Parents' Perceptions toward Private Primary Schooling

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Abstract

In the new Education 2030 agenda of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, inclusive and quality assurance in education is the primary concern and the unfinished agenda of the Education for All (EFA) goals 2015. This remains the top priority agenda of most developing countries, their Governments and their Ministries of Education.

Various studies reveal that low quality of teaching performance was reflected in the quality of results of students’ learning performance, though the learners themselves are the key factors. In addition, the lower quality of teaching performance was related to school working conditions, poor administrative management, and overwhelming administrative workloads performed by teaching staff in addition to core teaching responsibilities. Low teacher status and living conditions are also significant factors that contribute to the low quality of teaching services.

Globalization and the open free-market economy has led to rapid growth in private investment in education at various levels, including the primary education level, which from day to day attracts more and more enrolments of primary school-age children. This research finds that parents value and pay high attention to the quality of teachers and teaching instruction, school administrative management, sufficient and appropriate teaching/learning materials, and learning achievements of students.

Recommendations focus on three potential points for further consideration and improvement at both public and private schools: (i) The need for updated and responsive school syllabi, with quality of instruction services, (ii) School discipline to complement the growing environment of global citizenship, and (iii) Better and close communication and relationships between parents and schools.
I. Introduction

In the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for Education 2030 of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, “inclusive”, “quality education” and “lifelong learning” are the primary concerns. These key factors aim to accomplish the unfinished agenda of the Education for All (EFA) goals and towards education 2030.

Quality education involves quality of the school learning environment, including quality of teachers, relevance of curriculum and learning materials, and quality of the school principal. There are other relevant factors, however, including quality of teacher and teaching performance. These seem to be the key priorities leading to quality education. Teachers are one of the key players (actors and stakeholders) in ensuring quality of education as they are the primary people who have direct interaction with students in classrooms. Without good teachers, other resources in education are of limited value. Obviously, the quality of the teaching force is not only dependent on teacher qualifications, pedagogical skills, background, knowledge and teaching skills, etc. but also the teacher’s will, motivation, interest, conscience, enthusiasm, dedication and commitment to teaching so that the quality of learning can be improved and sustained (World Bank, 2005).

The Global Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda states the essentials for supporting teachers’ effectiveness by focusing on four key elements, i.e. good conditions of employment, good conditions in the work environment, high-quality pre-and in-service training for teachers, and effective management.

However, in the context of developing countries, the comparatively low amount of money allocated to education budgets does not adequately cover teachers’ basic needs (Paul and Michale, 2005). The limited payoffs are low incentives for teachers and these have encouraged teachers to explore second jobs. These factors among others form a barrier to adequate levels of education, teacher motivation and dedication, and quality assurance in the education sector.

Cambodia is both affected by and a part of this global problem. Efforts made by the Government and the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) to improve the quality of education have not yet made an impact. These efforts include removal of registration and enrolment fees, implementation of scholarship programs, reviewing of curriculum and textbooks, training of teachers and school administrators, increasing teacher salaries, etc. The Minister of Education introduced two key priorities in 2017: (i) Upgrading teacher capacity, and (ii) Strengthening school-based management.
So far, along with improved access and quality in education, especially in public schools, these improvements have been confined to increasing teacher wages to around USD250 for primary school teachers. However, teachers still need to seek second jobs. One result has been an increase in the number of private schools in Cambodia in the past decade, where most of these private schools run formal primary education programs using the MoEYS curriculum and textbooks, as well as teachers. Those schools report annually on the increased student enrolment both at primary and secondary level, whereas some public schools, especially those located in the city, have reported a low level of enrolment compared to previous years.

This research paper is an attempt to explore some key issues by way of feedback and analysis using selected private primary schools in Phnom Penh as a case study. The aim is to better understand the factors that motivate parents to send their children to private primary schools.

Although the research is simple in nature, findings will be useful for relevant stakeholders, especially school administrators, to find ways to improve their schools in this growing free market economy.

1.1 Research questions

Research questions are: What are parents’ perceptions towards teaching and education in private primary schools? What are perceptions and opinions on student learning, teachers and administrators in the private primary school system? What, if any, are important factors of concern? What helps and what hinders better performance?

1.2 Conceptual framework

Below is diagram illustrating the conceptual framework for this study.
1.3 Objectives and significance of research

The significance of this research is to understand perceptions and opinions about private schools: what is good, what is bad, and what can be improved, ultimately leading to how problems can be realistically fixed. The results should be useful for educational policy makers, especially in making assessments/judgments and reviewing educational policy and guidelines regarding teachers. In so doing, it is hoped to help bring about or stimulate a growth in positive perceptions by teachers towards their teaching jobs, with resultant increases in motivation and dedication. This increased positive attitude and motivation will hopefully stimulate students as well.

The aim is for school principals and school management committees to use these findings and suggestions as a tool for adjusting their school administration and management to foster an environment that encourages teachers’ commitment and participation for effective teaching. Furthermore, the research findings should offer some key information that can be used by teachers to help balance and improve their teaching performance in order to benefit the quality of student learning performances. It is expected that the higher level of quality service provided by teachers will increase student learning performance and achievement, also producing a higher transition rate from primary to secondary levels.

Also, the findings can be used as information for educational strategies and policy setting, especially a primary school level in order to improve quality of education in general, and, specifically to promote teachers’ job satisfaction.

For school principals and administrators, this research could be as a baseline, providing fundamental information for improving leadership and administration, making school development plans, and aiding decisions related to future school improvements. The research could also benefit other school principals as an example to help analyze the status of their schools and staff.

For classroom teachers, the research findings can act as a guide for them to act and/or to improve the way they behave in their teaching practice. It will hopefully offer insights, especially regarding their impact on students, and indicate where changes need to and can be made. Finally, the authors hope that others will continue with research along these lines in order to improve the education sector in general.
I. Literature and Background Review

2.1 Introduction

This section aims to review and illustrate several models, theories and research related to motivation and job satisfaction. These are fundamental concerns for researching parents’ perceptions toward their children’s schooling. Negative or positive perceptions about school operation and performance, including quality of teaching as well as learning abilities, motivation, access to useful instruction/experiences, and achievements of students will influence the decision and choice of parents in choosing schools for their children.

Theories or ideas by Vroom (1964) and Deci & Ryan (1985) are somewhat old, but they are still relevant and useful. These are discussed below. The second part will discuss results of previous studies regarding perceptions and satisfaction at school.

Perception refers to a cognitive process in which information processing is used to transfer information from the world into the brain and mind where it is further processed and related to other information. It is the ability to organize the message from the environment so that it can be processed and acted upon. Gibson (1950) refers perception to semiotics, involving encoding, decoding, signs, etc. There are many psychological, sociological and anthropological definitions. However, for simplicity, perception is defined here as what parents view and believe about school, principals and teachers, including their opinions and feelings. Essentially, what do parents think about their role(s), both in theory and practice, in education?

2.2 Review of Theories regarding motivation and satisfaction

Vroom's Expectancy Theory: The expectancy theory of motivation was developed by Victor Vroom in 1964. It deals with motivation and management with focus on outcomes. The theory assumes that in order for a person to be motivated, efforts, performance and motivation must be linked in relation to three variables - valence, expectancy and instrumentality.

Similarly, the Self-Determination Theory developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan in 1985 highlights the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation based on the different reasons or goals to an action. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Deci & Ryan, 1985).
2.3 Overview of results from previous studies

Garrett’s (1978) findings are related to selected factors affecting teaching success, their rankings and importance. Garrett (1978) claims that the major personal traits of knowledge, perceptions, beliefs and enthusiasm are the most important factors related to success. Administrative functions, facilities provided, administrative support, school discipline and capable administration are important as well, but less important than the preceding factors. Among them, however, administrative support is considered extremely important for teaching success. Lastly, situational determinants include professional activity, school of education attended, the socioeconomic community, and academic talent of the students. These were viewed as being only slightly or very slightly important to teaching success.

Ngoh et al. (2004) conducted a qualitative study with 50 student teachers from the Initial Teacher Preparation program in Singapore on ‘the perceptions of student teachers toward teaching’ in order to understand their perceptions on the teaching profession and their expectations of the teaching job. The study found that teachers had positive views about their teaching profession due to a meaningful and worthwhile outlook, especially in regards to helping students. They viewed that teaching was all about helping students to learn. In addition, they perceived that this career contributed to economic stability and security. Teachers considered the importance of parents’ participation in education activities and they showed concern about parents who did not understand or appreciate the work of teachers, and who showed little respect for teachers.

Teachers are government employees and their feedback may be slightly biased. Having questioned people who were employed in the Singapore education sector, it is warranted to question the validity of teachers “having positive views about their teaching profession due to a meaningful and worthwhile outlook of the job.” Many graduates in the 1990s and 2000s simply took teaching positions because the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) was actively recruiting and other employment opportunities were seen as limited and difficult to obtain. Additionally, the social and financial context in Singapore may render it to be an irrelevant consideration for this study, despite Singapore’s Southeast Asian regional inclusion. Singapore does not face the same problems as Cambodia, and is a very different culture with higher per capita income. In 2018, Singapore had a per capita GDP of $52,049 US dollars compared to Cambodia’s $17,291 (https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-economy-of-the-southeast-asian-nations.htm).

Nonetheless, the juxtaposition of Singapore may help clarify some of Cambodia’s specific problems. Adu and Olatundun (2007) conducted a study on ‘teachers’ perceptions of teaching’ correlated to students’ academic performance in Oyo State, Nigeria. They considered the paramount importance of the role of
teachers in the education system with a belief that the standard of education cannot be grown beyond the level or standard of teachers. The findings showed that the correlation and relationship between teachers’ perception of teaching and students’ performance is positive and significant. Furthermore, teachers’ attitudes and good behavior has a significant effect on performance and the teaching methods have a significant effect on students’ performance.

Interestingly, perhaps, the qualification of teachers has no significant effect on student performance. This is a more comparable case to Cambodia. It is likely that teachers with good attitudes, behavior and positive perceptions will stimulate better student performance and appreciation, dedication, etc. However, it is not clear in the Adu and Olatundun study about incentives such as higher pay and how this affects teachers’ attitudes and perceptions (most likely, positively correlated).

Chhinh (2002) conducted research on factors influencing teaching skills of urban primary school teachers in Cambodia. He studied the efforts and progress to improve the quality of teachers in Cambodia with 40 urban primary school teachers in Cambodia. The results showed the positive significant correlation between teaching skills and teacher enthusiasm, teacher punctuality, pupil behavior, the relation between the teacher and the pupils, the teacher's use of lesson plans, flashcards, supplementary exercises and visual materials. The study also showed that the use of textbooks by teachers had no significant relationship with teaching skills. However, the study concluded that teacher enthusiasm, pupil behavior, visual materials and textbooks contributed significantly. The key concern here is that teacher enthusiasm, responsibility and dedication positively affected student behavior and subsequently student performance over and above other factors.

II. Methodology

The overall methodology for the study is straightforward. Parents were selected for interviews and feedback. Formal and informal discussions were also conducted as necessary. Hopefully, the authors’ own experience in this field in terms of significant professional teaching experience has also been a factor in interpreting and understanding results and analyses. The study was conducted in three selected private primary schools in Phnom Penh. Researchers decided to select a few local private primary schools such as Sovannaphumi School, The Westline and the Beltei School. Due to time limitations, the researchers chose 105 parents who have children in these schools. Approximately half of these respondents are mothers.

3.1 Geographic Area of Study

For the purpose of accessibility and affordability of students and parents, the researchers selected schools that are located and surrounded by numerous businesses, shophouses, local restaurants, food stalls, etc.
Other businesses nearby include private computer/English schools and classes. In general, these areas are ‘modernized’ and fall within the middle class income category, excepting many business people and workers who are in lower socio-economic classes/categories. Both middle and lower economic class children attend the primary schools.

3.2 Data collection

This research study mainly emphasizes assessing the key determinants of parents’ perceptions towards private primary schooling. It draws on frameworks from organization and individual psychology related work motivation regarding technical tasks, administrative work and teachers’ status and conditions. Adopted are the combination of the views of Vroom’s Expectancy Theory (1964) and Deci & Ryan Self-Determination Theory (1985).

The research approach is intended to elucidate the perceptions of parents toward enrolling their children in private schools. Respondents were selected randomly. Research was conducted between May and July, 2017.

Accordingly, this research study applied a quantitative research method through a structured questionnaire sent to parents. The analysis is largely based on this primary data. The collected information was grouped and merged under respective questions and target respondents. Ideas were then prioritized, based on frequency levels of answers by respondents.

The main constraints are sample size and time (obviously related). Also, this research is not able to make generalizations beyond the results that emerge from a survey in the areas designated above.

III. Findings and Discussion

Following the designed questionnaires, this section will present and discuss findings of information collected from parents regarding to decision about sending their children to private school. This will begin with a general profile of parents and then it will seek to understand factors of quality of learning environment, including quality of teachers and teaching performance, teaching and learning materials and the methodology of teaching as well as school administration by the administrators and school principal of the private school.

4.1 Parents’ demographic information

4.1.1 Gender and age group
The total population of 105 respondents consist of parents who have sent and/or have their children enrolled in a private school. Mothers represented approximately half of the total respondents. The majority of these, 55 percent, are in the age range of 41 to 50 years old, and 18 percent are in between 31-40 years of age. Additionally, parents in the age group of 18-30, and 50 and above, shared approximately 13 percent each of the sample group.

### 4.1.2 Socio-economic status

This pie chart represents the socio-economic status of parents who are currently sending their children to private primary schools in Phnom Penh. The pie chart is divided into four different sections. The chart shows that almost 40 percent of parents whose monthly income is between $100 to $250 sent their children to private school. This is the lowest income category identified in the survey, but represents the highest percentage of those sending their children to private primary schools.

The highest category of monthly income above $500 represented 27 percent of respondents. The third income-related group is parents who make $351 to $500 monthly. This group represents 13 percent of respondents.
4.1.3 Educational Qualification

The next pie chart compares the parents’ educational qualifications from primary school level through to doctoral degrees. The chart reveals that parents with upper secondary school qualifications were the highest percentage at 43 percent. The second biggest proportion of 22 percent was the parents who hold bachelor degrees. The third percentage is 15 percent belonging to the parents who have reached the lower secondary school level of education.

However, the parents who have master degrees were only 12 percent. Finally, the parents who hold doctoral degrees were second lowest at 5 percent while the parents who have learnt only at primary school gained the smallest number at only 3 percent. It can be concluded that the parents’ educational background influences school choices for their children since the parents who have a higher education send their children to private primary schools more than the parents who have studied only at primary school level.

4.2 Key factors influencing parents’ decisions toward private primary schooling

Parents were asked about factors that make them choose private schools for their children. There are four main factors including: 1) teaching and learning environment & school facilities, 2) students learning, 3) teacher quality and 4) school administration factors.

As can be seen in the next graph, 88.3 percent of parents listed the teaching and learning environment and school facilities as the most important factor of choice; 85.7 percent listed the students’ learning as most important; 94.8 percent identified the quality of teachers as the most important and 87 percent listed school administrators as important.
4.2.1 Teaching and learning environment & school facilities

The findings regarding the teaching and learning environment and school facilities show that about 63.3 percent were satisfied regarding this, while 19.4 percent were strongly satisfied. However, another 13.0 percent disagreed and only 1.3 percent were strongly dissatisfied. As a result, this section illustrates that most of the parents send their children to a private school because of quality teaching, quality learning, the learning environment and school facilities.

4.2.2 Student learning

According to this chart, 66.3 percent agreed that the student learning factor motivated them to send their children to a private school, while 19.4 percent strongly agreed. In contrast, 13 percent disagreed and 1.3 percent strongly disagreed. Therefore, the students’ learning factor is another main reason that the parents decided to send their children to a private school.
4.2.3 Teacher quality

This chart exemplifies that 61.7 percent of the parents were satisfied and 33.1 percent were strongly satisfied with the teacher quality, while 5.1 percent were dissatisfied and only 0.1 percent were strongly dissatisfied. In short, teacher quality is one of the most important factors relating to parent trust and belief about sending their children to a private school rather than a public school.
4.2.4 School administrators

This chart indicates that 66.8 percent of the parents were satisfied and another 21.1 percent were strongly satisfied with the school administration. Nevertheless, 11.2 percent disagreed and another 1 percent strongly disagreed. Hence, it shows that the school administration is one of the major factors influencing parents’ decisions to send their children to a private school.

4.2.5 Parents’ important factors of concerns

VI. PARENTS’ IMPORTANT FACTORS OF CONCERN
This chart summarizes what the parents regard as the important factors in their children’s education. Parents are highest concerned with the development of citizenship skills for their children, at 97.1 percent. Moreover, parents also cared about discipline, rated at 96.2 percent. Other factors of concern are the quality of instruction and having a good relationship with parents, represented at 94.3 percent equally.

The lowest factor of concern is school facilities which parents rated about 83.4 percent. As a result, there are four outstanding factors of concern—citizenship skills, discipline, the quality of instruction, having a good relationship with parents. All of these motivated parents to send their children to a private rather than a public school.

4.2.6 School environment factors

The green school environment has caught the attention of most parents as it helps to motivate students to become better citizens. Most of the private primary schools are founded in high density areas of population where they are easily accessible to the students and parents. However, a number of private schools hire apartments where there is not enough space in terms of the size of the classroom, and where it is not possible to provide an adequate playground.

Around 86 percent of parents who responded valued the importance of the school environment, while the rest of respondents did not pay much attention to this factor. These parents believed that as long as the school classrooms are equipped with air-conditioners and appropriate space, students are being properly served. In addition, school hygiene and sufficient and clean latrine facilities are also factors that influenced parents. Three quarters of the surveyed parents strongly supported this factor. Similarly, parents’ approval of the importance of outdoor space within the school is about one third of the respondents.
4.2.7 School and Parents’ Relations

Parents’ relations with the school not only enable parents to monitor the learning progress of their children but it also helps to shape improving the school quality, by way of improved quality of teaching, administration and school environment. More than 80 percent of the parents in this survey approved that they were regularly contacted by the school to discuss their children’s learning activities, their learning performance and their learning progress. Approximately 20 percent reported that they had not been invited to discuss their children’s learning.

In addition, parents appreciated involvement in their children’s learning activities, especially in supporting their homework, checking homework results as well as the learning report cards of their children. Above 70 percent of parents were involved in following up their children’s learning activities and performance, while another 28 percent responded that they have no time to follow up and had not done so. Factors improving better school performance
As can be seen from the bar graph above, there are 11 factors that parents believe need to be improved for better school performance. The factor identified as being most in need of improvement is a good teaching and learning environment, which accounts for 9.0 percent of responses.

Strict discipline and individual attention from teachers and the school director towards the students is the second factor perceived as needing improvement. 7.1 percent of the participants suggested applying strict discipline at school while another 7.1 percent thought that students should receive more individual attention from teachers and the school director. This is perhaps because of their concern that some private schools do not provide a suitable environment and the discipline is not very strict.

Moreover, 2 other factors, identified as sufficient teaching and learning materials (6.2 percent) and having a good relationship between parents and the school (5.2 percent) are the third and fourth factors perceived as needing improvement. An updated school syllabus, qualified teachers, and active and committed teachers in their teaching careers resulted in the same value of percentages (4.3 percent).

**IV. Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the socio-economic status of parents does not seem to have any significant relationship to the choice of school because even the parents earning less from $100 to $250 per month (39 percent) compared to the parents earning more than $500 (27 percent) still send their children to private primary schools more than others. In addition, the findings show a majority of parents are educated with secondary education and above so they will have appropriate skills to evaluate the differences between public and private primary schools. Though the researchers do not have any evidence as proof, a question to be considered is: “Why parents decided to send their children to private school even with a low income?”

Parents valued four key education aspects, such as teacher quality, school administrators, the teaching and learning environment and school facilities, and the student learning environment as the basis for making their decision. A significant factor was also that most of the parents most valued the school being able to equip their children with global citizenship skills and a quality of discipline in their daily lives.

The research also revealed that what attracted parents the most was the close communication and relationship between school and parents on their children’s daily attendance, learning achievement and the opportunity for parents to be involved in school activities.

Key factors, therefore, seem to be trust and confidence in the school to help develop the students, and also the opportunity to be involved in their children’s education.
Updated and responsive school syllabus, with quality of instruction services: parents nowadays, especially those who resided in town seem to have more judgement and choice before sending children to any school.

**Future Directions**

In the future, it is hoped that a greater sample size can be targeted and more thorough investigations can be conducted. Perhaps separate surveys involving lower and middle socioeconomic groups can be undertaken and then compared. Perhaps also, comparable regional research can be compared with the results of urban surveys.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the results of this research can provide a baseline for future surveys. Also, hopefully, this research will be useful for the further development of private schools in Phnom Penh.

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