

The Challenge of Enhancing Teacher Professional Identity and Capability in Cambodian Schools*

LEO CASEY

National College of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland

CHANPHIRUN SAM and SET SENG

Phnom Penh Teacher Education College, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

PHEUNG POV

SeeBeyondBorders, Siem Reap, Cambodia

CHANKOULIKA BO

Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Democratic education is grounded on the fundamental assumption that every child should have free and equitable access to quality education. It is only when this assumption is met that other aspects of the complex interplay of democracy and education can be fully realized. In practical terms, this assumption entails that every child can attend school and benefit from good teachers and a learning environment appropriate to their needs. In Cambodia this assumption cannot be taken for granted. In recent years the country has made good progress in developing public education; however, it has come from a very low starting point.

In all education settings, the challenge of enhancing teaching capability to achieve better learning outcomes is complex and multifaceted. In the context of early grade education in Cambodian schools, this is especially the

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case. Cambodian education today is like the “perfect storm” of challenges. In addition to the underdeveloped, largely agrarian economy, Cambodia has a unique and terrible history of oppression that specifically targeted educators and intellectuals. April 17, 1975, marked the onset of Year Zero, when the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge took power and forcibly implemented radical social reforms intended to bring about the severe destruction of education in Cambodia. By 1979, when the regime was overthrown, it is estimated that 1.7 million people were killed (Kiernan 2003). With 75 percent of teachers and 96 percent of university graduates killed (Ayres 1999), the trauma still resonates today, and nowhere more so than in the thousands of schools and in the minds of the teachers and communities on whom they depend.

This article reports on the progress of Professional Identity for Khmer Teachers (PIKT), an ongoing study to investigate how teachers in Cambodia, and specifically the Battambang Province, can be enabled to improve their teaching practice through professional development. It focuses on the tasks and challenges of building teacher professional identity (TPI); how teachers see themselves and take responsibility to manage improvements to their professional practice. The authors are part of the PIKT research collaboration seeking to find new ways to improve the quality of early grade teaching at primary schools in Cambodia. The 28-month project commenced in September 2022 and will continue through to early 2025. The project uses design-based research (DBR; Barab 2006; Barab and Squire 2004) to develop a customized approach to enhance TPI and thereby facilitate teacher agency in implementing positive changes to classroom practice.

The collaboration involves SeeBeyondBorders, a nongovernmental organization concerned with teacher development in Cambodia; the Department of Policy, a research and think-tank unit within the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS); Phnom Penh Teacher Education College, as provider of the new full four-year degree program for primary and lower secondary teacher education; and the Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning at the National College of Ireland.

Research Goals and Method

The research goals of the PIKT project may be described in terms of three broad areas of inquiry: (1) to facilitate early grade Cambodian teachers to develop their professional identity and thereby enhance their classroom practice; (2) to design and deliver customized workshops, activities, and resources

to support this process; and (3) to further develop the practical research skills and capabilities of the collaborating partners so the work can continue in the future.

It is useful to consider three lines of learning and development associated with these three goals. First and foremost, PIKT is intended to address the challenge of poor learning outcomes for early grade school students in Cambodia. To achieve this, the project focuses on supporting the learning associated with developing their teachers' professional identity. In addition, the project team, as DBR actors and collaborators, are developing their own competence in research and capabilities to continue to support the teachers on their journey of professional development.

The overall approach may be characterized as practical inquiry with simultaneous development of theory and application. DBR was identified as the most appropriate method, as it allowed all three goals to be addressed simultaneously. The method involves iterations of data gathering, conceptual design, practical intervention, and reflection. DBR positions researchers as agents of change rather than passive observers "to move beyond simply understanding the world as it is and involves working to change it in useful ways with the broader goal of examining how these systematic changes influence learning and practice" (Barab 2006, 153).

Following Sari and Lim (2012), the article is organized to reflect phases of the DBR process by starting with an initial overview of education in Cambodia and conceptualization of TPI. This is followed by an account of the first round of data collection (DR1), informing design and delivery of the first teacher professional identity workshop (TPI W1), and then the second round of data collection (DR2), leading to design and delivery of the second teacher professional identity workshop (TPI W2).

Education in Cambodia

It is difficult to overstate the full extent of the challenges of teaching and learning in early grade classes in Cambodia. According to the recent Program for International Student Assessment for Development results, Cambodia scored significantly below the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations averages in the three domains of reading, mathematics, and science (MoEYS 2018a). Furthermore, in relation to those in comparable developing countries, Cambodian students only outperformed Zambia and Senegal. The findings highlight the lack of access to quality education in Cambodia and, on a global level, the vast discrepancy in international education standards.

Data from the national assessments for grades 3, 6, and 8 over the period from 2015 to 2017 in the core subjects of Khmer (Cambodian language) and mathematics show that achievement levels were at or below 50 percent and there were no signs of an improving trend (MoEYS 2016, 2017, 2018b). Consequently, many lower secondary students leave school early, especially in grade 9 when they may find learning too difficult. The same can be said for the transition from lower to upper secondary schools, where weak foundational standards in basic education prevent students succeeding at higher grade levels; “only 2.1% of 15-year-olds in Cambodia can be said to reach a baseline level of performance in reading; 2.7% in mathematics; and 1.4% in science” (MoEYS 2018a, 28). These findings highlight the poor education prospects for many Cambodian schoolchildren.

The scale and complexity of the challenge to improve education outcomes for early grade students in Cambodian public schools is considerable. The task is multifaceted; it will take many years and significant efforts to achieve progress.

Quality of Teaching

Simply put, the vital core that underpins primary education anywhere in the world is the quality of teaching. Teaching is at the heart of what happens in school, and there is no substitute for a fully resourced and competent teacher to encourage, guide, and assess learning in the early grades. The Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (2020) points to teaching capability as a core enabler for improved learning outcomes. They argue that teaching capability incorporates not just teacher knowledge and skills but also lesson-plan resources, school support structures, and community buy-in. We further argue, in keeping with Korthagen (2017), that the development of teacher capability involves cognitive, emotional, and motivational dimensions. This is especially the case in Cambodian primary schools.

Improving the quality of teaching, particularly for early grade classes, is regarded as an essential component of the overall effort to address the problem of education in Cambodia. The challenge is significant, as many of Cambodia’s primary teachers are underqualified in comparison with their international counterparts.

Recent improvements in initial teacher education offer hope for the future. Up to recently, primary teachers had been required to have completed just 12 years in school to enter a two-year preservice training program (MoEYS 2018a). Since 2018, the new four-year primary and lower secondary teacher education degree programs have been in place. The first cohorts,

comprising 483 newly qualified teachers, entered the profession in 2022 as novice teachers. It will take many years and a sizable increase in teacher education college provision before these new entrants can make a difference.

In the meantime, enhancing teacher capability through professional development offers more immediate opportunities for improvement. Achieving this will require greater understanding of what is happening in Cambodian schools and how teachers regard themselves as agents of change. Teacher professional development is also significantly underresourced and dysfunctional. A 2015 report found, “Teacher performance has been inhibited by ineffective incentives, an evaluation system that is disconnected from classroom realities, and a lack of opportunities to learn and share best-practice lessons with peers” (Tandon and Fukao 2015, 5). A more recent survey on teachers and teaching in Cambodia also highlights the bleak situation for teacher professional development: “Capacity building activities are limited and follow a piecemeal approach, with less evidence of usefulness for or sustained impact on teaching” (No and Heng 2017, 7). For balance, it should be noted that the PIKT project partners are active in addressing the challenge of teacher professional development, and it is anticipated that the outputs of this research will provide important insights to inform the effectiveness of future initiatives.

The decision to focus on TPI was taken at an early stage of this research. TPI entails how teachers regard themselves as educators and what they deem to be essential practices associated with their role (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Mockler 2011). The underpinning premise is that TPI is a significant factor contributing to the problem of low achievement rates in early grades.

Although TPI is widely recognized as a critical component of teacher formation and development, it is difficult to point to a single universal definition. As Mockler (2011) suggests, professional identity involves an understanding of what it is to “be” a teacher. This involves development of teachers’ perceptions of what it means to learn, how they define the tasks of teaching, and how they see themselves and rate their capabilities—all of these (and more besides) will have a direct influence on their practice and paths to improvement. These perceptions—we might even say “theories of learning”—are often shaped in teacher training and further developed by professional experience, the influence of positive role models, and a supportive school leadership.

As we might expect, TPI is framed within a wider cultural context. In Cambodia, the cultural profile (Berkvens 2017) of the country and its education system has a significant influence on how teaching and learning are regarded. The unique and tragic history of Cambodian education, with the

devastation of the entire system by the Khmer Rouge, has inevitably given rise to subsequent and ongoing challenges with deficits of expertise in pedagogy, lack of school leadership, and a scarcity of experienced role models. In this context, the task of developing an effective sense of TPI is uniquely challenging and requires thoughtful, sensitive, and systematic interventions as described here.

Initial Perspectives—DR1

Based on the experience of the collaborators, a starting assumption was that teachers in Cambodia have narrow and functional frames of reference as to what it means to be a teacher. For instance, they may regard teaching as a technical process involving the application of the most appropriate method—if the results do not meet expectations, then the method should be adjusted. This implies that Cambodian teachers frame their practice through a more constrained sense of agency when compared with teachers from other countries.

The PIKT collaboration regards the development of TPI as a process of transformative learning (Mezirow 1997) for Cambodian teachers. Transformative learning may be regarded as a learning process where previously unquestioned underpinning assumptions are scrutinized and reshaped, often in response to a disorientating dilemma. In this case, teachers will be encouraged to “look again” at what it means to be a teacher and to question their own understanding of the role.

The design aim of PIKT is to encourage teachers to consider wider and less-constrained frames of reference as to what it means to be a teacher in Cambodia. The workshops are intended to invigorate new ideas and wider discussion on the nature of teaching. In this way, the hope is to facilitate the transformation of the teachers’ professional identities. The case for identity as the target area of transformative learning is well argued by Illeris (2014). PIKT is about reshaping Cambodian teachers’ professional identity and thereby enabling them to self-select purposeful actions to enhance their teaching and improve learning outcomes for students. This in turn will provide valuable insights to inform policy and further projects for teacher professional development as well as the education of preservice teachers.

As may be seen from the project timeline (fig. 1), field research commenced in September 2022 with the recruitment of a cohort of 25 participating teachers. The PIKT project leveraged a preexisting network of teachers in and around the city of Battambang to access and recruit the participants. SeeBeyondBorders, one of the collaborating organizations, has worked to support schools in the area for several years, and initial contact

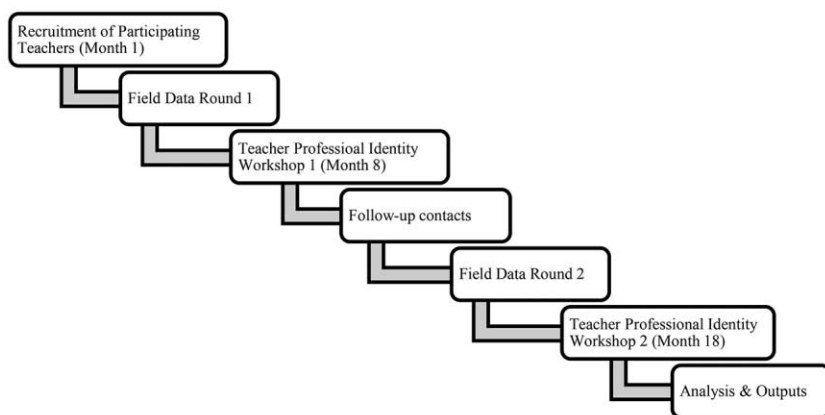


Fig. 1. Professional Identity for Khmer Teachers design-based research timeline

with the teachers was made possible through this network. Participation was entirely voluntary; the nature and purpose of the research and the commitment required, should they decide to participate, were clearly outlined at the point of contact.

The PIKT team emphasized that the teachers were considered co-participants in this research, and their role was to help develop insights on how they see the world. All communication with the teachers was in the Cambodian language of Khmer, and the preparation process for approaching, explaining, and gaining informed consent was planned in detail.

Recapping the three goals of the project, it is worth noting that the third goal—that of developing local research capability—was very much to the fore throughout this process. The core values of respecting the experience and autonomy of the participating teachers were central to the research approach. In keeping with the inquiry-led ethos, the project team were careful to avoid a prescriptive approach to teacher competence and classroom practice.

It was important for the researchers to have a baseline picture of what was happening in the schools and to gather initial opinions from the participating teachers. The research team worked in groups to identify suitable instruments to gain understanding of the school context and to inform an initial identity framework and workshop design. Three instruments were developed: a classroom observation checklist, a teacher interview protocol, and a school and community profile (see app.). A four-person field research team was established and provided with initial training prior to being tasked with using these instruments while visiting the schools, observing the lessons, and interviewing the teachers.

The classroom observation instrument was essentially a modified version of the *Teach* classroom observation tool (Molina et al. 2018, 2020). The *Teach* tool is an open source instrument developed by the World Bank Group for primary classrooms. It is designed to be suitable for use in low- and middle-income countries. Furthermore, when used with larger sample sizes, *Teach* provides an international comparative measure of teacher effectiveness. The team decided to adapt the *Teach* tool and to customize it for use in the context of the 25 Battambang participating teachers. Two points are worth noting here: first, there was much fruitful learning involved in interpreting and translating the components of the *Teach* observation tool; and second, the task of training field observers was considered central to the process. The field researchers were already working in roles to support schools in the area; however, they had no previous experience of classroom observation or interviewing for research. The PIKT team regarded the development of field research capabilities as critical to the success of the project.

The *Teach* tool measures quality of teaching based on three areas of observation, comprising classroom culture, instructional practice, and development of socioemotional skills. As will be discussed later, encouraging teachers to have wider appreciation of the importance of nurturing a positive classroom culture within a supportive and inclusive learning environment was prioritized as an outcome for TPI W1.

The collaborators were also clear that the *Teach* tool was being used as a means of gathering data to inform the DBR. It was not intended for comparative purposes or to measure or score the individual performance or abilities of the participating teachers. For this reason, only aggregated and anonymized data were used to inform the TPI workshop designs.

A teacher interview protocol was developed specifically for PIKT. The instrument design was informed by a previous survey by No and Heng (2017) and overviews provided by Hanna et al. (2019) and Canrinus et al. (2011). The purpose of the interview was to gain initial insights on the motivational mindset of the participating teachers. A structured fixed interview protocol was deemed appropriate for DR1. This was an important consideration, as building trust, getting to know the teachers, and developing the interview skills of the field researchers were prioritized at this early DR1 stage of the research. The approach prepared the ground for more in-depth insights on teacher perspectives from the workshops and subsequent DR2 interviews.

The 25 PIKT participating teachers worked in 10 schools in the region. For each, a “school and community profile” was also compiled as part of the initial data round. This was completed by the field researcher using information

provided by the school principal. The purpose of the profile was to gather background information on the children, parents, and overall socioeconomic context of each school.

Initial Profile of Teacher Participants

The three instruments provided sufficient data for an initial profile of the 25 teacher participants to emerge. The cohort comprised 20 female and five male teachers with length of service ranging from 37 years to newly qualified, although most had more than 10 years' experience. The breakdown of highest level of education was bachelor's degree (12), upper secondary (10), and lower secondary (3); although most had a teacher training certificate (20), some had no formal teacher training (5). All taught in early grades, as grade one (10), two (6), and three (9).

Teacher participants were asked to self-rate how they describe themselves as teachers. Overall, the responses conveyed positive dispositions to being a teacher; for example, "I see myself as a passionate person in teaching" (most of the time 44 percent, almost always 52 percent) and "I see myself as a supporter of my students" (most of the time 28 percent, almost always 72 percent). The participants were also asked to select from a range of options as to why they choose to work as a teacher; the top reasons cited were "help the future of Cambodia" (first choice 36 percent), "like to work with children" (first choice 36 percent) and "job security" (first choice 16 percent). The picture conveyed by the structured teacher interviews presents a well-motivated cohort of experienced professionals committed to working to achieve a better future for the children of Cambodia.

The DR1 classroom observation data provided initial insights on the actual teaching practices of the participants. The observers checked the lesson activities against the *Teach* tool component checklist statements such as "teacher uses positive language and behavior with students"; the checks occurred at 10-minute time intervals for the duration of each lesson. It is important to recognize that each teacher was observed for only one lesson, and therefore the classroom observations could only serve as a "temperature check" rather than a comprehensive overview of teaching quality.

As mentioned previously, the *Teach* tool categorizes quality of teaching along three dimensions as classroom culture, instructional practice, and development of socioemotional skills. Overall, the initial observation findings indicated low levels of the measure for "quality of teaching." For example, for the time interval 30–40 minutes, the statement "children follow instruction of the teacher and know what to do" had aggregated findings

of “not observed” (36 percent), “observed once” (44 percent) and “observed occasionally” (20 percent; note the field observers had two further options, “observed frequently” and “observed throughout,” which had nil findings). Likewise, for the same time interval, the statement “the teacher acknowledges student positive behavior” had: “not observed” (44 percent), “observed once” (32 percent), “observed occasionally” (16 percent), “observed frequently” (4 percent), and “observed throughout” (4 percent).

The summary of findings from DR1 indicated a group of well-motivated teachers displaying a limited range of classroom practice capability. Although they would like to improve their teaching, they do not have a clearly available learning path to achieve this.

First Teacher Professional Identity Workshop (TPI W1)

The next stage of the DBR approach was the development of a customized professional identity workshop for the 25 participating teachers. In Cambodia as elsewhere, the logistics of organizing such an event are complex; permission had to be obtained for the release of the teachers from their school duties, a suitable date and venue identified, and the teachers provided with a small allowance to facilitate travel.

The instructional design for TPI W1 was developed through collaborative seminars involving the PIKT research team. Several design themes emerged, and they are worth noting here. First, the notion of adult and transformative learning was teased out as an appropriate underpinning for developing TPI. This approach contrasted with previous experiences of professional development as the conveyance of prescriptive, often technical, instructions for teachers to follow. Adult learning methods encourage leveraging experience, participation, questioning, and self-direction as means of development.

A second design theme was the importance of time management for the workshop. The release of 25 teachers for one day is a significant resource allocation for an already stretched education system. The collaborators had a realistic expectation of what could be achieved through the two one-day workshops and were keen to optimize the agenda through a range of activities.

A further related theme was to allow for as much teacher discussion and input as possible. As mentioned previously, the teachers were regarded as co-participants in this research, and as such their voice was considered critical to the design process.

The first TPI workshop took place on June 16, 2023. Teachers were arranged in groups of five—each table had a prearranged seating plan to ensure a mix of schools and backgrounds. Each table had a facilitator who

was part of the research collaboration team. The entire workshop was conducted in Khmer with plenary presentations from different speakers interspersed with activity-oriented discussions at each of the tables.

The presentations were based on elements of the *Teach* tool framework such as “creating a supportive learning environment,” “establishing positive behavior expectations,” “monitoring for understanding,” and “building socio-emotional skills.” The teachers were introduced to each of these concepts through short presentations and were then provided with opportunities to discuss the ideas at their table and invited to suggest examples of how they would work in practice.

Table discussions were conducted in a relaxed and informal manner. The aim was to provide an environment conducive to uninhibited interaction and discussion. Facilitators (drawn from the research team) and teacher participants explored ideas and undertook tasks related to the presentations. Participants were enthusiastic in sharing their experience and ideas during the workshop. Concepts such as positive classroom culture and effective instructional strategies were discussed and interrogated. The teachers’ inputs provided additional insights, not just on the concepts themselves but also on how ideas such as classroom culture are perceived and interpreted in the Cambodian context. For example, a fruitful discussion at one of the tables centered on the distinction between positive classroom culture and positive classroom management. These insights, further discussed later, were synthesized by the facilitators and presented to all participants on behalf of the group. Teacher suggestions on each topic were collected and shared on posters.

Toward the end of the workshop, teachers were asked to select new classroom practices that they would be willing to adopt. In addition to completing an open worksheet, each teacher was provided with two sets of cards and envelopes, wherein they were encouraged to post and seal their selections. The first set of envelopes would be opened by each teacher when instructed to do so by the facilitator at the beginning of the Cambodian new school year (January 2024). A second envelope was provided so teachers could note their reflections on TPI W1; these were sealed and gathered for safekeeping, to be returned to the teachers during TPI W2 in March 2024. This served as a conceptual bridge between the two workshops.

TPI W1 provided valuable insights both from the teachers’ perspectives and those of the research collaborators. Teacher reflections, along with those of the facilitators, were compiled and thematically analyzed. Insights from the reflections covered overall workshop design and format, content of the workshop, and likely impact on classroom practice.

Overall, the teachers were appreciative of the format and content of TPI W1, especially where it provided opportunities for participation. Teachers commented on how they felt engaged and encouraged by the experience. Open discussions and seeking teachers' own suggestions were positive aspects they had not expected. They valued the opportunity to exchange ideas and share experiences among peers from different schools. They were happy with the autonomy to choose their own areas for improvement. The non-prescriptive approach contrasted with their limited previous experiences of professional development where being told what to do was the norm, rather than being asked to identify one's own areas for improvement. Nevertheless, a few teachers were skeptical about the effectiveness of teachers' self-reflection. They suggested that teachers need explicit instructions on how to do things and they need to be checked against the plans.

Classroom culture was a new concept for the Cambodian teachers. Some teachers regarded classroom culture as an alternative term for "classroom management." They were familiar with classroom management, which is about controlling students' attention. The classroom expectations are known as classroom rules as set out by teachers and often hung beside the chalkboard. From time to time, teachers would point out misbehavior by referring to the rules on display to get students to pay attention in class.

The concept of establishing a positive classroom culture and understanding the steps to achieve it intrigued many of the teachers. In the cultural context of Cambodian schools, as may be the case in many developing countries, there is a strong emphasis on delivering instruction. The reasoning is quite straightforward: with limited time available in school, the priority is often placed on maximizing learning opportunities. Consequently, dedicating time to create a positive classroom culture, promote inclusive practices, encourage collaboration, and develop socioemotional skills may seem like an inefficient use of resources.

This clash between the traditional view of teachers as instructional managers and the evolving role of teachers as cultivators of a positive learning environment became evident during the discussions. This contrast touches on the core of how teachers perceive themselves in terms of their professional identity.

Further insights on classroom practice and factors that may facilitate or inhibit change emerged from the workshop reflections. The researchers were impressed with how the early grade teachers were enthusiastic in their suggestions of how they might go about nurturing inclusive and positive learning environments. The team noted how their enthusiasm contrasted with the evidence from the classroom observation data, which indicated relatively low

scores for this measure on the *Teach* tool. A possible explanation, to be explored further, is that teachers overemphasized direct instruction while they were being observed. This may be related to aspects of Cambodian culture where loss of face is considered disrespectful for all concerned. The teachers may have been trying to do the right thing—note, the right thing is often interpreted as a best guess on what will please the observer, not what the teacher thinks they should do.

Further Insights—DR2

January marks the beginning of the new school year in Cambodia and, in keeping with the process outlined at TPI W1, teachers were reminded to open their self-sealed envelopes containing their suggestions to improve their practice. This served as an additional touchpoint and encouragement to follow through on the workshop commitments.

DR2 took place in late January and February 2024. The field research team once again observed the teachers in class and used an updated version of the *Teach* classroom observation tool. Teacher interviews were also conducted. This time the researchers were encouraged to ask follow-up questions and to strive for deeper insights on how the participants regard themselves as teaching professionals, why they remain as teachers, and their priorities in terms of professional development.

A comparison of DR2 (January 2024) and DR1 (March 2023) classroom observations provided indications of an uplift in classroom culture practices (the theme of TPI W1); for example, for the criterion “teacher use of positive language and behavior with students” (middle of lesson), DR2 indicated ratings of “medium” (56 percent) and “high” (28 percent) compared with DR1 ratings of “medium” (36 percent) and “high” (8 percent). This trend was sustained for many of the components for DR2 observations. These findings provided good evidence of improved classroom practices by the teachers for DR2. It should be noted that by DR2, the teachers had a good sense of what the observers were looking for in the lesson observations. Many of the desirable behaviors were covered in the first workshop and the teachers had recently been reminded to open their envelopes and to recommit to the practice improvements they had each identified. These were intentional strategies intended to encourage the teachers, and it appears they were successful in that regard.

A synthesis of DR2 teacher interviews provided the researchers with additional insights on teacher perspectives. The participants regarded their professional identity with a mix of passion, commitment, and resilience.

Their decision to become educators was influenced by a genuine desire to help children learn and grow, family influences, financial considerations, and a passion for teaching. When asked about their own interest in professional development, they identified enhancement of classroom practice, integration of technology in teaching, and improvement in subject-specific teaching as priorities.

Overall, the analysis from DR2 further reinforced the finding of a well-intentioned and motivated group of teachers wishing to improve their practice and develop their professional skills. In keeping with the DBR process, insights from DR2 along with the feedback and reflections from TPI W1 were used to inform the design of TPI W2.

Second Teacher Professional Identity Workshop (TPI W2)

A key decision regarding the design approach to TPI W2 was to provide teachers with even more opportunities to voice their opinions and share their ideas. The overall theme was identified as instructional strategies, and this was to be unpacked from the perspective of the experience and insights of the participating teachers. Questions related to the subtopics of lesson facilitation, checks of understanding, and development of critical thinking provided the key tasks for the workshop sessions. The agenda was meticulously planned and prepared in advance by the facilitators, with specific questions identified and times allocated for each group task. The workshop took place on March 28, 2024, with full participation by the teachers. Once again, the entire workshop was in Khmer. It opened with a presentation on DR2 classroom observations and comparisons with the observations from DR1. The teachers were greatly encouraged by the results demonstrating their improvement, and this set a positive tone for the remainder of the day. They were also provided with the envelopes containing their self-reflections from TPI W1, thereby enhancing overall integration of the approach.

Considering the centrality of TPI, the workshop facilitators made every effort to reinforce the importance of each teacher's own classroom experience as a valuable resource for learning. Questions related to each topic were explored on stage with a panel of teachers and subsequently in group discussions and open, teacher-led idea sharing activities. The workshop topics covered each of the components for instructional practice in the *Teach* tool framework—namely, lesson facilitation, checks for understanding and feedback, and development of age-appropriate critical thinking skills. The format was strongly encouraging of contributions, and throughout the workshop the teachers shared many useful examples from their practice; for instance, how the challenge of

teaching subtraction could be addressed by storying and making connections with the children's daily lives, as in you have five mangoes, and you eat two, so now you have three. Likewise, the teachers identified the importance of monitoring classroom activities to provide additional support for struggling students and the importance of using differentiation of tasks to provide opportunities for success for students of all abilities.

Throughout the workshop, the teachers consistently demonstrated willingness to explore each topic and contribute useful suggestions. The panel discussions afforded an opportunity for teachers to sit on stage with a microphone and share their experience with colleagues. Several with more than 20 years' experience remarked how this was the first time they were asked for their opinion. At the end of the workshop, teacher feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with opportunities for participation consistently regarded as the most useful feature. It is worth emphasizing that the approach was regarded as highly unusual in the context of teacher professional development in Cambodia.

Discussion

Given the complexity of the research challenge, DBR was identified as the most suitable approach from the onset. DBR worked well, providing a structure to facilitate goal setting and data-informed decisions, although sufficiently flexible to allow partners to develop capabilities as the project progressed. An example was the ongoing enhancement of the skills of the field research team. It is important to appreciate the steps involved in preparing a team for classroom observations and teacher interviews. This was a big challenge, as the instruments and protocols needed to be in Khmer. The process of translation was not straightforward, as abstract concepts such as "classroom culture" and "socioemotional skills" had to be discussed and their meaning teased out and understood in the Khmer way. Likewise, the workshop presenters and facilitators had their own learning journey to prepare for the TPI workshops. A key decision was to adopt a participative rather than prescriptive approach to teacher development. Based on the participant feedback, we can affirm that the approach was appreciated by the teachers. Overall, the tasks and milestones of PIKT provide a rich line of inquiry-based learning for all involved in the research collaboration.

The *Teach* tool framework provided a useful template to guide consideration of alternative approaches to teaching. The framework was developed through extensive observations of what works for teachers in a range of contexts. It was presented in the manner of "this is what good teachers do" in

other contexts. In this way, the ongoing PIKT project does not seek to impose a particular approach; it is, rather, an invitation for Cambodian teachers to see themselves in the context of teachers worldwide as they endeavor to deal with the challenges and possibilities of their classroom practice. This sense of belonging to the global community of practitioners is intended to help shape the professional identity of the Khmer teachers.

It is now possible to consolidate insights from the perspectives of the teacher participants. Based on data collection and workshop participation, there is ample evidence of high levels of motivation to improve classroom practice. Cambodian teachers care about the future and desire school improvement and better learning outcomes for their students. Their enthusiasm to provide practical examples and share ideas is based on their extensive experience rather than what they learned in preservice or in-service programs. This suggests harnessing teacher experience as a promising approach to teacher professional development.

The results for the PIKT project also suggest a shift from didactic, expert-based approaches to professional development, in favor of participative, teacher-led programs. Insights from the project support the establishment of teacher communities of practice and a general opening of professional discourse among teachers. This is not easy to achieve and will not happen without the strong support and commitment from national and provincial government and school leaders and an enhanced skill set for teacher educators.

At its core, PIKT set out to critically investigate TPI by asking what it means to be a teacher in Cambodia. By actively engaging teachers and fostering collaboration and agency among them, the project sought to cultivate a fresh approach aimed at improving early grade student outcomes. The DBR process yielded new tools to support meaningful uplift in TPI in the challenging context of Cambodian education. In doing so, the project provides insights on essential questions for teachers everywhere. It is easy to overlook experience as a powerful resource for adult learning. In many contexts, teachers strive to uphold their professional identity as they are increasingly subjected to powerful external influences that seek to manage and regulate what happens in classrooms. However, good teachers are the ultimate custodians of the students under their care, and TPI is the deep recognition of that responsibility. Cambodian teachers know what it means to be good teachers; we need to listen to them and provide more opportunities so they can believe that for themselves.

Appendix

Professional Identity for Khmer Teachers (PIKT) Data Instruments

Note: All data were collected through Khmer-language versions of the data instruments.

Classroom Observation Tool

The classroom observation tool is an adaptation of the World Bank Teach Primary Observation Tool available here:
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/teach-helping-countries-track-and-improve-teaching-quality>

DR1 Teacher Interview Selected Questions

How do you describe yourself as a teacher? [never, sometimes, most of the time, almost always]

- I see myself as a passionate person in teaching.
- I see myself as a reserved person.
- I see myself as a facilitator in the classroom.
- I see myself as a supporter for my students.
- I see myself as an adviser for my students.
- I see myself as the second parent of my students.
- I see myself as a motivating person for my students.
- I see myself as an expert in the classroom.
- I see myself as a learner in my class.
- I see myself as a researcher in my class.

How do you think others (teachers, principals, parents, school community) may describe you as a teacher? [never, sometimes, most of the time, almost always]

- I am a knowledgeable person in the society.
- I am a resource person to help the children in the community.
- I am a role model for my students and society.
- I am a person who can make a difference to the future of the children in the community.
- I am a respectable person.

Why are you motivated to work as a teacher? [Select all that apply]

- Teachers make a difference in children's lives.
- Teaching is an honorable profession.
- Teaching is something you can do for your whole working life.
- Teachers are generally respected in Cambodia.
- Teachers are paid enough for the job that they do.
- Teachers have opportunities to grow personally.
- Teachers have opportunities for promotion or career progression.

What makes you choose to work as a teacher? [Rank in order of importance]

Job security

Respect from community and society

No other option available

Help the future of Cambodia

Like to work with children

Financial security

Family idea

Is there another reason that is not present here?

School and Community Profile

Note: The profile is completed by the school principal.

School area of location (please circle) Remote Rural Urban

Number of teachers Total Male/Female

Number of students Total Male/Female

Numbers of priority learners, including special needs students

ID Poor in level 1 Male/Female

ID Poor in level 2 Male/Female

ID Exactly Poor Male/Female

Students with disability Male/Female

Approximate % of teachers who own and use digital devices in your opinion?

Is there any record on student performance?

Has the record been disseminated to the parents or community? If yes, how?

In your opinion, what is more important for teachers in this school, classroom administration or teaching practice? Please explain.

How often does the community communicate with the school per semester (principal/teacher)?

How do teachers currently communicate with the community?

Is there any program/activity initiated by the school to engage parents or the community in recent years?

What do you think about the way teachers treat the community? Please describe.

In your opinion, do the parents actively involve themselves in their children's study?

In your opinion, how do you describe the parents-teacher relationship at your school?

In your opinion, what kind of activities involve parents with school?

In your opinion, are those parents happy in participating with the school activities? Why or why not?

In your opinion, what are three top issues that concerned the community the most?

In your opinion, what are the challenges in communicating with parents or the community?

In your opinion, are there any attempts to address those challenges? What are they?

Additional comments:

Semistructured Interview Questions (as used in DR2)

Why did you want to become a teacher?

Why are you still a teacher?

What do you want to do to improve your teaching?

Additional comments, if any.

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