

## **Community Participation in Education: A Case Study in Samlot District, Battambang Province, Cambodia**

Loeurt To

Faculty of Education, Dewey International University, Sangkat Ratanak, Battambang City, Cambodia  
Email: Loeurt\_educ@yahoo.com

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### **Abstract**

This study was conducted to investigate the nature of community participation in education in a remote district in Cambodia. A case study approach was used to explore the issue and employed qualitative research methods for data collection. Epstein's participation and Bray's degree of community participation were used as analytical frameworks. The study focussed on the forms and processes of participation by parents, community members and education stakeholders in primary schools in remote areas. The study discovered a range of social practices in community participation in education. The degrees of participation varied depending on the types of participation and the participants. Parents had direct participation in their children's learning at home, and indirect participation through resource contributions for school development. In addition, the community participated in education through their main representatives, the School Support Committees (SSCs). The most common type of participation was collaborative resource contribution for school development. This practice reflected the traditional culture of participation of Cambodian society but there was also a sign of behavioural change to focus more on children's learning. Teachers and School Support Committees were the drivers in bringing community and parents to participate in education. This case study suggests that a shift in focus (on the part of the government, non-governmental organizations and education stakeholders) to support parental involvement in children's learning, rather than the traditional resource mobilisation, may better to promote children's learning. Further research on parental involvement in children's learning could be conducted.

**Keywords:** *community, participation, community participation*

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### **1. Introduction**

Community participation is crucial for the success of community development programs. Development projects and programs with strong participation can enhance ownership and sustainability in development (Kumar, 2002) and the projects are more likely to succeed in developing the community. Likewise, the participation of communities in education can enhance education and children's learning. Research has shown that the participation of families and communities in education has positive impacts on children's learning and can also increase a children's learning potential which results in long-term impacts on children's lifelong learning (Epstein, 1992, 1995, 2006).

Existing research has found different forms and levels of community participation particularly in education (Epstein, 1995; Griffin & Steen, 2010; Ngoun, 2012; Pak, 2012; Sanders, 2001). Epstein strongly believed that children can do better in their learning when teachers, families and the community work together to achieve learning and development goals of children (Epstein, 2006). To contribute to this contention, she suggests that educational institutions build strong partnerships. Epstein used the term 'involvement' to refer to various forms of participation but did not analyse them as being strong or weak (as in Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation). Thus, Epstein's framework is not judgmental because the concept of participation may change in accordance to the context, types of involvement and commitment of the implementers. This framework, as suggested by the author, is applicable in all levels of education, and in different contexts. In addition to Epstein's six types of participation, Griffin and Steen (2010) recommended – leading as an additional category for promoting partnership. Griffin and Steen recommend that in order to get communities and families to participate in education, leadership by school administrators and community leaders is required.

The aim of this framework is to provide guidance to school staff, families and communities to perform their partnership roles to ensure better academic achievement of their children. The concept of such

partnerships is to build connections between schools, families, and communities so that the three partners assist each other in supporting children to have successful study outcomes in their future lives (Epstein, 1995).

This study has two primary outcomes. The first is its contribution to the body of knowledge on community participation in education, specifically within the education sector in the rural context of a developing country, Cambodia. This study also provides lessons on community participation in education for the different schools and communities. As a result, this information can be used to advocate for improving the quality of education at the primary school level.

## 2. Objectives

The purpose of this study was to investigate community participation in education in the remote primary schools in Samlot district in Cambodia. There are two specific objectives to be explored in this study.

- 1) To determine the forms and processes of community participation in education in the remote primary schools in Samlot district in Cambodia.
- 2) To assess the degrees of community participation in the remote primary schools in Samlot district in Cambodia.

## 3. Materials and methods

This study employed a case study approach to examine community participation in education. It investigated the parameters of community participation in certain rural schools that had been the target of government efforts and the interventions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in mobilizing communities to participate in education. As the study required exploration of the 'how' of participation, qualitative methods were chosen as appropriate for collecting and analyzing data. It is an approach for exploring and understanding perspectives and interpretation of the individuals about the social contexts (Denscombe, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative data collection methods were used to collect data from local people in the field by using different tools such as interviews, group discussions, document review, and observation (Creswell, 2013). To triangulate the qualitative data, a survey was used with parents and community members in selected school communities. This quantitative data collection tool was used to complement the qualitative data (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003).

Samlot district was selected for the study as it is a very isolated district and is in some respects quite different from other districts. It is geographically isolated with bad road conditions. However, it has shown a marked improvement in education since early 1990s in terms of community participation and the enrolment rate for boys and girls (MoEYS, 2015). It has received significant interventions from NGOs resulting in improvements in education in recent decades.

Eighty participants were selected to join in the study, including four school directors, four teachers, four School Support Committee (SSC) leaders, 21 parents, one religious leader, two local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) staff, one District office of Education (DoE) officer and forty households. The mixed participants offered a diverse range of perspectives on the research questions and had different experiences of collaboration.

The first form of data collection was document analysis. Formal and informal documents which were relevant and available for my case study were collected. Formal documents were documents that were compiled and analyzed by an organization for specific purposes and they were formalized by the organization through an organization stamp.

Four school directors were purposefully selected for the study as it was hopeful that they would share their thoughts about the community and education in their school. These four informants were interviewed to get answers for the research questions. Four SSC leaders from the four schools were selected for in-depth interviews to get information about their participation in education and the support that they had in mobilizing community participation. These interviews also helped me to verify the data from the interviews with school directors. Four teachers were selected for interviews to determine the participation of parents in their children's learning and the relationship between parents and schools. At the same time, local authorities such as one village leader and two commune council members were interviewed to explore their participation

in education. To investigate the participation from NGOs, three staff from two NGOs were invited for interviews.

To obtain the parents' perspectives, a questionnaire survey and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with parents were conducted. Forty family members were selected for the questionnaire survey. This survey explored aspects of the parental participation in education. It was also hoped that this data would help to verify the information from the interviews with school directors, teachers, SSC leaders and local authorities. In addition, twenty-one parents were selected for focus group discussions. The discussions were on the parental participation in their children's learning, parental contributions to education and the challenges in participation in education. These discussions were important because all participants could be involved in the conversation about the same topics within the groups (Table 1).

**Table 1** Guiding questions for data collection with different research participants

Participants	Primary questions
School directors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How has community participation occurred in your community?</li> <li>- Who are the education stakeholders? Who participates?</li> <li>- What are the forms of participation?</li> <li>- How has each form of participation taken place?</li> <li>- How do you mobilize community participation in education?</li> </ul>
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is the relationship like between teachers and parents?</li> <li>- How do you communicate with parents and community members?</li> </ul>
School Support Committee (SSC) leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In what ways do you participate in education?</li> <li>- Can you describe each form of participation?</li> <li>- How do you help schools to mobilize community members to participate in education?</li> </ul>
Local authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do you participate in education?</li> </ul>
NGOs staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What roles do NGOs have in education?</li> <li>- How do NGOs intervene in education?</li> <li>- How do you help the school to get the community involved in education?</li> </ul>
Focus Group Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do you support your children's learning?</li> <li>- How do you support the school?</li> <li>- Do you have any challenges participating in school?</li> </ul>
Small Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What are the forms of community participation in education?</li> <li>- How do you participate in education?</li> <li>- Are there any challenges to participation?</li> </ul>

Epstein's Framework for forms of Community Participation was used to determine the forms and process of participation in education (Table 2). This framework was used in a general sense which has categorized community participation into six forms, however, each form could not be used to explore degrees of participation that the research questions were aiming for. In addition, in response to the research question, Bray's model was used (Table 3). As Bray's practices do not map exactly onto Epstein's forms of participation, the author merged the frameworks of Bray and Epstein to provide a comprehensive framework (Table 4) for analysis in Cambodia.

**Table 2** Epstein framework of participation

Types of involvement	Description
Parenting	The schools assist community and parents with parenting and childrearing skills, in understanding child development, and in setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level.
Communicating	The schools keep community and families up-to-date on school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.
Volunteering	Activities that support children and school programs, improve outreach, training, and schedule to involve families as volunteers and improve family attendance at events at school and in other locations.
Learning at home	The schools offer suggestions and techniques to involve families in learning activities with their children at home.
Decision making	Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.
Collaborating with the community	Coordinate resources and services for families, children, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups. Provide services to the community.

In an education context, Bray has a practical approach to put participation in education into 7 different types and is placed between two extremes: genuine participation and pseudo-participation (Table 3). Genuine participation is the process in which participants voluntarily participate in a development process. They have equal rights, power and influences in making decision. In contrast, in pseudo-participation, people participate for consultation and information giving in development, research or in completing surveys. Participants do not have the power or rights to make decisions. Between pseudo-participation and genuine participation, certain types of participation are identified including: (1) use of service, (2) resource contribution, (3) attending meeting, (4) consultation, (5) involvement in service delivery, (6) delegated power and (7) real power.

In order to contextualize the frameworks for participation in education to the Cambodian context, and to allow for a full discussion of various forms of participation, the author has amalgamated the frameworks of Bray and Epstein (Table 4). This matrix will be used to assess the forms and degrees of community participation in education.

**Table 3** Bray’s model: Degree of community participation in education

	Pseudo-Participation						Genuine Participation
Community Role/Education functions	Use of service (1)	Resources Contribution (2)	Attending meetings (3)	Consultation (4)	Involvement in delivery (5)	Delegated powers (6)	Real powers (7)

**Table 4** A Merged framework (combination of Epstein’s framework and Bray’s model)

Forms Participation	Pseudo-Participation						Genuine Participation
Parenting activities	Use of service (1)	Resources Contribution (2)	Attending meetings (3)	Consultation (4)	Involvement in delivery (5)	Delegated powers (6)	Real powers (7)
Learning at home							
Communicating							
Volunteering							
Decision-making							
Collaborating with the community							

The study used Epstein's participation framework to investigate and analyze the forms and process of participation of the communities in education and the methods of community mobilization (Epstein et al., 2002), and Bray's degree of participation (Bray, 2001) to evaluate the degrees of community participation in education in the research area. I used NVivo 10 for data analysis. Adapting Epstein's framework, six main themes were created that accurately reflected my research findings: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, collaborating and decision making. These were further analyzed using sub-themes of each type of participation. Bray's framework, the degree of participation in education (from pseudo-participation to genuine participation) was used to determine the degree of participation of the communities in the remote primary schools in Cambodia.

Thus the analysis of the data collected from the fieldwork can be summarized as having three steps: deducting the data, classifying the data into types of participation, and evaluating each type of participation.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1 Perceptions about community participation in education

It is essential to determine the different understandings of the research participants towards community participation in education. This helps to discover how local people constructed their understandings about participation in education. Interpretivism contends that the different ways in which the world is viewed arise from the influence of our beliefs, value systems and cultures (Walliman, 2008). The data collected from the field shows that each group of participants had different perceptions about community participation in education as shown in the table 5 below.

**Table 5** Perceptions on community participation in education

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Perceptions towards community participation in education</b>
School directors	Community participation in education is a process involving parents, authorities and education relevant stakeholders in education in the forms of ideas, money, materials and labour contribution for school development.
Teachers	Community participation in education is the participation in receiving education information from schools and spreading in the community. Examples for this perception included sending the children to schools and contributing ideas, money and materials whenever the school asks for help.
SSC leaders	Community participation in education is the processes of receiving and spreading education information in the community, and the process of mobilizing resources in the communities for school improvement.
Parents	Community participation in education is the contribution of money, materials, labour and ideas for school improvement such as school construction, and sending children to school and helping children learning at home.
Local Authorities	Community participation in education is the involvement in spreading education information and value of education to local authorities and community in order to get children get education. It occurs through resource contribution such as money and labour for school and education development.
NGOs	Community participation in education is the contribution of materials, labour, money, time and ideas from communities for school and education development.
Religious leader	Community participation in education is the participation in the discussion to identify weaknesses of the school for improving children's learning.

#### 4.2 Types and processes of community participation in education

Results of the study indicate that the behaviors of the community towards education occurred in various forms by different education stakeholders which fall into the six types of participation.

**Parenting:** The study found some parenting activities carried out by parents and some parenting assistance undertaken by the schools. The participation in parenting in children’s education occurred with parents, caregivers such as guardians and siblings, and children’s relatives. Parenting activities of both parties were for serving children’s learning. The table 6 below indicates the main parenting activities undertaken by parents/caregivers and the schools.

**Table 6** Parenting Activities

Parents’ parenting activities	Schools’ parenting support
Parent made their children’s accessibility to education through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enrolled children in schools</li> <li>- Ensured their children’s attendance in schools</li> <li>- Accompanied small children during classes to get them used to the schools</li> </ul>	Schools conducted education/enrollment campaign <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informed education information in the community</li> <li>- Encouraged parents to participate in their children’s learning</li> </ul>
Pertained information about their children’s learning progress from teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Suggested teachers to provide extra support to their children</li> <li>- Suggested teachers to give them teaching methods</li> </ul>	Updated children’s learning progress with parents through student study records, meetings and occasional conversations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Helped parents with basic teaching techniques to help children at homes</li> </ul>
Helped children with their daily schooling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prepared children to dress up with tidy uniforms, appropriate hair</li> <li>- Prepared learning materials such as notebooks, textbooks and pens and so on for children</li> </ul>	Consulted with parents about children’s safety and security at schools and in communities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encouraged parents to pay attention on their children’s school attendance</li> </ul>

The result of a survey shows that 98% of parents reported going to the schools for enrolling their children at the beginning of the academic year. In addition, in order to retain children’s school attendance, some parents dropped their children off at school and picked up them after classes every day (FGD with parents, June 1, 2015), and some parents accompanied their little children to the classes and stayed with their children for a while to observe their children’s learning (observation, June 1, 2015). Older brothers/sisters and relatives of the small children were observed coming to pick up small children at the end of their classes. Parents and caregivers consulted with teachers about their children’s learning progress. The parents in the FGDs mentioned that they consulted with classroom teachers frequently about their children’s learning progress and suggested teachers provide extra support such as paying more attention to their children’s learning (FGD, May 1, 2015).

**Learning at home:** The study found a variety of activities that parents had to support their children’s learning. According to questionnaire survey results, in response to the question of how communities and families support their children’s learning, all participants responded that they provided support to their children learning at home. The survey with household shows three categories of parent activities supported children’s learning. Some 25% of parents helped their children with teaching and encouraging children, and checking their children’s learning materials; 37% of parents helped with encouraging children to study and by checking their study record; and 38% of parents responded that they helped only by telling children to focus on studying.

The FGD results show that the most common activities parents had at home were encouraging their children's learning, but it was less common that they got involved in teaching their children. However, parents who have themselves had an education and who have better living standards paid more attention to supporting children's learning at home.

The interviews with school directors and teachers show that teachers encouraged parents to have conversations with teachers about their children's learning and teaching methods so that they can assist their children learning at home. For example, a librarian from Dauntret showed his passion to get parents involved in helping children's reading. He encouraged parents to come and observe their children's reading in the library so that they could help their children at home.

**Communicating:** According to the interview data, document review and the observation, the schools and communities used several methods of communication to send and receive information to/from the communities/schools, and the communication occurred in multi-dimensions (school-family-community). The study identified three main aspects of communication between the schools and communities: school-to-community communication, community-to-school communication and the agent of communication.

**School-to-community communication:** The schools used both written and verbal communication. Written tools were student study records and communication books which occurred only between teachers and families. Verbal tools were telephones, meetings and community outreach which occurred within schools, families and communities (interviews).

**Community-to-school communication:** According to Aphiwat primary school director, parents used telephones to communicate with teachers to receive information about their children's learning (P. Nop, personal communication, May 11, 2015). The FGD with parents shows that parents sometimes contacted the teachers or school director to follow up their children's learning at schools and clarify their children's homework. Some parents called teachers when they did not see the student study records at the end of the month. Some parents visited schools and some were invited to get further education information and information about their children's learning. According to the questionnaire survey, 98% of parents had been to the schools.

**Agents of communication:** The study found five groups of community people who were information carriers between the schools and the community. Those information carriers were students, SSCs, Buddhist monks, local authorities and parents who participated in the school. These people spread information about education throughout the villages. These groups were the connectors, agents, interpreters and mediators between the schools and communities who were found supportive for children's education.

**Volunteering:** Through the observations, all four of the schools had two formal groups each that carried out volunteering work for the schools: the School Support Committee (SSC) and the Student Council (SC). The deputy director of Samlot District Office of Education mentioned that SSCs were formed or reformed annually (V. Hang, personal communication, May 22, 2015). Each of SSCs had mixed and different components ranking from commune council, village leaders, monks, clergymen/women to retired teachers and teachers. These committees had roles in supporting the school operation and mobilizing community resources for school and education development (MoEYS, 2015).

All schools have Student Councils (SCs) consisted of mixed ages and genders from different grades in which student representatives from grade 3 to grade 6 were elected for SCs every year. The Aphiwat primary school director informed that the council was helpful for school and education development (P. Nop, personal communication, May 11, 2015). SCs were grouped, and each of the groups had specific tasks to perform such as enhancing school regulation; assisting classroom teaching and learning; emergency tasks for any incidents in the schools; administration and finance activities such as involving soliciting money; information; arts and culture; hygiene, sanitation, environment and sports; and children's club.

**Decision-making:** The interviews with the four school directors show SSCs participated in developing annual school development plans (SDPs), implementing and monitoring SDPs. The Aphiwat primary school director commented that the SSC leader and its members were invited to join formal meetings with teachers to develop school development plans at the beginning of the academic year (P. Nop, personal communication, May 11, 2015). SSCs were reported as being involved in the school administration and

budgeting. All school development plans and budget plans were made with the involvement of teachers and SSCs (Aphiwat Primary School, 2015). A Buddhist monk leader, who was a member of SSC reported participating in budget planning and fund raising. The research found that SSCs particularly the leaders had significant power in the decision making process in school development. Two school directors provided similar responses that SSC leaders were influential.

These findings indicate that those who provide the budget and who were officially sanctioned by the government were more likely to be able to wield influence in decision-making. The District office of Education (DoE) and commune council participated in the decision in the forming of SSCs. The deputy director of Samlot District office of Education also added that they were invited to the election meetings and other official meetings with schools (V. Hang, personal communication, May 22, 2015). In addition, Sung Commune leader informed that commune council members and/or leaders were invited to the SSC election process to give technical advice as well (M. Pom, personal communication, May 20, 2015).

**Collaborating:** Education stakeholders were observed have different ways of participation in education. The table below are the responses from participants during the study.

**Resource contribution:** Results of the study show that community people contributed their local resources in the school construction projects. The contributions were financial, labour and materials as shown in table 7-8 below.

**Table 7** Type of community contribution in the school development

Community contribution (n=40)	Percentage
Money	63%
Labor	20%
Materials	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 8** Financial contribution for school development (2015)

Schools	Financial Contribution(US\$)*	Government Budget (US\$)	Comparison with government budget
Aphiwat Samlot	438	2,668	16%
Dauntret & its annex school	1,425	2,373	60%
Sung 1	1,350	1,753	77%
Sre Reach	150	1,697	9%
<b>Total of the four schools</b>	<b>3,363</b>	<b>8,491</b>	<b>40%</b>

*Note:* \*The contribution was in Riel currency, but I converted into US dollars with rate of 4,000 riels per US dollar.

According to the interview and survey data, the sources of these financial contributions were teachers, parents, communities, local authorities, Buddhist pagodas, business people, microfinance institutions, banks and international charities.

*Material contribution:* Some community people were reported contributing materials rather than money, including Buddhist pagodas, business people and NGOs for any school construction projects. Those materials including sand, cement and bricks for the construction of school playgrounds and fences. Local authorities and communities contributed local materials and construction materials as well. The Sre Reach school director said that: Communities from the two villages contribute 10 bags of cements, 1 meter cube of sand to construct 40 square meters of concrete school yard (P.R. Nov, personal communication, May 20, 2015). The Dauntret primary school director also mentioned that the pagoda also provided food to the teachers when there is a religious occasion in the pagoda, food left over was usually brought to the teachers who were living in school (C. Chim, personal communication, May 18, 2015).

*Labour contribution:* The survey reveals that roughly 18% of the parents contributed labour in addition to their financial contribution in school development. For example, the Sre Reach primary school director stated that communities with skills in minor construction came to help to fix school buildings and maintain school facilities (P.R. Nov, personal communication, May 20, 2015). Some communities were mobilized by the village leader to construct the school basement. According to Dountret village leader and School Support Committee leader, all families in the village who had tractors were called in to help in this work (K. Prak, personal communication, May 18, 2015). In this way, communities spend their time and effort voluntarily to establish the school so that their children could access education.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Perceptions of education stakeholders towards community participation in education**

Overall, even if the participants had different understandings, a common view on community participation was resource contribution such as material, money, and labour. The diverse understandings of the research participants on community participation in education which were mentioned above are interrelated with each type of Epstein's participation frameworks, and their understandings were also correlated with the behaviors of the community towards the participation in education which are reported in the next section.

### **5.2 Degrees of community participation**

Analysis from this study showed a noticeable discrepancy among communities, parents and education stakeholders with regard to their participation in education. Their participation is spread over the various levels of participation described in Bray's degrees of community participation (Bray, 2001) which is shown in Table 9. The six types of community participation are situated into different levels according to the nature of their participation.

**Table 9** Types and degrees of community participation in education in the four primary schools in Samlot District

Forms of participation	Pseudo-Participation						Genuine participation
	Use of service (1)	Resources Contribution (2)	Attendance at meetings (3)	Consultation (4)	Involvement in delivery (5)	Delegated powers (6)	Real powers (7)
Parenting activities	Sent children to school and assisted children's daily schooling	n/a	Attended meetings and school events	Consulted with teachers about their children's learning progress	n/a	n/a	n/a
Learning at home	Encouraged children, taught children at home and checked homework	n/a	Attended meetings when invited by teachers	Consulted with teacher about how to help children's learning at home	n/a	n/a	n/a
Communicating	n/a	n/a	Received information in the meetings and school events	Teacher and parents communicated about children's learning in various ways	Communities and students shared information in the wider community	n/a	n/a
Volunteering	n/a	Communities voluntarily spent time to look after schools	SSCs, parents, local authorities attended the meetings and school events	Consultations among SSCs, local authorities for education/ school development	Education campaign, network for child protection, trainings	n/a	n/a
Decision-making	n/a	n/a	SSCs attended the meetings to establish annual school development plan	SSC conducted fund raising; DoE and local authorities gave technical advices	n/a	Decision making in planning, fund raising, construction,	n/a
Collaborating with the community	n/a	Contributed resources for school infrastructure	SSCs and parents attended the meeting to get information about school micro projects	SSCs consulted with the schools about how to do fund raising	Teachers and SSCs conducted fund raising together	Networking for child protection; SSCs raised funds	n/a

According to this table, 'parenting' and 'learning at home' are the lowest degree of participation, while 'communicating' and 'volunteering' reach service delivery and 'collaborating with community' and 'decision making' involves delegated power. These forms of participation are further explained below.

**Parenting activities:** Results of the study show that parental involvement in children's learning varied from home to school. The evidence was shown through the activities of sending their children to schools and supporting children daily schooling such as preparing their children for school with learning materials and appropriate dressing. Parents were also reported to approach teachers to get information about their children's learning progress. They consulted with their children's classroom teachers about their children's learning. These activities are counted as parenting because parents created opportunities for children to have knowledge through education (Bornstein, 2005; Epstein, 1995). The involvement demonstrates that parents cared for the future of their children. They responded to the government policy which suggests parents send their children to school. It also reflects parents' understandings of the value of education.

To assist parents with parenting, the schools were found to have encouraged parents to send their children to schools and advised parents to provide learning support to the children. Their suggestions indicated that teachers had the intention to support parents with regards to parenting. Teachers appear to understand the importance of the participation of the parental involvement in children's learning. However, no specific parenting skills were given to parents and caretakers, except for the consultations and informal discussions between parents and teachers about children's learning progress and challenges of children's learning. This indicates that the parenting knowledge, which is important to enhancing children's learning (Epstein, 1995), was not the focus of the schools. This might be because of no attention being given by the government to these skills.

**Learning at home:** Parents were found assisting their children studying at home after class. Participating parents were reported supporting their children at home with their studies but only a minority of them helped in teaching and checking their children's books, and most of the parents only provided encouragement and told the children to study before bed. The research findings were consistent with Nguon (2012) that educated parents tended to get much more involved in their children's learning than their counterparts. Poorer families had less involvement because they were busy working. Some educated parents came to the schools to consult with the teacher on their teaching method so that they could help their children's learning at home. In order to get parents more involved in supporting their children's learning at home, teachers motivated parents to come to talk with them about their children's learning progress. Teachers provided advice on how to assist their children.

From these findings it can be assumed that parents attempted to get involved in their children's learning, but this was under-utilised because of the limited abilities of the parents. The research findings show that most parents had difficulties in reading and writing which are barriers for them in supporting their children. In addition, parents appeared to have a dependent perception on teachers to help their children's learning. To assist parents, teachers seemed to have the intention to get involved in children's learning through suggesting to the parents to come and talk about their children's learning. Buddhist monks were also seen as helpful in encouraging parents to focus on their children's learning. They advised parents in religious ceremonies to help their children's learning. Despite the advice, the lack of focus of the parents in children's learning is a sign of inequality among children (Sachs, 2015). According to Sachs, this could have a long-term impact on the inequality among the next generation.

The degrees of participation of the parents in these two forms, parenting and learning at home, were found to be moderate influences. The parents were involved in discussions and informal talks without any evidence of taking part in actual decision-making. These forms of participation, therefore, are undoubtedly at the consultation level (level four of degrees of participation). Consultation, according to Bray (2001) is a degree to which the participants get involved in sharing information and discussing education programs and their children's learning progress.

**Communicating:** It is evident that community people and parents participated in education through communicating education information. The schools and parents communicated children's learning through

various aspects such as meetings, written and verbal communication tools. Non-parents, local authorities and other stakeholders received updated education information through meetings, letters and phone calls. Receiving the education information, communities and parents spread the information in their community so that community members understood the value of education and got involved in children's learning. These processes imply that parents and community members got involved in delivering and interpreting education information to a wider community. In addition, local authorities and SSCs were found using several means of communication such as meetings, phone calls and school visits.

The schools' diversified means of communication to reach parents and community members was evident with teachers using appropriate channels of communication with even the most remote families to follow up children's learning. The study found that the official written communication tools were challenging for some parents and community members because they had difficulties in reading and writing. It was hard to create a two-way communication system which resulted in less effective communication as suggested by Epstein (1995, 2004). It was fortunate then, that the schools had the community, parents and SSCs to assist spreading information to the wider community, especially those with lower levels of literacy.

These findings show that the written communication tools which were used officially to communicate children's learning performance between schools and parents tended to be not always appropriate and sometimes ineffective due to the ability to read and write of the parents. The other options that could be applied such as meetings, home visits and phone calls require an added commitment of the teachers and the parents themselves.

**Volunteering:** The study found two groups in each school that consisted of volunteers. School Support Committee (SSCs) which were community representatives in the schools had mixed members such as local authorities, retired teachers, Buddhist monks, clergy people and parents. These people participated in the committee voluntarily. SSCs participated in the meetings with teachers to develop school development plan and discuss about school and education development; conducted fundraising for school development; and looking after school properties. Students through Student Council (SCs) assisted the schools in environment, learning, school safety and other administrative works in the schools. In addition, in the research area, the study found active Youth Club (YCs) supported by World Vision Cambodia (WVC) to provided awareness raising on child protection, domestic violence and hygiene and sanitation in the community and schools. Community members, families and local authorities were volunteers who participated in the school meetings and some schools events when they were invited. The study did not find any voluntary activities related to curriculum development, as this area seemed to be left to the teachers.

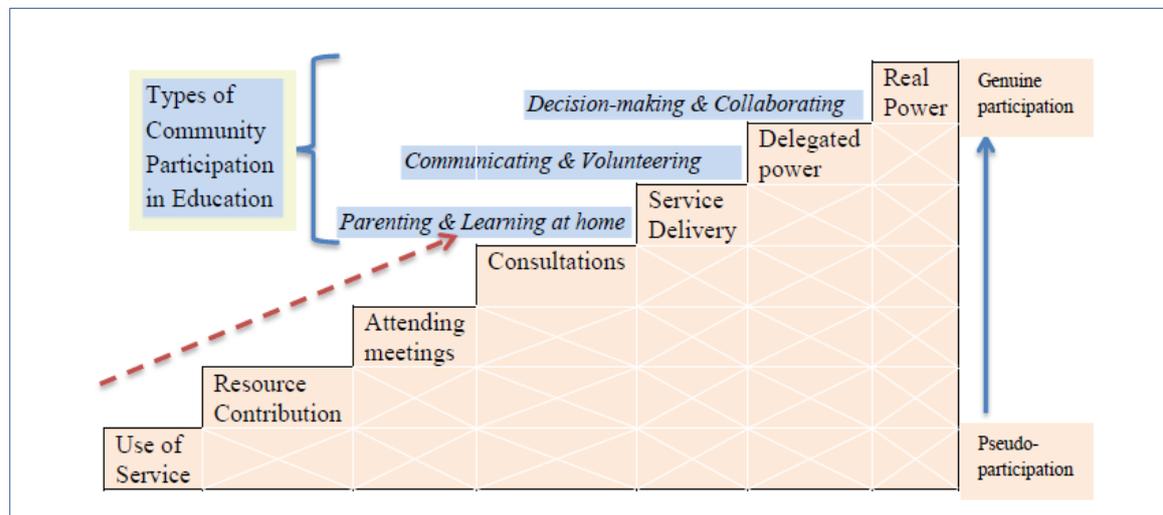
These findings demonstrate that community people had a strong commitment to helping to improve schools and education. Even if the schools did not provide training to the volunteer groups, the schools received the assistant from NGOs to build the capacity of teachers and SSCs as well as Youth Clubs.

The research findings above indicate that community people got involved in education through communicating education information and voluntary work to assist the schools. Despite no evidence of unequal power relations between the schools and community people, these community people were reported to be active in spreading education information. The nature of the involvement of the community and parents in education above matched the fifth degree of participation (Bray, 2000) which has a tendency of becoming between the schools and community as described by Arnstein (1969).

**Decision-making:** Participation in decision-making is the involvement of parents and community members in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities for school and education development through the school committee (Epstein, 1992, 1995, 2006; Epstein & Salinas, 2004). It is evident from the findings that SSCs had various rights and a degree of power in the decision-making process. Schools and SSCs were observed sharing power in decision-making. SSCs were normally invited to participate in establishing school development plans and the budget plans, and in monitoring and evaluating education programs and school development projects. The schools worked in partnership with SSCs for education and school development where power was distributed. Arnstein (1969) suggests that: "power is in fact redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power holders" (p.221). It became clear that genuine participation lies where power is distributed among participants, reflecting the work of Bray (2001).

**Collaborating with the community:** This form of participation is concerned with the collaboration of the schools, agencies, businesses, organizations and other groups to share responsibility for improving schools and education (Epstein, 1992, 1995, 2006). Collaborative activities of the community and parents were reported to take place at different levels ranking from ‘resource contribution’ to ‘delegated power’. The community, parents, students, NGOs, Buddhist monks, teachers and local authorities were reported as working collaboratively on school construction, collecting children to go to school, networking for child protection and capacity building. In this case, SSCs were reported to be a working partner in fundraising for school development. Community resources were mobilized. This participation indicates that community and teachers respected each other in decision-making. Thus, their collaborative participation can be assumed as reaching Bray’s level of ‘delegated power’.

The participation of community in decision-making and collaborating forms (delegated power) is close to genuine participation. According to Bray (2001), genuine participation is the participation in which all participants have equal rights in decision making (it is the partnership rung in Arnstein, 1969). The degrees of community participation in education can be summarized in the following figure 1 below.



**Figure 1** Degrees of participation in education in four schools of Samlot District

### 5.3 Community participation policy and practices

The fifth dimension of the policy of Child Friendly Schools (CFS) has as an outcome, to promote the relationship and participation between/of schools and communities in order that this relationship becomes a collective resource for school/education development (MoEYS, 2007). The school Support Committee (SSCs) framework was developed to include community representatives in the schools. The basic idea of this framework was to enhance ownership of the community within the schools because the schools are community assets where community involvement is necessary (MoEY, 2014a). According to this policy, the Cambodian government attempts to work in tandem with communities to improve education. The guideline suggests mixed components of SSC to extend community representativeness. The research findings to a certain extent reflect that this community participation policy is working effectively.

The structure of SSCs of the four schools shows strong power and the ability of community resource mobilization. According to the study, the four remote primary schools had village leaders or retired teachers as leaders of the committee. This included Buddhist monks, the elderly and parents as well as commune authorities who were also on the board of management of the SSC. This collective, mixed component committee enables the SSCs to gain more power in their decision-making in education development as DeRienzo (2008) has suggested that power appears when people are collective. In addition, the inclusion of such a mixed group in the committee increases the ability of the SSCs towards pooling resources from a wider section of the community (De Beer, 2006; Rose, 2003). According to Pellini (2007), local authorities and the

elderly in Cambodian society are highly respected so by including them in the committees they increase the SSCs' power.

SSCs were found to be active in most aspects of participation and especially in the decision making in school development plans. The most commonly observed tasks that the study found were community resource mobilization. According to the research findings, SSCs helped the schools in sourcing resources from community members for school construction and school renovation activities. Community people could indirectly participate in education through their resource contribution through SSCs.

In spite of this, the SSCs structure could be more inclusive of other governmental departments and agents such as health centres and district agriculture offices, educated families or retired better off people so they too can influence the participation practice. A greater, more multi-sectoral committee could enhance the ability of SSCs to support school/education development not only through mobilizing resources, but also promoting the culture of sharing and participation within the community.

#### **5.4 Traditional practices of community participation**

The results of the study show that the most common form of participation in education was resource contribution. Community people and families contributed their available resources such as money, materials and labour in school renovations and environment improvements when requested by the schools. Their contributions were shown to be important for school development as it could respond to the real needs of the schools, unlike the government budget which could not respond so quickly. The practices reported in the study reflect the contention of Rose (2003) that community contribution is desirable when public resources are insufficient.

This finding reflects the social norms and culture of the local community towards the participation in education. This resource contribution practice has been reportedly practiced in Cambodian society in the past. According to Pellini (2007); Clayton (2005) after the decolonization period and the destruction by civil war in the 1980s, the government of Cambodia called for resource contribution for schools' construction for children's learning. Community resources were significantly complementary to the challenging budget shortage of the government for education development. This practice has been passed on to the next generation as presented in my study. In line with the findings of NGO (2015), this study shows that community people become participatory when called for contributions. This trend of participation practice may stay unchanged unless community people change their perception about what contribution and participation entails.

The practice of resource contribution influences the ways local people construct their knowledge about community participation in education. According to the research findings, community people perceived participation in education as resource contribution in school development more than their involvement in their children's learning. There is some supporting evidence that the schools mobilized community people to provide resource contributions for physical infrastructure and environment improvement. The perception could be influenced by the government policies and guidelines and the policy interpretation. According to the SSC's guideline, the focus of participation is resource contribution, which may mean that it seems more important and is prioritized over other forms of participation.

It is true that a good school environment and facilities could have emotionally positive impacts on children and attract children to schools (Bernstein & Brannen, 2013). It can be substantially beneficial in enhancing children's learning outcome when it is a necessity and appropriately reflects the real situations and needs of the schools and the availability of the resources. For instance, kindergarten renovation is very important and beneficial for children's learning as little children should have appropriate classrooms to learn in and they are likely to come to school regularly if the environment is a positive one. Nevertheless, in my opinion, some school facility construction tends to be wasteful such as the animal statues and Buddha statues even though these statues were educative for children. They did not reflect the real needs of the schools. In this example, the community of people suffer economic hardship and 45% of the community in the study area were poor (RGC, 2014). In addition, according to the research findings, farmers encountered late rainfall in the current year which affected their crops. Consequently, this affected the incomes of the farmers. On top of their hardship, communities were called on for multi-sectoral development projects including health, agriculture and education. Thus, there are many demands on farmers who are already struggling financially.

Even though resource contribution was of importance for school development, in my opinion the practice tended to narrow the concept of participation. In addition, it was likely to affect the behaviour of community people towards their participation. This practice should be changed through changing the perception of teachers and the community. The schools should consider the capacity of the school and community when proposing school development projects. To optimize the community resources, the schools should run development projects that contextually benefit children's learning. The school administrators should shift their focus to the participation for children's learning, although attention to collecting children to schools should still be made. More attention could go on increasing numeracy and literacy skills rather than certain structures or facilities.

### **5.5 Schools and SSCs for participation**

On top of the six types of community participation in education, the study investigated the leading roles of the schools and community to mobilize community participation. The schools were found to possess leadership characteristics that entrusted the communities to get involved. The study found the schools were transparent in the school administration. The schools presented their plans to the community members, and the money that community members contributed was displayed on the school facilities. School staff were reported as having good relationships and being good network builders. They built connections with community members and encouraged community people to get involved in children's education.

SSCs were reported as having positive leadership roles in supporting education programs in the schools. More specifically, SSC leaders were the main supporters for school development. They were confident and powerful in the community. Because they were local authorities and former school directors, SSC leaders of the four schools gained high respect from the community and teachers. They were reported to have commitment in supporting the schools as well.

The findings of the current study were consistent with Sanders in terms of the factors that enhanced community participation in education. Sanders (2001) found that leadership roles of the school leaders were important for making partnerships between school, family and community. This contention indicates that to ensure the six types of Epstein's participation take place, school leaders and staff could play roles in facilitation, coordination, designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the community participation in education.

Likewise, this research found that the leading roles of the schools and SSCs were crucial to enabling community participation in education. School directors and SSC leaders were found playing roles as communicators and community mobilizers in the schools and in the community. However, the school directors and SSC leaders needed strong management and leadership skills so that they could mobilize community participation (Pellini, 2007). Better leadership and management skills could enable the school and SSCs to more effectively mobilize community members and civil society to participate in education, such as providing training in parenting skills to parents and teachers.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study discovered a range of social practices in community participation in education, in the four remote schools in Samlot district, Battambang province, Cambodia. The study found that the participation behaviours of the local people in education were influenced by traditional practices. People participated in education largely through resource contribution for their school's physical development. As resource contribution was thought to be important for education, the schools and community leaders as well as education stakeholders tended to prioritize mobilizing the community to contribute their own resources in school development. This behaviour had been passed on from generation to generation. Not only in Cambodia, but also in many other developing countries. This local practice informs the broad body of literature not only in education sector, but also in multi-sector development that local, remote people appeared to participate in development in different ways. They also have different definitions of participation.

In spite of this, there was a sign of behavioral changes towards improving education. Even though the study did not explore specifically the involvement of parents in their children's learning at home, there were some indications of the increase in attention of parents and the community in children's learning. This focuses less on the bricks and mortar of buildings and more on how parents can support their children at home

and is a welcome change. Parents were likely to have more involvement in their children's learning if they were aware of how to provide support. This study informs the government and education stakeholders that parents need their assistance to know how to provide quality support to their children. Due to a low level of literacy and a disrupted education system from past historical times, parents today need support to know how to assist their children in their studies. This training and information may include knowledge about the curriculum, ideas for helping improve literacy and numeracy at home and knowledge about children's developmental stages.

This study has also provided useful information to non-governmental organizations and donors that are focusing on education to pay extra attention on parenting-for-education for parents. Without the skills to support their children in education, parents who are often struggling financially may find it difficult to participate when the most common form is through resource contribution. This study has highlighted that this traditional perception may need some challenging and support for parents should be a priority for the government, NGOs and others in the education sector.

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