

OPINION PIECE

Cambodia's Secondary Education: The Need to Motivate Professionalism in Teachers

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Abstract

This reviews the impact of the revision of Education Law (2007) on Cambodia's secondary education system. The government policy ensured high implementation. As a result, private tutoring conducted by teachers was considered as a corrupt act and officially banned, but the basic salary was unchanged, so teachers and their families faced economic hardship. As a result, teachers continued to do second jobs, including private tutoring and receiving bribes from students during the examinations until there was a crackdown on the latter. Doing so resulted in low morale and professionalism as well as reduced quality of teaching. It is argued that private tutoring should be acceptable, but involvement in other clearly corrupt acts should be banned. Hence, incentives involving intrinsic and extrinsic motivation should be provided. Increasing salaries should be the highest priority to motivate and ensure good quality in education.

I. Introduction

Cambodia is a developing country in Southeast Asia and is officially named as a post-conflict society still recovering from a civil war followed by the depredations of the Khmer Rouge period when most educators and other professionals were murdered (*e.g.* Beneveniste *et al.*, 2008). As a result, there has been shortages in terms of educational infrastructure, as well as human resources including qualified and experienced teachers.

Teachers have been recognized as the key individuals influencing the quality of education and students' achievement. In Cambodian education, secondary school teachers have faced several

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challenges such as poor quality of teaching, inadequate salary, downgrading professionalism, low policy implementation and insufficient daily basic needs. Despite these difficulties, the Royal Government of Cambodia aims to provide free basic education for all. If the implementation of educators does not match and align with the education policy, there will be slow improvement and reformation at best.

Therefore, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) has initiated many different approaches to restore the educational system through introducing laws and other measures for all educators and teachers to implement. As a result, MoEYS has developed a range of policies aimed at increasing continuous professional development, basic salaries and professional ethics for educators. Furthermore, they implemented the Education Law (2007) which aims to ensure effective teaching and school management and to provide free education for all.

There have been many debates on current issues regarding the education system in Cambodia, and the performance and accountability of teachers in response to the Education Law and other policy innovations. Teacher's morale and professionalism are central components in the development of these because teachers are highly respected by the public: many indicators in the Law relate to the need for teachers to adopt good practices.

This article reviews parts of the Education Law (2007) for secondary education, primarily concerning the role of professionalism and remuneration of teachers in improving its quality. Teachers are considered as problem-makers by the government in their efforts towards education improvement, but in reality it is proposed that they are the victims who need both mental and physical support. The following highlights some contradictions between statements of government policy and the educators' reality in its implementation. It is argued that the main issue leading to low quality of secondary education is not resulting from teachers' performances, but a lack of awareness and understanding of teachers' basic needs regarding salary and motivation.

Importantly, the study proposes solutions for policy makers to consider for changes, and it then makes recommendations for improvement. Thus, to ensure good quality of education, increasing salaries will not only motivate teachers to perform better but also attract more graduates to the teaching profession.

II. Efforts to Improve Secondary Education: The Ideals

The Royal Government of Cambodia has issued an array of policies and initiatives which aim to accomplish its goal of moving Cambodian teachers from pre-professional to autonomous professionals. In addition, the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport announced its plan to increase teacher basic salary and promote occupational security (Tan and Ng, 2012). However, there is a gap between policy rhetoric and actual reality in the reform of education, as is often the case elsewhere (Ng, 2008a). There are still pertinent issues such as low wages, which are inadequate to meet basic daily needs; as well as poor conditions in schools, teacher shortages and little involvement of the parents.

1. The 2007 Education Law

Article 31 states that everyone has the right to enrol in a public school for at least nine years for free. This requires that MoEYS must manage and plan policies and strategies to comply with this obligation.

For present purposes, one of the most important components is Article 37, which states that “teachers have the right to gain compensation in accordance with one’s professional capacity, dignity and social status”.

- This is consistent with the precept that teachers providing private tutoring are indulging in a practice which contradicts the professional standards of educators; therefore, it is advised that they should be punished with a fine and/or withdrawal of teaching license (Heyneman, 2011).

2. Minimising the Problem of Corruption

According to the National Strategic Development Plan 2006-2010, “Corrupt activities are the result of opportunity, behavior and risks. The higher the unsupervised discretion of an individual entrusted with performing duties while interacting with others, the higher the scope for corruption. Illegal and improper personal gain in cash, material or services, to either do one’s duty or provide favours out of turn, or wrongfully, at public expense, leaves corruption clandestine by nature. It is not clearly measurable but its deleterious effects pervade all government activities”.

Having seen that corruption is a barrier of education improvement, educators such as school

officers in charge, school principals and teachers particularly are banned from accepting money, material or other services from students for their personal benefit according to the 2007 Education Law.

III. Efforts to Improve Secondary Education: The Realities ‘On The Ground’

The basic monthly pay for teachers in their probationary first year is US\$30-60, depending on their qualifications, age and the number of shifts worked. Existing salary scales mean that those who have worked for 16 years are qualified to receive an increase of around 20% of the initial basic salary, and when their experience reaches 28 years, their salaries are increased by approximately 30% (Benveniste *et al.*, 2008).

1. Personal Economic Realities

Physical basic needs such as food and utilities are very important for all human beings (Maslow, 1954). Cambodian teachers have to be responsible for every expense; however, if their salaries are inadequate, they will have to deal with financial problems for their family. If their basic needs are not satisfied, it is hard for teachers to buy into a reform agenda by the government (Tan and Ng, 2012). Inadequate salaries in Cambodia are seen as the most important problem: 91% of responses taken from analysis of teachers’ current circumstances attest to this (Jago, 2008). Although the government has raised teacher’s basic salaries up to 280,000 riel (US\$60), teachers feel strongly that this is not sufficient to support basic daily living. There are increasing major expenses such as gasoline (1.23/litre), rice (0.91/kg), electricity (610 Riel/kWh), water supply, and children education (Education Partnership, 2008). In addition, the salary is not received regularly and no information is sent about it; moreover, when teachers go to enquire, the accountants treat them as if they are beggars.

2. What is Professionalism?

Another issue is the contradictory view between teachers and school directors. Following their supervisors, school directors are obliged to ensure effective policy implementation, so initiatives and creativity from teachers is rarely appreciated. This is a demotivating factor since the administrators mainly focus on Ministry guidelines rather than considering real teachers’ problems ‘on the ground’.

Most teachers are not clearly informed about short- and long-term plans, but they are blamed or

criticized for even petty mistakes made at work. To enhance professionalism, good leaders should be forward-looking and promote innovation by collaborating with individuals who genuinely strive for change, and not opt for inertia (Ng, 2008b). Thus, whilst teachers that they are underpaid and overworked, they have to comply with centralized learning standards, curriculum targets, and numerous testing regimes. Their performances are evaluated based on various discrete items on a checklist.

These intense pressures are supposed to make teachers and their colleagues re-evaluate their professionalism and decide what further professional training they need to undergo to perform better (Hargreaves, 2007). As a result, teachers are pressured by the school director and have no channel for any formal complaints. Consequently (see below), teachers project their frustrations on their students. Thus, their professionalism is tainted in public.

3. What Constitutes Corruption?

Until recently,² cheating was rampant during the national school-leaving exam (the Baccalaureate): invigilators (teachers) ignored students cheating if they received bribes. In some cases, teachers were asked to answer the exam questions of their particular subject. This perception of cheating during the exam is generally known as a 'rooted system' because students' parents provide their children with much money for bribe. The legal approach to corruption sees this as a breach of rules or the law, but so-called 'public good' or 'public opinion' approaches see the phenomenon as a breach of ethics (Karklins, 2005). Other dimensions of the rooted system include in relation to attendance in class: students are required to attend every session in mainstream classes, and if they do not come, the absences are counted. When students have too many absences, they will not be allowed to take semester exams or have to repeat class, but teachers may turn a blind eye to this given the right circumstances.

Corruption and nepotism being deeply systemic in the Cambodian context, these perspectives could influence teachers, and thus be a major cause of the overt lack of professionalism. A major issue for teachers is the allocation by upper management for selecting popular locations for teaching: teachers have to pay the officers in charge if they want to move to another post. In

² After his appointment as Minister for Education in 2013, Dr. Hang Chuon Naron introduced strict measures to control such practices: <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/high-stakes-grade-12-exams-kick>; <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/grade-12-exams-start-smoothly>

particular, those who prefer to work in private schools but want to keep their names in a state school have to give their basic salaries to the principal of the latter. Patrinos (2013) defined this situation as a moonlighting, which refers to the situation when they work elsewhere and not where they are assigned in the schedule.

This issue is compounded by evidence that school leaders also use private tutoring to support their sporadic enumeration, but part of the tutoring is called “flow to higher levels in the pyramid of political corruption” (Dawson, 2011).

The main factor which leads to downgrading of teachers’ professionalism in Cambodia is private tutoring. Such supplementary tutoring is widely called a ‘shadow education’ (Stevenson and Baker, 1992; Bray, 1999, 2009; Bray and Lykins, 2012; Buchman *et al.*, 2010; Brehm, 2015). On this particular issue, teachers do not enthusiastically teach their students in class, hiding some important points to only teach them during private tutoring. In doing so, teachers can attract more students to attend their class because the students have high expectations to be well prepared for and be confident with the exam. Generally, when there is a higher number of students attending their private tutoring, teachers will gain more income so that they are satisfied and happy. However, some students who cannot attend private tutoring will be noted and warned: if they cannot answer or solve the problems of the exercise during normal classes, they will be blamed and punished. Thus most teachers do not focus on key techniques in mainstream classes because they will have to repeat them again during private tutoring. At this point, it shows that teachers usually treat students unequally. As a consequence, most teachers do not fully follow the school curriculum and make it slow on purpose. As noted by Dawson (2009, 2011), the widespread so-called ‘trick of the teacher’ refers to the intentional slowing down of instruction in mainstream classes so that they can boost the income from their private tutoring students.

Thus the pressure to teach privately results in low teachers’ professionalism but also low educational quality because students do not learn to understand the real practice but only how to pass the exams. This represents a failure of the public educational system because the government does not provide enough pay to teachers, pushing teachers to conduct private tutoring and thus show moral weakness. School quality and teacher’s power can also influence the need for tutoring. The students-teacher ratio is not balanced due to too many students, and the curriculum requires teachers to have an overwhelming workload. With this system, students alternate between two

shifts with the same teacher in order to fully complete their education: one shift for regular classes, and the other for tutoring (Brehm *et al.*, 2012).

4. Conclusions

On the one hand, teachers are meant to be role models in society, in particular for students. Thus they should be able to pay attention to their teaching responsibilities, rather than worry about the need for second-income activities. However, if the teacher's living standards are poorer than the students, this undermines their social status in the society. Additionally, once teachers are engaged in an unprofessional job such as motorbike taxi driver, food seller at school or farmers, the value of their profession in the society is also undermined. More importantly, it is not easy for teachers to have different jobs simultaneously because a teaching career requires them to prepare lessons, tests and quizzes and also correct homework and exams outside formal classroom hours. They will not have enough time for these if they have a second job.

Where teachers resort to tutoring of their students outside formal class hours or to taking bribes in order to supplement their salaries, then all their students are not treated equally: low socio-economic status students have less opportunities to access the necessary education to better their families' prospects. In similar context to Cambodia, in various countries in Eastern Europe and in Mongolia, students are concerned that some teachers put pressure on them to take tutoring by favouring those who attended their private classes. Sometimes students are threatened with receiving lower marks unless they attend private tutoring (Silova *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, teacher's low pay plays important role to result in declining professional legitimacy of teachers (Silova *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, from private tutoring and corruption activity, teachers are considered to have moral and professionalism degradation, and as a result, teachers have become low education quality maker.

Hargreaves (2000) argued that teachers must value their professionalism and defend their entitlement to respect; instead, they have to deal with a discourse of derision, of blaming and shaming by politicians and the media because they have lost the public faith in their work. In this sense, having no option, teachers need to gain extra income through tutoring of students or by other means. Corruption is globally complex and cannot be investigated overtly because most of its transactions are done in secrecy (Alatas, 1968; Nowak, 1996). According to Kobakhidze (2014), teacher corruption is generally seen in different contexts, but it leads to declining professional

credibility of teachers, obstructs quality education, aggravate socio-economic inequality and damages public trust in the educational system.

Figure 1 provides a summary of the foregoing as a conceptual framework for the following sections.

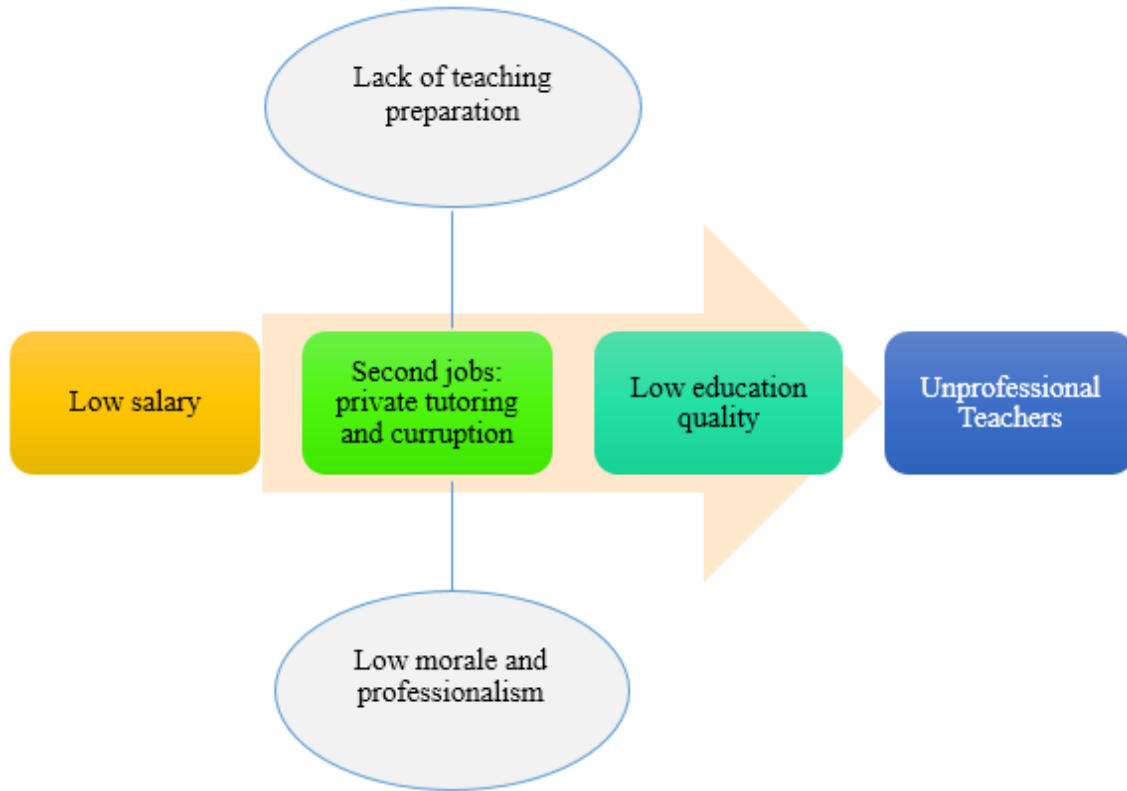


Figure 1 Conceptual framework for the negative impact of low salary on poor education quality.

IV. The Need for Teachers' Motivation

Emotions are the heart of teaching, and good teaching is charged with positive emotion (Hargreaves, 1998). It is certain that when one is hungry, he or she will change mood so that teaching will not be effective either. Emotional labor is vital component of teaching: the classroom can be either a boring or an unpleasant place if a teacher cannot manage it well, because it is a labor of love (Ben-peretz, 1996; Blackmore, 1996).

The need for positive emotions and the control of negative ones is seen when dealing with students who misbehave or perform poorly. Being influenced by the rooted education when students were taught by Buddhist monks in pagodas using the memorizing method (where those who could not

answer would be punished by hitting with a stick, kneeling down, standing on one leg and so on), most teachers cannot change their old perception of punishing students because they strongly believe that when students are scared, they will learn hard. Whilst parents often agree with the use of punishment, this is against current moral and professional standards, where patience is called for: although punishment may motivate the most talented students, it cannot deal with slow learners who are likely to drop out.

Since teachers currently have a low salary and are forced to do second jobs, increasing basic salary is the most effective factor: it enables them to deal with financial issues in their family with fewer worries. From the literature (see below), the main issue leading to low professionalism is not their private tutoring, which is considered as unprofessional matter, but the lack of monetary and psychological motivation from government support.

Motivation means to be moved to do something. A person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is characterized as unmotivated; however, someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated. Two types of factors driving motivation have been recognised: intrinsic and extrinsic.

Intrinsic factors are within the teachers themselves. According to Ryan and Stiller (1991), intrinsic motivation has emerged as significant phenomena for teaching practice and education achievement. However, they are strongly influenced (catalysed or undermined) by extrinsic ones. Kazeem (1999) noted that educators such as teachers and school administrators tend to be contented and reasonably motivated unless salaries are inadequate and they are not paid punctually, when this can undermine commitment to the job (Youlonfoun, 1992), especially if alternative sources of income are also needed to make up for erratic salary payments. Thus good salaries and prompt payment are significant motivating factors, as is the possibility of being promoted regularly.

In a Cambodian context, monetary motivation by increasing salary is an obvious extrinsic one, but others are also important. Thus teachers may find it hard to enthusiastically teach if there are too many students (teacher-student ratio 1:50),³ especially in a small classroom, with the demands from the heavier workload and the need to care for individual students. Hence, reducing the ratio

³ This is the average ratio for primary classes; that for lower secondary ones is 1:32 (Benveniste *et al.*, 2008).

and having larger classrooms might be a strong motivator for teachers to pay more attention to their work.

Another dimension is added through introjection, where unconscious internalisation of aspects of the external world (especially the behaviour and expectations of other people) influences a teacher's attitudes and performance. On the one hand, this includes following the instructions of superiors and the expectations of the law, in order to avoid guilt or anxiety and consequently reduced self-esteem (Nicholls, 1984; Ryan, 1982). On the other, exposure to negative factors such as corruption in schools and elsewhere offsets this taking of pride in one's work in the implementation of education policies, together with the practical need to generate supplementary income through private tutoring or other means to meet basic daily needs.

Thus there is no balance between policy implementation and the necessary basic salary, which has led to continued low education quality. Formulating and implementing education policy is a complex and contested process (Ball, 1990, 1994; Karlsson *et al.*, 2001), but a central component should be job satisfaction as an intrinsic motivating factor contingent upon appropriate external ones.

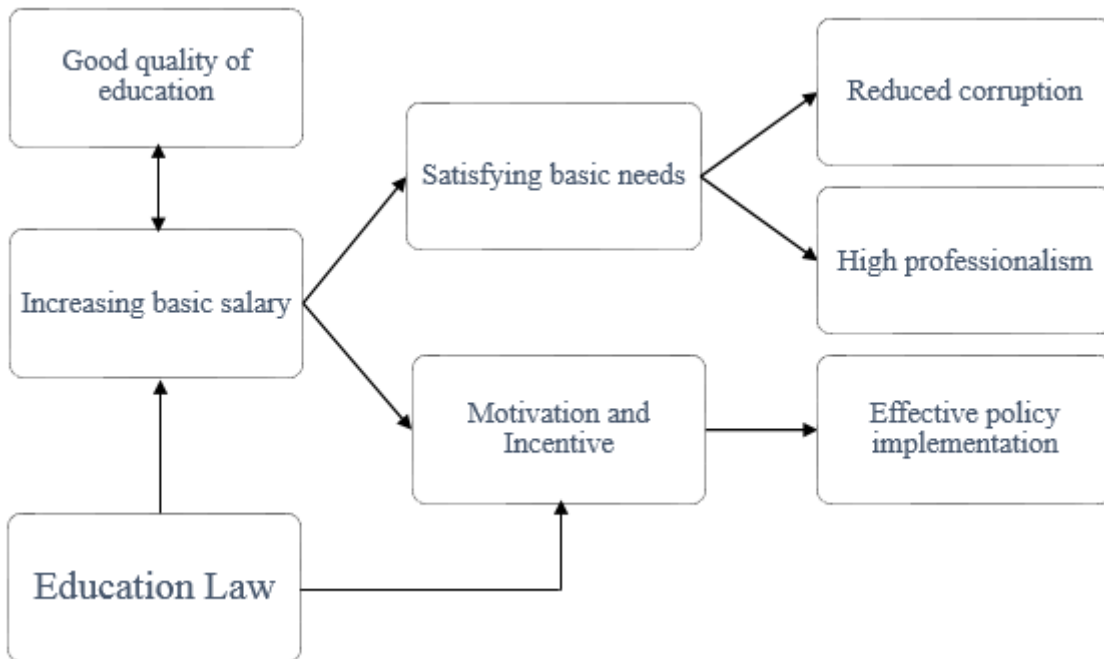


Figure 2 Implementation of Education Law and how to achieve a good quality of education.

V. Discussion

Figure 2 illustrates the ideal behind the development of the Education Law and its implementation, whereas Figure 1 summarises the current reality. Thus, whilst there has been a recent modest increase in teachers' salaries (15-20% of basic salary), many still have to resort to outside income in order to meet their basic needs: food, transport, healthcare, education expenses of their own children, socializing, *etc.* A knock-on consequence is that it is difficult to attract good, well-qualified teachers: the quality of education system depends on the quality of its teachers as well as their being sufficiently motivated.

Because monetary incentives highly impact teacher motivation and education quality, salary reform should be considered as critical for improving educational quality. Whilst, according to Herzberg (1959), motivational factors can be equated with the job itself and can be considered as the inner drive that causes individuals to achieve personal and organizational goals such as recognition, success, and personal growth, this argument can be adopted in developed countries where most teachers are already satisfied with their pay. Even so, bonuses and other financial and other incentives may also be important. Considering Singapore as an example, their government provides bonuses and promotion based on merit to motivate and retain teachers through an evaluation process called the Enhanced Performance Management System. Outstanding performers receive a 10-30% annual bonus, and promotions along with salary increases are provided to those who have a great progress in competence (Sclafani, 2008; see also Ng, 2008b). Unlike Cambodia, the Singapore government has a very good strategic plan in its human resources policies and economy because they adopt four significant areas in the system of education as follows:

1. high standards for recruiting teachers and administrators with deep support throughout their careers;
2. clear career management from preparation to retirement;
3. strong sense of professionalism among teachers; and
4. strategic use of financial resources to attract and retain excellent teachers.

Typically in Singapore schools, teachers are highly paid to encounter academic difficulties, teaching and planning periods for assisting unsuccessful students, so this is the key that makes the

Singapore system so coherent (Sclafani, 2008). Hence teaching remains a desirable respected profession in Singapore.

On the other hand, economic constraints limit the scope for such measures in Cambodia. Even doubling the present teachers' salaries would still mean a mismatch with their basic needs.

Thus it is proposed here that, although it is considered unprofessional and an example of corruption which is inequitable for students from poor families (thus being 'regressive': Beneveniste *et al.*, 2008), allowing teachers to supplement their incomes by private tutoring may be one of the only viable options under the circumstances. Bray (2013) has argued that "it is better to prevent teachers from tutoring students to avoid corruption cases, but if [the practice] is already rooted in the system, then public campaigns against corruption may be a good idea to mobilize the public attention." He also acknowledged that the prohibiting teachers from tutoring in developing countries with poor salary might not be an effective strategy. Similarly, a study on teacher corruption in developing countries by Biswal (2011) found that there were two reasons for teachers-supplied tutoring: low salaries from government schools and a weak accountability and monitoring system.

Thus, whilst it is biased against poorer students, such tutoring means that teachers have an opportunity to help at least some students in a real practice which is important to educational and career advancement, so that they are more confident to take the national exam because they attend the private tutoring so that this motivates students to learn and teachers to work harder. As discussed, teachers are more motivated when they are able to fulfil their basic needs through increasing their income on top of their salary. However such tolerance cannot be extended to other forms of bribery in the rooted system: faking students' attendance records and helping them to cheat during state exams, other unethical and unprofessional acts in Education Law enforcement.

Regarding the importance of positive emotions and the risk of negative ones in teachers with money worries and low morale, there is the problem the latter might be unprofessional and hit or use bad words with bad students. As a result, such actions cause students to demotivate in learning. Corporal punishment is banned in both public and private schools: Article 35 of the Education Law 2007 states that "[t]he learner's rights concerning education are: the right to be respected and paid attention on human rights, especially the right to dignity, the right to be free from any form of torture or from physical and mental punishment." This Article also confirmed that "physical

punishments such as hitting, kneeling down, standing under the sun as well as mental punishments such as imposing copying of lessons that is impossible to achieve and making students feel bad and humiliated” were prohibited in all educational institutions throughout the nation.

VI. Implications and Conclusions

All in all, from the literature, there is a mismatch between education policy implementation and teachers' current issues in Cambodian public schools. In fact, the government policy wants to improve the secondary education by changing the teaching body from pre-professional to autonomous professional (Hargreaves, 2000), aiming to ensure good quality of education through the introduction and implementation of the 2007 Education Law.

The literature indicates the reality of teachers' issues which force them to try to balance enforcing the education policy with fulfilling the basic needs of their families. The basic salary and the recent 20% increase is not an adequate strategy for education improvement, so teachers are forced to do second jobs, particularly private tutoring, to resolve financial issues. There is a big gap between the salary offered by the government and the expenses in daily life; however, the government policy puts much pressure on teachers without considering the unequal balance between pay and needs.

It is proposed to continue to accept private tutoring as significant support to assist teachers' basic needs; and that the government needs to shorten the gaps between the policy implementation and the reality of teachers' situation. This should be by teacher motivation strategies rather than strict law enforcement, which would reduce pressures on teachers but gain more accountability from policy makers to make some revisions on education policy.

In terms of payment issues, it is recommended that the officers in charge of pay rolls should regularly process the payment so that it is not late. If the government cannot at least double the basic salary, some allowances and incentives should be provided such as salary scales, sick leave and providing annual rewards with monetary incentives and promotion as effective motivating factors.

- There should be good relationship between school directors and teachers to ensure collaborative working environment so that teachers are given opportunity to share ideas. This is the motivational force for both teachers and school directors.

- To reduce corruption, teachers assigned to work in remote areas should be offered more support such as accommodation, free access to health care and transportation because the living conditions can be unsatisfactory and far away from home and their family.

It is concluded that the morale and professionalism of teacher's secondary education can occur if teachers are able to deal with daily basic needs with their basic salary. Thus, when they have adequate salary, professionalism will be promoted, resulting in lower corruption and better quality in education. Hence, this will close the gap between government policy and real implementation, and these benefits will greater contribute to a more success in Cambodian education.

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