

Drivers of Dropout Rates Among Boys in Rural Cambodia

Exploring Factors Contributing to Low Secondary School Attendance

The
Gender
Equity
Initiative



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Intern report, June 2024



Acknowledgement of Country

The University of Melbourne acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live: the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples (Burnley, Fishermans Bend, Parkville, Southbank and Werribee campuses), the Yorta Yorta Nation (Dookie and Shepparton campuses), and the Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus).

The University also acknowledges and is grateful to the Traditional Owners, Elders and Knowledge Holders of all Indigenous nations and clans who have been instrumental in our reconciliation journey.

We recognise the unique place held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent, with histories of continuous connection dating back more than 60,000 years. We also acknowledge their enduring cultural practices of caring for Country.

We pay respect to Elders past, present and future, and acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledge in the Academy. As a community of researchers, teachers, professional staff and students we are privileged to work and learn every day with Indigenous colleagues and partners.

Acknowledgements

This report was written as part of The Gender Equity Initiative 2024 Internship Program.

The Gender Equity Initiative hosts talented University of Melbourne Master's student interns who lead projects across a range of gender equity issues. The interns produce reports covering pressing and timely topics in this area.

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Executive Summary

This research project seeks to explore the root causes of the current high trend of boys dropping out of secondary schools in rural Cambodia. Examining the factors contributing to boys' falling out of school is crucial, and the findings of this research will help the Cambodian government understand the issue and adopt policies to address this social problem accordingly. This research primarily relies on secondary data from journal articles, news reports, books, blog posts, and NGO reports about boys' dropouts in rural secondary schools in Cambodia. The findings indicate that socio-economic, socio-cultural, and psychosocial factors mainly cause the issue. The recommendation of this research for the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) is to provide financial, social, and psychosocial support to students at risk of dropout. The report will start by examining Cambodia's context and its education system. Then, it will provide a literature review of how socio-economic, socio-cultural, and psychosocial factors cause the dropout rate of boys in rural secondary schools. Finally, the report focuses on recommendations for stakeholders such as MoEYS to address the issue.

1. Introduction

Research Questions: How do socio-economic, socio-cultural, and psychosocial factors contribute to the dropout rate of boys in rural secondary schools in Cambodia?

Methodology: This is a desktop research project based on secondary data such as journal articles, news reports, books, blog posts, and NGO reports

1.1 Historical Context of Education

According to the World Bank, Cambodia had a population of 16,767,842 in 2022 (The World Bank, 2024a), with 32% under 24, indicating a significant youth demographic (United Nations Cambodia, 2021). The education system is crucial for a country with a large youth population since it is the primary sector for human resource development. Education plays a pivotal role by equipping individuals with knowledge, skills, and the ability to think critically for young people in developing countries and can foster involvement in community and national matters, thereby aiding in societal progress (TrainSmart Australia, 2024).

Education serves as the fundamental cornerstone of any society, so investing in education is the most effective strategy for countries to create prosperous, healthy, and equitable communities (United Nations, n.d.). The Cambodian education system is still in recovery after the Khmer Rouge Regime (1975-1979). This regime caused mass violence, execution and starvation, leading to approximately 1.5 to 3 million people being killed (University of Minnesota, 2024). Scholars, including their family members, were one of the significant groups targeted by the Khmer Rouge. Most highly educated people, such as doctors and teachers, were killed. Approximately 75%–80% of the nation's educators and university students had either perished or left the country (Collins, 2009, p. 192, as cited by McNamara & Hayden, 2022). As a result, after the Khmer Rouge era ended, the country barely had any scholars left, and the education system needed to be rebuilt from scratch. The revitalisation of the education system did not commence until the establishment of a national government in 1993 (McNamara & Hayden, 2022).

1.2 Contemporary Education

On top of rebuilding the education system, many Cambodian families face many challenges when sending their kids to school. They face poverty and need to consider whether to send their children to school or have them work to earn money to support the family. Although there is a high enrolment in primary schools, there is also a high dropout rate, especially in secondary schools in rural Cambodia. Students from marginalised backgrounds encounter challenges in fulfilling their potential as they encounter obstacles in accessing and remaining in school (UNICEF, n.d.).

There is a higher trend of boys dropping out of school, especially in rural Cambodia. According to Hamilton and Jhaj (2020), during the 2018-2019 academic year in secondary schools, boys had a dropout rate averaging 17.5%, almost three percentage points higher than that of girls. It is a concerning trend, and further studies are needed to identify the causes of the current high dropout rate among boys. Although boys have the highest dropout rate, there is still a lack of initiative to focus on boys' education. Cambodia's National Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan in Education,

launched in 2016, features several interventions aimed at supporting girls, yet non-specifically directed toward boys; the document mentions “girls” 101 times while “boys” appear only twice (Thomson, 2018, p.1).

Exploring the root cause of boys’ dropout in rural secondary schools is crucial since education should be promoted and accessible for all genders. By staying in schools, children can unleash their potential, end the poverty cycle, and contribute to the country’s development. Education is not just a right but a gateway to human development, unlocking doors and broadening opportunities and freedoms (United Nations, n.d.). The nation’s development strategy highlights its youthful, dynamic, and mobile population as a critical driver of sustainable development and economic progress (UNICEF, n.d.). According to Davis, a social research consultant as cited by Thomson (2018), “Funding for programs needs to avoid gender assumptions like women are fragile, and men are invulnerable and don’t need protection. If males are dropping out of school, [that will] also harm females.” (p.1).

2. Literature Review: Exploring Factors Contributing to Dropout Rates of Boys in Cambodia

In 2019, the per capita gross domestic was only US\$4583 for Cambodia, significantly lagging behind its neighbouring countries: Laos (US\$8172), Vietnam (US\$8397), and Thailand (US\$19,276) (WB, 2021 as cited by McNamara & Hayden, 2022). After attaining a middle-income status in 2015, Cambodia set its sights on elevating to an upper middle-income economy by 2030, with the aspiration to ultimately evolve into a higher-income economy by 2050 (The World Bank, 2024b). The anticipated economic growth for 2024 is expected to experience a slight improvement, reaching 5.8%, and this growth is primarily attributed to the resurgence of service and goods exports (The World Bank, 2024b).

During the ten years leading up to COVID-19, poverty rates steadily dropped by 1.6 percentage points each year, primarily because of substantial increases in earnings, especially from wages (The World Bank, 2024b). Nevertheless, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic led to surges in unemployment and poverty rates (The World Bank, 2024b). Approximately 13% of the population is impacted by poverty (World Bank, 2021, as cited by McNamara & Hayden, 2022).

2.1. Socio-Economic Factors

a. Low-Income Families

A study by UNICEF in 2020 shows that the main reason why students drop out is because they cannot afford school. Parents need to support their children’s school expenses, such as transportation, materials, and food. According to Yim (2022), one student noted, “My parents told me to quit school and I just followed them, they told me that they could not support my study anymore,” (p. 1). This resonates with the economic burden leading to students’ dropout. Around 52% of young people in Cambodia surveyed indicated that poverty and the necessity of work were the primary reasons for not attending lower secondary school (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020).

In 2019, around 17.8% of the population was under the poverty line (Asian Development Bank, 2024). Poverty is one of the main challenging factors for accessing education in Cambodia, especially in rural areas. With 85% of Cambodia's population residing in rural areas, most respondents reported engaging in secondary occupations such as farming or running small businesses (De Guzman, 2007). This pattern underscores the seasonal nature of employment in Cambodia and the generally modest incomes earned by its residents (De Guzman, 2007). People in rural areas work in low-skilled jobs as farmers or factory workers. These jobs provide low income, and the family must focus on their basic needs and their children's need to contribute financially to support the family.

Generating Additional Income for their Parents

Families in rural areas typically have lower incomes, so they expect their children to help earn money to support the family. In Cambodian traditional family structures, there is an expectation for children to actively contribute to the household (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). Commonly, children discontinue their education in secondary school to assist their families in generating additional income to meet their financial needs (Yim, 2022). Children not attending school participate in various activities to supplement their family's income, such as farming, employment in garment factories, involvement in sales, and household chores (De Guzman, 2007).

Data indicate that many children discontinue their education between grades 6 and 9, often seeking employment opportunities to contribute to the family's financial stability (De Guzman, 2007). Gender roles and social expectations contribute to the causes of students' dropout. Boys commonly leave school to assist their parents on the family farm or to participate in income-generating activities, while girls often discontinue their education to help with household chores, childcare responsibilities, and employment in a nearby community (De Guzman, 2007).

Parents must address their basic needs, which is more immediate than keeping their children in school. Families facing financial hardship considered whether the long-term advantages of sending their children to school were more significant than their current pressing issues (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). Moreover, some parents expressed a desire for their children to attend school, but their efforts were hindered as they were preoccupied with earning income to provide for their families, leaving little time to support their children's studies at home (Yim, 2022).

The MoEYS's minister attributed the main reasons for the issue to poverty and parents migrating to Thailand for employment opportunities (Evans, 2019). By seeking employment to support their families, boys lose their chance to stay in school. Poverty served as the fundamental condition in the lives of these adolescents, often exacerbating other obstacles that hindered their ability to complete lower secondary school (McNamara & Hayden, 2022). Children are profoundly impacted by poverty in Cambodia, with over 10% deprived of educational opportunities, and roughly 44.8% (1.52 million) of those aged 5-14 engaging in economic activities (Brockner, 2021). For children aged 5 to 14, more than 18% are involved in child labour, with 79.2% lacking access to education (Helpcode, n.d.).

The issue of poverty and school dropout is even worse in ethnic minorities in Cambodia. Ethnic minorities are among the poorest and most marginalised populations in Cambodia. Many members of these communities have limited or no proficiency in Khmer, the national language used in the educational curriculum; this language barrier contributes to low enrolment and retention rates for

ethnic minority students in Ratanak Kiri and Mondul Kiri (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018; OpenDevelopment Cambodia, 2023). In 2009, almost 47% of boys and girls aged 12 to 14 years from ethnic minorities were not enrolled in school, a notable difference from the national average of 11%, indicating how young Indigenous ethnic minority individuals face numerous economic, logistical, and cultural obstacles when striving to stay in school (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020).

b. Migration

Many boys drop out of secondary school to migrate to work in neighbouring countries like Thailand. Some children drop out of school to migrate to other parts of the country for better employment opportunities. Typically, migrant children tend to be older, and they depart from their homes for various reasons, predominantly driven by economic factors (De Guzman, 2007). For instance, a farmer from Banteay Meanchey revealed that three of her children left school between grades 6 and 9 because they opted to seek employment in Thailand to contribute to the family's financial needs (Evans, 2019).

The highest dropout rates occur in provinces neighbouring Thailand. A Cambodian official recently disclosed that approximately 23% of children residing in three provinces bordering Thailand have ceased attending school (Evans, 2019). In a conference in 2019, the MoEYS minister highlighted the concerns about student dropout in Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, and Oddor Meanchey provinces, where the dropout rates in these provinces were notably higher compared to other regions, reaching between 18% to 19% (Evans, 2019).

2.2 Socio-Cultural Factors

a. Informal Private Tutoring

Although the national education curriculum states that education is free for all, informal fees and private tutoring are standard practices in Cambodia's education settings. Parents consented to cover all necessary expenses associated with their children's schooling, including uniform food and transportation; however, they were reluctant to pay additional school-related costs such as registration fees, teacher fees, private tutoring, handouts, and exam materials (UNDP, 2015). Fees for private tutoring typically involve payments to teachers in exchange for tutoring sessions arranged by the school or the class teacher to supplement regular classroom instruction (UNDP, 2014). Teachers earn low salaries and find extra ways to make money. Criticism has been directed towards Cambodia's public education system due to the imposition of various informal fees on students by teachers; these fees are often levied to compensate for the teachers' notoriously low wages (Millar, 2018). Inadequate teacher training and low salaries lead to substandard teaching quality, a significant obstacle to achieving quality education (Yim, 2022).

Legal and illegal payments have become more prevalent at secondary schools, where parents and students spend money on various types of private tutoring while covering other informal fees (UNDP, 2015). School expenses and informal tutoring fees increase by 75% with the transition from primary to secondary school (De Guzman, 2007). Students in secondary school (grades 7-9) are pressured to take private classes to prepare for their exams, which adds economic stress for students from low-income families since they cannot afford it; parents and students spend 72% on private tutoring fees, 14% on daily teacher fees, 10% on lesson handouts, and 4% on exam papers (De

Guzman, 2007). 45% of parents financed tutoring outside of regular class hours, while 34% funded tutoring sessions during school vacations, highlighting an issue of unequal access to services essential for basic education (UNDP, 2015).

Consequences for Those Who Cannot Afford

There are negative consequences for students who do not pay for extra fees and private tutoring. Poor attention from teachers and the need to pay additional fees are seen as some of the main challenges to student access to education (UNICEF, n.d.). Students who do not take private classes face negative repercussions from their teachers. Those who cannot afford extra tutoring can face punishment, negligence, and coercion from their teachers (De Guzman, 2007). For example, if students do not take private classes, they will not do well in the exams, or sometimes they are mistreated or not cared for by some teachers (Yim, 2022).

Moreover, students who do not attend private classes often miss crucial components of the state curriculum, putting them at risk of falling behind their peers; private lessons usually prioritise exam preparation, so students unable to afford them typically perform poorly on exams and may be required to repeat the class (De Guzman, 2007). These are some negative impacts of private tutoring for students who cannot afford it, which could potentially push students out of school. With an economic burden and unfair treatment from teachers, some students need to drop out of school. Guzman (2007) claims that 63% of students said that financial constraints pushed them to drop out of school; those expenses included informal tutoring fees and daily school expenses.

Education Inequality

Paying informal fees in various forms is a financial strain, especially for families with low or middle income and many children (UNDP, 2015). These formal and informal fees add a substantial economic burden for students and their parents. Many Cambodian families need to deal with basic needs and cannot afford to pay informal fees for teachers (UNICEF, n.d.). The informal tutoring fee is beyond the means of many, particularly for families of disadvantaged groups such as the disabled and other vulnerable children (Millar, 2018). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds who cannot afford additional tutoring face coercion and punishment; ultimately, if their parents cannot afford these extra classes, these students may experience academic failure and are at risk of dropping out of school prematurely (De Guzman, 2007).

Hence, private tutoring promotes education inequality because it is probable that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds have easier access to education compared to those from lower ones (UNDP, 2015). Private tutoring arranged by the school may offer immediate educational advantages to students and serve as a supplementary income source for teachers. However, it does not address underlying issues related to the curriculum, teacher proficiency, or instructional quality (De Guzman, 2007). Children encountered difficulties in school, either due to inadequate attention from teachers or because they were economically disadvantaged and unable to afford additional educational support classes (Yim, 2022). Private tutoring fees affect education quality and negatively affect education access (UNDP, 2015). Informal fee payments are likely contributing to school dropout and other issues such as lack of motivation among impoverished parents and students, potential

discrimination against those unable to pay, and the necessity for children to enter the labour market early (UNDP, 2015).

b. Gender Norms

Boys need to quit school to help earn money for their families. In Cambodia, traditional gender roles contribute to distinct experiences of economic pressure, with boys often expected to engage in employment outside the household at a younger age compared to girls (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). In addition, in every community, parents, teachers, and local leaders frequently believe that teenage boys should engage in employment, emphasising their future responsibility as providers and integrating the necessity of work into their anticipated role as primary earners (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020).

With low earnings, children are expected to contribute to the family's income. Based on Cambodian gender norms, men are the family's breadwinners, so boys are likelier to quit school to earn money to contribute to the family's financial needs (Thomson, 2018). Young men expressed adherence to traditional gender roles both within their families and in their work environment, which entailed facing heightened expectations to leave school prematurely in favour of employment, typically in construction or factory jobs, as a means to generate income (Scandurra et al., 2017).

For instance, a school director observed that within Cambodian culture, when families face financial difficulties and have both a son and a daughter, they tend to prioritise sending the son to work (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). According to Davis, a social research consultant, as cited by Thomson (2018), "It's assumed that boys will be able to make more money, so there is a lot of pressure from families pushing them into work sooner and [so they're] not finishing school," (p.1).

Moreover, there are more job opportunities for adolescent boys than girls. Boys in lower secondary school had access to higher-paying and more abundant job prospects across all areas; manual labour, such as forestry, construction, or specific farming duties, which demanded physical strength, was typically viewed as tasks suited for boys (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). As Cambodian boys transition into young adulthood, they commonly encounter pressure to meet traditional economic expectations associated with manhood, prompting some to abandon their education prematurely (Scandurra et al., 2017).

Rural young men encounter pressure to conform to traditional family roles, often leading them to abandon their education to provide financial support to the family, and social pressures to migrate in Cambodia are gendered, with young men facing higher expectations to relocate in pursuit of better life opportunities compared to young women (Bylander & Hamilton, 2015). This gender norm leads to a higher dropout of boys than girls. Across the nation, statistics reveal that girls complete lower secondary school nearly 20% more often than boys (Thomson, 2018). In 2021, 19% of boys in lower secondary school dropped compared to 16.9% of girls (Ngay, 2022).

2.3 Psychosocial Factors

a. Mentorship

Students in Cambodia often lack a mentor or role model in their family or community. They do not see any successful example of staying in school, succeeding in their study and having a

promising career; they lack any idea about career opportunities or academic options beyond their current community (Lim & O’Keefe, 2019). Without mentors or community role models who have experienced the benefits of investing in education, students cannot comprehend the potential economic advantages of education, and the practical timeline needed to attain those benefits becomes challenging (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020).

The aspirations of students and their families to invest in education were shaped by the opportunities available. Students with restricted knowledge about potential career paths are uncertain about the benefits of investing in education and often lack a clear understanding of the nature of various professions or the routes to pursue them (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). For instance, many young people in rural Cambodia often harbour limited career aspirations, which unfortunately hinder the realisation of their full potential (Lim & O’Keefe, 2019). Education is considered an investment for many people in Cambodia. When families do not anticipate significant returns from investing in education or find the costs too burdensome, they may discontinue such investments and prioritise sending their children to immediate job opportunities (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). The impact of the Khmer Rouge Regime on the education sector still exists in the education system today; rural students have limited access to career guidance, which hinders them from pursuing their interests (Schupp, 2021).

b. Impact of Drug Abuse on Boys’ Education

Cambodia has emerged as a significant transit country for drug trafficking, with a considerable rise in the prevalence of illicit drug use; some Cambodians have fallen prey to the human trafficking epidemic prevalent in the region (UNODC, n.d.). Local community members expressed particular concern regarding the impact of drug use on adolescent boys’ school completion within their villages and neighbourhoods, underscoring the damaging influence of negative peer pressure associated with drug abuse (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020).

A research study discovered that within the past year, 44% of adolescents, with 26.6% being girls and 61% being boys, have experimented with drugs (UNICEF, n.d.a). Parents, teachers, and local leaders tended to perceive drugs as a more significant issue associated with boys (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). Some students skipped class to meet their drug-addicted friends, which affected their academic performance, and some dropped out of school (Nhoek, 2022). Parents, teachers, and authorities highlighted peer pressure as a leading cause of adolescent boys initiating drug use; they observed potential conflicts between teachers and teenage boys involved in drug use (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). Another parent expressed that she would prioritise sending her daughter if she had to choose between sending her son or daughter to school since if her son attended school, he would have more opportunities to engage in drug-related activities (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020).

The Drug Treatment Agency receives admissions from individuals aged between 17 and 40, with over 20 new patients seeking treatment monthly; currently, close to 300 individuals are undergoing treatment at this facility, with around 30% of them being students or individuals who have dropped out of school (Nhoek, 2022). Drug use resulted in prolonged absences from home for months or years, with a complete disengagement from school (Nhoek, 2022).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, although the Cambodian government has tried rebuilding education in Cambodia, much work must be done. Many students in rural areas still experience challenges accessing education in Cambodia. Current data reveals that boys in secondary school are the leading group experiencing dropout. It is a concerning issue and could potentially affect human resource development and create more social costs for the government in the long run. Some of the major contributing factors to boys' dropout include low family income, informal tutoring fees, gender norms, drug abuse, lack of mentorship and career guidance. These factors have pushed students out of schools, mainly boys, and prevented them from unleashing their full potential. Intervention programs and designed policies are crucial to address this pressing problem. More support from MoEYS, such as stipends, scholarships, mentoring and career path guidance, and training of teachers, parents and community leaders, is needed to address this issue. Future research should focus on the contributing factors for students from ethnic community dropouts since it requires a deep understanding of the issue and explicit policies to address the problem.

5. Recommendations

1. Focus on the Learning Outcome instead of Exams

- We recommend that MoEYS focus more on a student-centred approach by creating a policy focusing on learning and practice rather than test scores. It is crucial to ensure that assessments, activities, and materials have explicit and measurable learning objectives and remove unnecessary exams, allowing learners and teachers to concentrate on what truly matters (Schroeder, 2020). It will also reduce the stress and anxiety of students and the workload for teachers.
- Most current practices in Cambodian classes utilise a teacher-centred approach, where teachers do most of the talking and explaining with little interaction with students. This approach should be changed to a student-centred approach, which focuses more on allowing students to express their ideas, practices, experiments, and reflections on their learning. The students-centred approach views students as creators of work, problem solvers, reflective learners and globally connected collaborators, changing the teacher's role to that of a guide and mentor (Coutts, 2019).
- Classes should focus on learning and reflection rather than a means to pass exams. MoEYS should not use exams as the only way to measure students' achievement. Student achievement measurement should be more holistic and focus on their learning journey. The requirement for university enrolment should not be solely based on the score as the criteria for enrolment. The measurement should be holistic, based not only on the test score but also on observing students' essential skills, such as critical thinking and life skills. Some knowledge can be assessed through exams, but traditional exams cannot effectively measure skills such as critical thinking and other 21st-century competencies, said Naron, MoEYS' minister (Som, 2024).

2. Provide school dropout intervention and economic support programs for students at risk of dropout

- We recommend that MoEYS implement the dropout intervention program nationwide and include more gender parity to ensure students at risk of dropout get the support they need. The School Dropout Prevention Pilot Project funded by USAID in 2014 has shown significant success in increasing student attendance, student and teacher engagement, and reducing dropout (Kampuchea Action to Promote Education, n.d.). Moreover, economic support programs such as stipends or scholarships would help support low-income students. A subsidy to cover school expenses should be provided for those in need. Previous dropout intervention program by USAID indicates that financial intervention provided 92% of positive outcomes for students' dropout reduction (Kosal et al., 2015).
- We recommend that MoEYS create a program that provide funding for teachers to follow up on students who already dropped out to encourage them to return to school. This funding can help teachers have home visits or phone calls to check in with students, understand their circumstances, and encourage them to return to school. Schools and external organisations have successfully funded this project, and it has shown significant success (Hamilton & Jhad, 2020). MoEYS should pilot this kind of project and scale up nationwide.
- We recommend that the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) allocate a sufficient yearly legislation budget for the education sector. The annual legislation budget for MoEYS was low despite the low academic performance and high dropout among students (Yim, 2022a). In 2021, the RGC spent 1.7% of GDP on education expenditure (The World Bank, 2024c). This amount is not sufficient for an investment in quality of education. We recommend that RGC provide at least 5% to 6% of public spending on education. With enough budget provided by RGC, MoEYS can have adequate funding to support education initiatives that can reduce the school dropout rate and improve human resource development.

3. Mentorship and Career Program

- We recommended that MoEYS create a professional pathway program involving students' mentorship. Mentors can be those who succeed with their studies and careers to guide secondary or high school students. Hence, it helps students have a role model and better ideas about opportunities available after graduation. Adult mentors can assist teenagers in comprehending the range of career opportunities awaiting them post-education and gaining insight into the necessary pathways to pursue their aspirations (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020). The mentor can provide study techniques and how to set goals with their future career aspiration. The mentoring program can support students with their studies, plan their careers, and stay in school.
- We recommend that MoEYS create a career program for students in rural areas. The program should run at least twice a year so that students can have more opportunities to join the career program and learn from it. Career programs are crucial for students to understand job opportunities and career availability. This program should highlight different available careers and allow students to talk to professionals working in those sectors to gain industry insights. It should also highlight different steps for students to reach that desired profession. Career opportunities can inspire students and help them recognise opportunities outside their community, allowing them to make realistic steps and plans to achieve their professional goals. Broadening students' perspectives on the potential of education and

offering chances to integrate academic learning with practical skills can elevate their ambition (Hamilton & Jhaj, 2020).

4. Provide Professional Development and Increase Salary for Teachers

- Teachers should be provided professional development opportunities by MoEYS to improve their teaching skills and capability. Besides, they should be trained on ethical standards and treating students fairly, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The average teacher in secondary school earns \$400 monthly; the minimum monthly teacher's salary should be increased to at least \$500 to \$800 to ensure they can support their living expenses and improve the quality of education (Meas & Rov, 2024). Moreover, students should be able to report misconduct by their teachers who mistreat them because they cannot afford private tutoring, and punishment for teachers should be applied.

5. Training on Drug Abuse Prevention

- MoEYS should establish a LifeSkills Training (LST) program, a universal, classroom-based prevention focused on imparting skills for resisting drugs and essential social skills for secondary school students (Rural Health Information Hub, 2024). This drug prevention program should involve parents and community leaders to ensure that they get enough knowledge and skills to intervene in drug abuse. LST has significantly reduced illicit drug use prevalence (Rural Health Information Hub, 2024).
- Another critical point is to stop drug trafficking into Cambodia, which is to address the issue at its root cause. RGC should enforce strong regulations to end drug trafficking into Cambodia from neighbouring countries. Also, heavy punishment should be applied to those who trade the drug, especially the main drug dealers. Law enforcement should not criminalise drug abusers are not offenders; they are victims who fall under the trap of the drug trafficking issue.

6. Involving Parents and Community Leaders in Dropout Interventions

- We recommend that MoEYS involve parents in dropout intervention. They should be trained in dropout intervention programs. Incentives should be provided for their participation in the intervention program. Community Leaders can help implement government policies related to education and school dropouts since they are community experts and have close connections with students and their parents. They also need to help keep track of the number of students who are out and help them get back in school. Studies have shown that the involvement of parents and the community in school dropout programs can significantly reduce the dropout rate and improve students' performance (National Dropout Centre, 2022).
- Moreover, parents need to be involved and provided training to understand the importance of education as part of the dropout prevention program. With their limited understanding, commitment, and passion for the value of education, parents attempt to compel their children to drop out of school to provide financial support for their families (Millar, 2018). Parents should be trained by education advocates about dropout intervention skills and how they can support their children with their studies. Their knowledge from the training should

be assessed to understand progress and what support they need. Studies have indicated how training parents about the importance of education can significantly contribute to the positive on students achievement and reduction of dropout rate (National Dropout Centre, 2022).

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