and strategic planning to address the complex and interconnected issues within the education systems of the Philippines and Cambodia.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Expansion and Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

In the Philippines, rebuilding education post-martial law involved decentralization and private sector partnerships, enabling innovation alongside stratification. Rural, indigenous and poor students still face barriers entering and finishing schooling [2]. Passage of the 2017 Universal Tertiary Education Act signified unmet equity needs. Similarly in Cambodia, post-conflict reconstruction prioritized expanding basic infrastructure though enrolments remain among Southeast Asia's lowest. Disparities across socioeconomic, regional, ethnic and gender categories persist. And centralized state curriculum often discounts local cultures and languages [14].

4.2 Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education

With high linguistic diversity, there is growing promotion of mother tongue instruction for minority group schooling [8]. The assumption is that beginning learning in a familiar language lessens disadvantages some children face. In the Philippines, regional languages have been formally permitted since the 1970s but application is uneven [2]. The K-12 reform now mandates kindergarten and 12 years compulsory education including Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) for early grades. However, teacher capacities, materials and financing remain lacking for full implementation, especially in remote areas [2], [4].

In Cambodia, languages often obstruct Khmer-centric education. Since the 2000s, NGOs have spearheaded small MTB-MLE and bilingual efforts for ethnic minorities with government backing. But centralized control has constrained scaling localized, context-relevant models. Questions also continue around sustainability and actual impacts on learning [15], [16].

4.3 Community Partnerships and Alternative Approaches

With limited state capacity to equitably deliver education, non-state initiatives help plug gaps. In the Philippines, these include supervised neighbourhood playgroups and mobile early childhood development programs, mobilizing local volunteers [13]. In Cambodia, home-based initiatives engage mothers in providing basic early learning and parenting support, aided by trained village teams. While quality and resourcing are continual concerns, community-led efforts often adaptatively serve excluded groups by tapping local relationships and resources. Anecdotal evidence also indicates potential wider social benefits around awareness, cooperation, empowerment and inclusion [13]. However, systematic monitoring and evaluation of outcomes remains needed alongside stronger government infrastructure to link and sustain grassroots innovation.

Complex interplays around centralized control, stratified access and quality, community marginalization, and cultural disjunctions characterize key tensions in both Cambodia and the Philippines' education terrains. While formal structures spread, flexible non-state programs creatively enhance inclusion. But realizing quality, equitable education at scale depends on resourcing, localized governance and integrated policy commitments [16].

Based on the comprehensive study of educational challenges and opportunities in the Philippines and Cambodia, several alternative courses of action can be proposed to address the identified issues. Firstly, one alternative course of action involves implementing targeted interventions to address resource constraints and capacity gaps within the education systems of both countries [14]. This could include initiatives such as increasing government investment in education, improving infrastructure, and providing comprehensive training and professional development opportunities for educators and administrators. By enhancing the resources and capabilities of educational institutions, this approach aims to better equip them to meet the diverse learning needs of students and improve overall educational quality [3].

Another alternative course of action focuses on promoting culturally responsive and inclusive educational frameworks that recognize and integrate the unique contexts and identities of marginalized communities. This involves revising curricula to incorporate cultural diversity, linguistic variations, and local knowledge into teaching and learning practices. Additionally, fostering partnerships with community stakeholders, including indigenous groups, linguistic minorities, and marginalized populations, can facilitate the co-creation of educational programs that are relevant, accessible, and empowering [17]. By cantering cultural relevance and inclusivity, this approach seeks to address historical injustices and systemic inequities within the education systems of the Philippines and Cambodia [3].

A third alternative course of action involves advocating for policy reforms that decentralize decision-making authority and empower local communities to shape their educational priorities and strategies [4]. This decentralized governance model aims to promote community-driven education initiatives that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of diverse stakeholders [5]. By devolving power to the grassroots level while maintaining alignment with national education standards, this approach fosters a sense of ownership, accountability, and agency among local stakeholders. Moreover, it encourages innovation, flexibility, and adaptation in educational practices, leading to more responsive and sustainable solutions to educational challenges. Through these alternative courses of action, stakeholders can work collaboratively towards building more equitable, inclusive, and empowering education systems in the Philippines and Cambodia.

4.4 Alternatives and Decision Criteria

4.4.1 Alternatives

Several potential alternatives exist to tackle the systemic issues of inequitable access, variable quality, and lack of inclusion that persist across the Philippines and Cambodia's education systems [17], [15].

One option is to maintain centralized governance and standardized national curriculums, benchmarks, and quality assurance systems while substantially boosting investments in schools, social support programs and teacher training capabilities specifically targeting remote, poor and indigenous communities. This would enable current formal schooling to reach more disadvantaged areas. However, it may not overcome the cultural disjunctions in curriculum and language exclusion felt by some non-dominant groups.

Another alternative is to initiate decentralized governance approaches that shift more budget, personnel and policy decision-making control to regional or local authorities. This would allow local bodies increased flexibility to tailor programming content, language, hiring priorities, community engagement and facilities to specific community contexts and needs. However, safeguarding minimum quality standards could prove challenging.

A third possibility is to formally integrate high-performing non-state supplementary education programs focused on hard-to-reach groups into national policy frameworks, funding streams and quality oversight systems while still sanctioning localized design flexibility in areas like staffing approaches, language use, pedagogies and curricular adaptation. This would catalyze grassroots initiatives to sustainably scale. But tensions between standardization and flexibility would need balanced management. Finally, community school models could be promoted that encourage local decision-making authority and accountability across key functions like educational priorities, resource allocation, staff hiring, assessment reforms, language selection and teaching methods while still requiring linkage to national benchmarks and quality reviews. This empowers communities while embedding schools within common expectations. Capacity building for leadership would be essential.

4.4.2 Decision Criteria

The optimal decision will promote solutions fit for purpose across diverse community environments and student groups to expand education access, excellence and inclusion nationwide. Selection criteria to evaluate alternatives include [17], [15], [18].

Feasibility-Can the approach realistically be implemented within current political, budget and capacity constraints? Approaches requiring substantial systemic reforms may not be feasible.

Scale-Does the method have clear potential for catalysing change beyond pockets of innovation to system-level improvement nationwide? Solutions only benefiting some communities have less value.

Localization-Is the solution sufficiently flexible and adaptable in design to promote positive outcomes across different cultural, linguistic, geographic and economic community settings? One-size-fits-all models limit contextual responsiveness.

Ownership-Does the option centre community-driven leadership and mobilize local resources and relationships for sustained education improvements? Community agency and assets must be leveraged.

Quality-Can minimum standards and supportive professional development systems still be integrated while encouraging ongoing contextualization? Compromising on quality is unacceptable.

Equity–Will marginalized groups genuinely experience expanded learning opportunities, respect for their identity and belonging within education systems? Inclusion must be cantered, not peripheral.

The optimal approach should balance national benchmarks for learning with sanctioned localized variability to actualize access, excellence and inclusion for all student groups nationwide. Sustaining this balance remains key.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, amidst the myriads of challenges confronting the education systems of the Philippines and Cambodia, promoting community-driven education models emerges as a beacon of hope for fostering meaningful and sustainable change. By centering local empowerment, cultural relevance, and inclusivity, this approach holds the promise of addressing the systemic inequities that have long plagued both nations' educational landscapes. By entrusting communities with the autonomy to shape their educational priorities and strategies, while still adhering to national standards and frameworks, community-driven models offer a pathway towards fostering a sense of ownership and agency among stakeholders at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, community-driven education models align closely with global trends towards decentralization, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness in education. By leveraging the rich cultural diversity and local knowledge within communities, these models have the potential to unlock innovative solutions to complex challenges, fostering environments where every learner can thrive. Moreover, by fostering partnerships and collaboration between government agencies, academic institutions, civil society organizations, and community stakeholders, community-driven education models can catalyze collective action towards achieving shared educational goals.

However, realizing the full potential of community-driven education models requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders involved. It demands a commitment to capacity-building, infrastructure development, and stakeholder engagement to ensure that communities have the resources and support needed to effectively drive educational change. Moreover, it necessitates a shift in mindset and approach within the education sector, towards one that values inclusivity, collaboration, and community participation as fundamental pillars of educational reform. Ultimately, by embracing community-driven approaches, the education systems of the Philippines and Cambodia can move closer towards realizing their shared vision of equitable access and excellence in learning for all.

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities within the education systems of the Philippines and Cambodia, a set of strategic recommendations is proposed to advance towards more inclusive and community-driven models of education. Firstly, advocating for policy reforms that decentralize decision-making authority to local communities while maintaining alignment with national education standards is essential.

This decentralization empowers communities to tailor educational programs to their specific needs and contexts, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability among stakeholders. Additionally, investing in capacity-building programs aimed at equipping local stakeholders with the necessary skills

and knowledge in education management and leadership is crucial. By strengthening the capacity of local educators, administrators, and community leaders, we can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of community-driven education initiatives.

Furthermore, establishing strong mechanisms for quality assurance and monitoring is paramount to ensure that standards are upheld while allowing for flexibility and innovation at the local level. By implementing systems for continuous assessment and feedback, we can foster a culture of accountability and continuous improvement within community-driven education models. Additionally, fostering partnerships between government agencies, academic institutions, and civil society organizations is essential to provide holistic support for the implementation of community-driven education initiatives. Collaborative efforts can leverage resources, expertise, and networks to address the diverse needs of communities and ensure the success of educational reforms. Finally, allocating sufficient resources and funding to support the transition towards more inclusive and community-centered education systems is imperative. Adequate investment is necessary to provide the necessary infrastructure, materials, and training needed to facilitate meaningful change and create environments where every learner can thrive. Through these strategic recommendations, we can work towards building more equitable, responsive, and empowering education systems in the Philippines and Cambodia.

5.2 Recommendations

The recommended solution is to promote and integrate community-driven education models that decentralize significant decision-making, resource allocation and accountability to local schools while still linking to national benchmarks. This approach empowers communities to take ownership over key functions based on contextual needs while upholding minimum quality standards. It balances localization and flexibility with wider systemic consistency.

5.3 Specific Steps Would Include

- Passing policies sanctioning increased school-based authority over areas like language selection, hiring, budgets, facilities, teaching methods and community partnerships.
- Building regional and school-level leadership capabilities to manage functions and sustain community participation.
- Establishing two-way review systems facilitating quality support from national agencies to local schools and vice versa to ensure standards.
- Allocating funding pools directly to localized bodies overseeing clusters of community schools.
- Integrating non-state and informal programs focused on marginalized groups into formal localized structures.

5.4 Implementation Plan should be as follows

- Short Term-Piloting decentralized schools; drafting legal frameworks expanding local financial and managerial autonomy; public engagement and advocacy campaigns.
- Medium Term-Phased integration of independent community initiatives into formal devolved structures with financing formulas; progressive decentralization of functions based on school readiness assessments.
- Long Term-Mainstreaming localized models as primary education delivery pathway; outcome monitoring and evaluations driving continual quality improvements.

Acknowledgments

The authors have no specific acknowledgments to make for this research.

Funding Information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Mardy Serey	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Judith S. Taboada		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Maureen May R. Fernandez			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓

C : **C**onceptualization
M : **M**ethodology
So : **So**ftware
Va : **Va**lidation
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis
I : **I**nvestigation
R : **R**esources
D : **D**ata Curation
O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
E : Writing - Review & **E**diting
Vi : **Vi**sualization
Su : **Su**pervision
P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Informed Consent

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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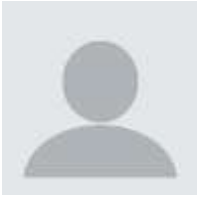
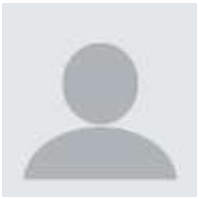
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How to Cite: Mardy Serey, Judith S. Taboada, Maureen May R. Fernandez. (2024). Global perspectives on education: A cross-cultural comparison in the Philippines and Cambodia. Journal of Learning and Educational Policy (JLEP), 4(2), 41–50. https://doi.org/10.55529/jlep.44.46.56

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