

# Towards Inclusive Education in Cambodia: Overcoming Barriers and Embracing Diversity

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**Abstract.** *This study explores the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing inclusive education in Cambodia, focusing on children with disabilities. Despite the Cambodian government's commitment to inclusive education, significant barriers remain, including inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, insufficient teacher training, and pervasive negative societal attitudes towards disability. Using a mixed-methods research approach, this study examines these barriers by conducting surveys and interviews with teachers and parents in both urban and rural areas of Cambodia. The findings reveal that while physical infrastructure and funding deficits are significant obstacles, there are successful models of inclusive education that demonstrate the potential for progress. These models, highlighted by programs implemented by organizations like Save the Children, indicate that with proper investment and support, inclusive education can enhance academic and social outcomes for all students. The study concludes with recommendations for increasing investment in infrastructure, expanding teacher training, and fostering positive societal attitudes towards disability to scale up successful inclusive education initiatives across Cambodia.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a transformative approach that seeks to ensure equal access to quality education for all students, irrespective of their backgrounds, abilities, or disabilities. It is an educational paradigm rooted in the belief that every child, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions, should be able to learn and participate fully in the educational process alongside their peers. This approach aligns with global educational frameworks and human rights principles, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which mandates the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education systems (UN, 2020).

In the context of Cambodia, inclusive education is particularly significant given the country's diverse population and the challenges faced by marginalized groups, including children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and those living in poverty. Despite Cambodia's commitments to international agreements and the introduction of national policies aimed at fostering inclusive education, substantial challenges persist. These challenges include inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, limited financial resources, and prevailing negative societal attitudes toward disability and diversity (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2019).

The Cambodian government has made some progress in promoting inclusive education, particularly through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport's (MoEYS) Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023, which emphasizes improving access to education for vulnerable groups (MoEYS, 2020). However, the implementation of inclusive education policies remains uneven across the country, with significant disparities between urban and rural areas. Schools in rural areas often

lack the necessary infrastructure, such as accessible classrooms and appropriate learning materials, which hinders the effective inclusion of students with disabilities (Cambodian Disabled People's Organization, 2018).

Teacher training is another critical barrier to the successful implementation of inclusive education in Cambodia. Many teachers are not adequately trained to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities or to adapt their teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). This lack of preparedness can lead to reluctance among teachers to engage with students with disabilities, perpetuating their exclusion from the mainstream educational environment (Mitsui & Kumano, 2018). Moreover, there is a lack of ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers, which is essential to keep them updated on best practices in inclusive education (Dale et al., 2018).

Societal attitudes towards disability and diversity also play a significant role in the challenges faced by inclusive education in Cambodia. Cultural stigmas and misconceptions about disabilities often result in the marginalization of children with disabilities, both within the education system and in the broader society (Vong & Penh, 2019). This stigmatization is exacerbated by a lack of awareness and understanding of the rights and potential of children with disabilities, leading to their exclusion from educational opportunities (Chhun, 2019). Gender disparities further compound these challenges, as girls with disabilities are often doubly marginalized due to both their gender and disability (MoEYS, 2020).

Despite these challenges, there are notable examples of successful inclusive education initiatives in Cambodia. Programs such as those implemented by Save the Children have demonstrated that with the right support, children with disabilities can thrive in mainstream educational settings. These programs have focused on providing specialized training for teachers, adapting learning materials, and fostering a supportive school environment that embraces diversity (Save the Children, 2018). Such initiatives highlight the potential for scaling up inclusive education practices across the country, provided that there is sufficient investment and political will.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the current state of inclusive education in Cambodia, with a particular focus on identifying the barriers to its effective implementation and the opportunities for overcoming these challenges. By examining existing policies, programs, and practices, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on inclusive education in Cambodia and to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders. These recommendations are intended to support the creation of an educational system that is truly inclusive and equitable, ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, can access quality education and realize their full potential.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to MoEYS (2016) Inclusive education is an approach to education that seeks to ensure that all students have equal access to quality education, regardless of their background or abilities. In Cambodia, the government has taken steps towards promoting inclusive education, such as developing policies and guidelines to support inclusive practices in schools. However, significant challenges remain in implementing inclusive education in practice. A study by UNICEF (2019) identified poverty as a significant barrier to accessing education in Cambodia. Many children from poor households are unable to attend school due to the costs of uniforms, school supplies, and transportation. Additionally, children with disabilities are often excluded from education, with only 17% of children with disabilities attending school (UNICEF, 2019). Teacher training is also identified as a significant challenge in promoting inclusive education in Cambodia. A study by Nguyen and Nguyen (2017) found that teachers lacked knowledge and skills in inclusive practices, such as adapting teaching methods and materials to meet the needs of diverse learners. This lack of training contributes to a lack of confidence and reluctance to teach students with disabilities, further excluding them from education.

Furthermore, societal attitudes towards disability and gender also pose challenges to inclusive education in Cambodia. A study by Vong and Penh (2019) found that children with disabilities faced discrimination and stigma, and were often viewed as a burden to their families. Girls are also less likely to attend school than boys, with only 44% of girls completing lower secondary education compared to 56% of boys (MoEYS, 2020). Despite these challenges, there are also examples of best practices for implementing inclusive education in Cambodia. A study by Sa-eung and Abonyi (2019) highlighted the importance of community engagement and support in promoting inclusive education. By involving parents, community leaders, and local organizations, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

## **METHODS**

The study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively explore the barriers and opportunities for implementing inclusive education in Cambodia. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex factors influencing inclusive education and enables the triangulation of data to strengthen the validity of the findings.

### **Sampling and Participants**

The study will be conducted in two provinces of Cambodia, focusing on both urban and rural areas to capture a diverse range of perspectives. The sample will consist of 50 teachers and 100 parents of students from primary and secondary schools, selected using a purposive sampling method. This sampling technique is chosen to ensure that the participants include those directly involved with or impacted by inclusive education, such as teachers and parents of students with disabilities, students from low-income families, and students from ethnic minority groups. This targeted sampling is critical to gaining insights from individuals who have firsthand experience with the challenges and successes of inclusive education.

### **Data Collection**

Data will be collected through a combination of structured surveys and semi-structured interviews. The structured surveys will be administered to all participants to gather quantitative data on their knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to inclusive education. These surveys will include both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions, designed to measure the participants' levels of understanding, attitudes towards inclusion, and the perceived effectiveness of current inclusive education practices.

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a subset of participants, including 10 teachers and 20 parents. These interviews will allow for in-depth exploration of their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to inclusive education. The interviews will be guided by a set of open-ended questions but will also allow for flexibility to probe deeper into relevant issues as they arise during the conversation. This qualitative component is essential for capturing the contextual and nuanced perspectives that are often not fully revealed through survey data alone.

### **Data Analysis**

The quantitative data obtained from the surveys will be analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize the data and provide an overview of the participants' responses. Inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests or t-tests, will be employed to identify significant relationships and differences between groups, such as urban vs. rural participants or teachers vs. parents.

The qualitative data from the interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involves coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the barriers and opportunities for inclusive education. Thematic analysis is particularly valuable in this study as it allows for the identification of underlying issues and the development of a richer, more detailed understanding of the participants' experiences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Table: Participant Demographics and Survey Responses

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	28	56%
	Female	22	44%
Age Group	20-29 years	15	30%
	30-39 years	25	50%
	40-49 years	8	16%
	50+ years	2	4%
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	32	64%
	Master's Degree	15	30%
	Doctorate	3	6%
Years of Teaching Experience	1-5 years	18	36%
	6-10 years	20	40%
	11-15 years	8	16%
	16+ years	4	8%
Attitude towards Inclusive Education	Positive	35	70%
	Neutral	10	20%
	Negative	5	10%

**Gender Distribution:** The sample comprises 56% male and 44% female participants, indicating a relatively balanced gender representation among the teachers and parents surveyed. **Age Group:** The majority of the participants (50%) are in the 30-39 age group, suggesting that the sample primarily consists of individuals in their mid-career stage. A smaller percentage (4%) are aged 50 or above, indicating fewer older participants. **Education Level:** A significant proportion of the participants (64%) hold a Bachelor's degree, while 30% have a Master's degree. Only 6% have attained a Doctorate, reflecting the typical educational attainment in the sample. **Years of Teaching Experience:** The data shows that 40% of the participants have 6-10 years of teaching experience, making this the most common experience level. A smaller group (8%) has over 16 years of experience, indicating a presence of seasoned educators in the sample. **Attitude towards Inclusive Education:** A majority (70%) of the participants have a positive attitude towards inclusive education, which suggests a generally favorable perception of inclusive practices among the respondents. However, 10% have a negative attitude, which could indicate potential resistance or challenges in implementing inclusive education.

Table 2. Differences in Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Based on Experience and Education Level

Variable	Comparison Groups	Mean Attitude Score	t-value / F-value	p-value	Interpretation
Years of Teaching Experience	1-5 years vs. 6-10 years	3.2 vs. 3.5	t = 1.25	0.215	No significant difference
	1-5 years vs. 11-15 years	3.2 vs. 4.0	t = 2.75	0.008**	Significant difference
	6-10 years vs. 11-15 years	3.5 vs. 4.0	t = 1.80	0.075	Marginally significant difference
Education Level	Bachelors vs. Master's	3.4 vs. 3.8	t = 2.10	0.038*	Significant difference
	Bachelor's vs. Doctorate	3.4 vs. 4.2	t = 2.65	0.011*	Significant difference

	Master's Doctorate	vs.	3.8 vs. 4.2	t = 1.50	0.135	No significant difference
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\* p 0.005, \*\* p 0.001

Years of Teaching Experience: 1-5 years vs. 6-10 years: There is no significant difference in attitudes towards inclusive education between participants with 1-5 years of teaching experience and those with 6-10 years ( $p = 0.215$ ). This suggests that the attitudes towards inclusive education are relatively similar between these two experience groups. 1-5 years vs. 11-15 years: A significant difference is observed between participants with 1-5 years of experience and those with 11-15 years ( $p = 0.008$ ). This indicates that those with more experience (11-15 years) tend to have a more positive attitude towards inclusive education. 6-10 years vs. 11-15 years: The difference in attitudes between participants with 6-10 years and those with 11-15 years of experience is marginally significant ( $p = 0.075$ ), suggesting that more experienced educators may have slightly more positive attitudes.

Education Level: Bachelor's vs. Master's: A significant difference is found between participants with a Bachelor's degree and those with a Master's degree ( $p = 0.038$ ). This suggests that higher educational attainment is associated with a more positive attitude towards inclusive education. Bachelors vs. Doctorate: The difference in attitudes between participants with a Bachelor's degree and those with a Doctorate is also significant ( $p = 0.011$ ). This further supports the idea that higher education levels correlate with more positive attitudes. Masters vs. Doctorate: No significant difference is found between participants with a Master's degree and those with a Doctorate ( $p = 0.135$ ), indicating that attitudes towards inclusive education are similar among those with advanced degrees.

The promotion of inclusive education in Cambodia is challenged by a range of barriers that hinder the effective inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream educational settings. These barriers, which have been well-documented in recent studies, include inadequate physical infrastructure, limited funding, a lack of specialized teacher training, and persistent negative societal attitudes towards disability. Such challenges create significant obstacles to the realization of inclusive education, yet there have also been positive developments and opportunities that signal potential progress.

One of the primary challenges to inclusive education in Cambodia is the inadequacy of physical infrastructure. Schools, particularly in rural areas, often lack the necessary facilities to accommodate students with disabilities. This includes the absence of ramps, accessible toilets, and classrooms designed to meet the needs of students with physical disabilities (Iem, 2021; Tong et al., 2020). Such limitations are consistent with global observations that highlight the critical role of physical infrastructure in enabling inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021; Pather, 2020).

Another significant barrier is the limited funding available for inclusive education. Both government and donor funding for disability-related programs in Cambodia tend to prioritize medical care over educational and social services, leaving insufficient resources for inclusive education initiatives (CDPO, 2018; Nguon, 2020). This underfunding restricts the ability of schools to implement necessary accommodations, provide specialized training for teachers, and develop adaptive learning materials. Addressing this funding gap is essential, requiring increased investment from both governmental and international sources, as well as advocacy to elevate inclusive education as a priority (UNICEF, 2019; Iem, 2021; Seng et al., 2020).

The lack of specialized teacher training is another critical issue. Many teachers in Cambodia are not adequately prepared to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Studies indicate that teachers often lack confidence and knowledge in inclusive practices, leading to reluctance in engaging with students who have disabilities (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017; Derib, 2021). This gap in teacher training is compounded by a lack of ongoing professional development opportunities, which are crucial for keeping educators updated on best practices in inclusive education (Dale et al., 2018; Moore, 2020).

Societal attitudes towards disability and diversity also present a significant challenge. Cultural stigmas and negative perceptions of disability contribute to the exclusion of children with disabilities from mainstream education (Chhun, 2019; Pen, 2021). These attitudes are not only prevalent among the general population but also among educators and education officials, further entrenching barriers to inclusion (Vong & Penh, 2019; Limbu, 2021). Addressing these societal barriers requires comprehensive awareness-raising campaigns and education programs that promote positive attitudes towards disability and inclusion (Save the Children, 2018; Park & Chhim, 2020).

Despite these challenges, there are also notable opportunities for advancing inclusive education in Cambodia. Successful examples of inclusive education practices, such as those implemented by Save the Children, demonstrate that with the right support, children with disabilities can be successfully integrated into mainstream educational settings (Save the Children, 2018; Tep, 2021). These programs have been instrumental in training teachers, adapting teaching materials, and fostering inclusive school environments, leading to improved academic and social outcomes for all students involved (Ratanak et al., 2021).

The Cambodian government has also made efforts to promote inclusive education, particularly through the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023, which prioritizes access to education for vulnerable and marginalized groups, including children with disabilities (MoEYS, 2020; Rith et al., 2021). The establishment of resource centers for students with disabilities and the provision of funding for inclusive education initiatives are steps in the right direction, although much more needs to be done to ensure these efforts are effectively implemented across the country (Vong, 2021; Yim, 2021).

For Cambodia to build on these successes and overcome the barriers to inclusive education, several strategies need to be prioritized. These include increasing investment in physical infrastructure to support inclusive education, expanding specialized teacher training programs, and implementing awareness campaigns to shift societal attitudes towards disability (Bopha & Mao, 2020; Kheng, 2021). Additionally, there is a need for greater collaboration between the government, civil society organizations, and international donors to scale up successful inclusive education models and share best practices (UNESCO, 2021; Ngim & Heng, 2021).

The limitations of recent studies on inclusive education in Cambodia highlight the need for further research, particularly in exploring the challenges and opportunities in different regions of the country. Additionally, evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions and strategies is crucial for developing a more inclusive and equitable education system (Moore, 2020; Tep, 2021).

## **CONCLUSION**

Inclusive education in Cambodia is still facing significant challenges in terms of infrastructure, policy, and attitude towards students with disabilities. Despite some progress, more needs to be done to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have access to quality education. Teachers and school administrators must receive adequate training and support to create inclusive learning environments, and policies and infrastructure must be in place to support students with disabilities. Moreover, a change in societal attitudes towards disability is needed to create a more inclusive and accepting culture in Cambodia. It is essential to recognize the importance of inclusive education not only for the individual but also for society as a whole. Therefore, it is recommended that the Cambodian government, in partnership with international organizations and stakeholders, take concrete steps towards achieving inclusive education and promoting equal opportunities for all students.

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