Curriculum development in Cambodia: neo-colonialism or social practice?

Popkewitz (1997) argues that curriculum is:

a particular, historically formed knowledge that inscribes rules and standards by which we “reason” about the world and our “self” as a productive member of that world … Curriculum is a disciplining technology that directs how the individual is to act, feel, talk and “see” the world and “self”. As such, curriculum is a form of social regulation’. (p. 132).

Writers such as Apple have drawn on the work of Gramsci to extend this argument to identity the school curriculum as ‘a critical factor in enhancing the ideological dominance of one group of people or one class over less powerful groups of people or classes’ (p. 54).

At the same time, scholars in the field of aid, development and education such as Arnove have argued that ‘many [educational aid and development] reforms [are]… impositions of foreign values, languages, institutional forms, and practice’ (1980, p. 62). Matusda (p. 188) puts the same view more strongly: ‘international education assistance should be seen as part of a worldwide process of neoimperialism, dependency, and hegemony in which ideas, values, and knowledge associated with donor countries are privileged’

The school curriculum that might be produced in a ‘developing’ country, then, as a result of aid provided through an education sector, should, if these arguments are accepted, be seen as an instrument to ‘disseminate the dominant political and economic ways of thinking of powerful countries to

1 See also Altbach (1977) who argues that ‘the purpose of education in many Third World societies was altered by colonialism, changing in some cases from a largely religious and cultural mission to a certifying institution with a role in social mobility and access to power in the new colonial political and economic system’

2 I, like many others, would much prefer to use an alternative to the common terms ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ when categorising countries. As far back as 1955, Niculescu (p. 546) pointed out one of the difficulties associated with these terms:

   The present meaning of ‘under-developed’ has an historical bias: development seems to be understood as from some common level defined in terms of the Western industrial and agrarian revolution … Though this is a perfectly legitimate historical approach, it is not only useless but can also be very confusing when the attention is turned from the past accomplishments to the future.

A second difficulty with these terms is that they position one group of countries – the economically powerful – as at a desirable end-point with no allowance for any critique of the possibly less-desirable characteristics of those societies. Conversely, the other group – the economically weak – are positioned as having as their only desirable goal the replication of the characteristics of the ‘developed’ group with no possibility of identifying characteristics of their own society that may be beneficial to the ‘developed’ societies. Alternate categorisations, however, such as ‘majority’ world or ‘two-thirds world’ are static categories that may well be shortly out of date with the continued growth in China and India. In the absence of an alternative, I continue, reluctantly, to use the terms ‘developed’ and ‘developing’. 
less-powerful countries’ (Clayton, 1995, p. 15) and that serves to perpetuate social stratification.

This paper explores these propositions through the examination of an aid-funded curriculum reform project in Cambodia in 2003. As such, it serves as an example of what Apple (1995, p. x) characterizes as a ‘focus on the “microlevel” as a site of the political’.

The project under examination was part of the Education Sector Development Project (ESDP) funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB 1865/CAM). It was a project primarily focused on the construction of new school buildings, but included in the project design was a small component that provided technical assistance to the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) to review the structure of the upper secondary curriculum. The terms of reference for this component included the following:

(i) A review of the official curricula for Grades 10 to 12 and instructional materials and teachers’ manuals for Grade 10
(ii) Recommendations for the curricula, instructional materials and teachers’ manuals
(iii) A model of a reformed upper secondary curriculum and an implementation plan
(iv) A program of capacity building of PRD staff in curriculum development and curriculum and textbook review and evaluation

The purpose of this paper is to outline and examine the processes and the outcomes of one aspect of this particular project and to ask the following questions: to what extent, if at all, was this reform project a process of cultural colonisation, an example of the imposition of Western thoughts and analysis in the guise of an aid and development project? To what extent were the Cambodian recipients of aid passive players in the process, and to what extent were they active agents able to shape programs, through both overt and covert participation and resistance? Whose voices were most influential in the process of developing the project? What influence and power did different stakeholders bring to the process, and how was this influence and power exerted? What motivated the different stakeholders, and how were these motivations manifest?

A brief background note on the complex and fraught history of education and curriculum in Cambodia is necessary at this point.

The history of curriculum development in Cambodia is a history of colonialism (for a full discussion of the history of education in Cambodia, see Ayers, 2000). The development of a formal, modern education system began with the declaration of a French protectorate over Cambodia in 1863 and the subsequent attempts by the French in the early 1900s to develop the education system of the *wats* (*wats* were – and continue to be - Buddhist temples, but, as they serve both as places of residence for monks and as sites of education, are closer to Western Christian monasteries than our contemporary western concept of ‘temples’) to produce a civil service that would both understand the administrative requirements of the modern state
and be compliant with the wishes of the colonial administration, or, as an early observer of Cambodian education noted, to ‘train boys for the higher ranks of the civil service’ (Bilodeau, 1954, p. 16 – 18). This was consistent with the efforts by France at this time to consolidate its position across French Indo-China. This system remained in place, despite a process of Khmerisation through the 1950s–60s that saw the language of instruction change from French to Khmer. The education system was then all but destroyed in the 1970s, a result first of civil war and then the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 – 79. The Vietnamese, who invaded Cambodia and defeated the Khmer Rouge in 1979, oversaw the initial rebuilding of the education system up until the Paris Peace Accord of 1991. This was followed by the first national election in 1993 and a flood of international advisers funded by a wide range of multi-lateral and bi-lateral donors who, rather than providing budget program support to the Government of Cambodia, funded a series of projects and programs that reflected the donors’ beliefs about the priorities for education reform rather than necessarily a direction determined by Cambodian officials. The history of education in Cambodia from the early 1980s to the present is therefore entangled with the role of international aid and development programs and organizations and the individuals associated with them\(^3\).

By the late 1990s, the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport had, under the strong influence of a range of donors and international consultants, both extended the years of schooling from 11 to 12 (the ‘6+3+3’ model: 6 years of primary education followed by three of lower secondary and three of upper secondary) and embarked on a strategic planning exercise to set out the path for the re-building and development of the education system. Policies for the structure of the education system – years of schooling, class sizes and budget allocations – were developed, but no policy about what should be taught in schools had been developed. With its multiplicity of subjects and emphasis on academic rather than applied learning, the curriculum was, at the beginning of the new millennium, still very much a reflection of the colonial education system imposed by France.

Among the critical issues identified was the curriculum content and structure that was most ‘appropriate’ for Cambodia, given its stage of ‘development’. This included determining the place that ‘life skills’ should have in the formal school curriculum, the place of the teaching and learning of traditional agrarian skills together with the kinds of thinking associated with modernity, the role of the school as a site of moral education, the teaching of foreign languages and the role of public-private partnerships in the delivery of education.

I need to declare my own interest in these questions, an interest that goes beyond this academic inquiry. In May 2003 I was asked to assist as the ‘curriculum expert’ for the ESDP project. The work I undertook initially was, in

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\(^3\) Cambodia of course is not alone in this regard. The education sector in developing countries has been a particular target of international aid and development agencies. For example, in the period 1963 – 2001 The World Bank alone distributed total of $30 billion to education programs (Mbida-Essama, 2002, p. 284),
accordance with the terms of reference, focussed on the upper secondary curriculum (Grades 10 – 12). As a result of this initial work, I was asked by the MoEYS to assist in the development and drafting of the new curriculum policy. The culmination of this work was the signing by the Minister for Education, Youth and Sport in December 2004 of a document titled, *Policy for Curriculum Development 2005 – 2009*. This document set out the policy position of the Department of Education, Youth and Sport on the aims and objectives of each stage of schooling, the number of hours of schooling, the subjects that would be taught at each stage of school and the number of hours that should be allocated.4

While the document itself is of insignificant length – it is only 15 pages in total – unpacking the language of the document and the processes that surrounded its development of the document (including my own role as an external consultant) potentially provides a rich source of data and a specific lens through which to examine fundamental issues related to education, curriculum, aid and development.5 In this paper, I investigate these issues through a focus on one specific component of the reform project, that of the structure of the upper secondary curriculum.

In 2003, Cambodia’s upper secondary education system was fundamentally unchanged from the program that had been imported directly from the French *baccalaureate* program when formal secondary education commenced in the 1960s. The only real difference was that where the *baccalaureate* provides for students to choose between three streams of study, Cambodia provided a choice of two, but even this was a choice in theory only. In practice, all students followed exactly the same course of study.

One reason for this was that secondary education, and upper secondary education in particular, was (and is still) only available to and taken up by a small minority of Cambodian students. For example, in the 2003-04 school year, the enrolment ratio at upper secondary level was 8.1% compared to 21.3% at lower secondary and 90.1% at primary. One reason for the lack of demand was revealed in a 1999 tracer study on the destination of Grade 9 and Grade 12 students that found ‘there appears to be little value added in job

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4 One of the questions attached to this study, therefore, is my own role as ‘curriculum worker’ (to use Apple’s term), and to examine the extent to which my role validates or otherwise Apple’s claim that ‘the consciousness of curriculum workers themselves … can be seen a latently political and often somewhat conservative’ and provides an opportunity to investigate the ‘role of the “intellectual” in enhancing hegemony’ (Apple, 2004, p. 110).

5 There are three sources of data for this study. The first is a critical examination of the draft and final version of *Policy for Curriculum Development*, minutes of meetings and workshops held in the course of the development of the document and reports from a range of national and international consultants. The second is twenty interviews conducted with a range of national and international officials. These include interviews with both senior and more junior officials directly involved in the preparation, drafting and negotiation of the *Policy for Curriculum Development*, international consultants and representatives of the major donor institutions. The third is Notes from numerous conversations, meetings and discussions, both formal and informal, that I participated in both in the four months I spent working with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport on the upper secondary curriculum and the *Policy for Curriculum Development* in 2003 and then nearly three years further work with the MoEYS, from May 2004 to December 2006.
terms for grade 12 graduates compared to grade 9’ and ‘the overriding feature is that the significant investment be parents in secondary schooling brings little noticeable immediate economic returns … from the three additional years in grades 10 – 12.’

By 2003, however, it was clear that demand for upper secondary education would increase significantly because of the success that had been achieved in terms of increasing primary school enrolments.

The policy on upper secondary education that emerged in the Policy for Curriculum Development 2005 – 2009 marked a radical break with this past. It set out a new structure for the upper secondary school curriculum. Under the new structure, while some subjects remained compulsory, students would be able to choose from a range of elective subjects. The number of subjects students would take was cut from 14 to 6. In addition, students would have the opportunity to include vocationally-oriented subjects as part of their upper secondary school course. The tables below show the curriculum structure as it existed at the time of the reform proposal, and the new proposed structure.

Table 1: Existing upper secondary curriculum structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY A</th>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>HOURS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign Languages</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Earth Science</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>History</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moral-Civics studies</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology-House Keeping</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical Education and Sports</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Activities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Proposed new upper secondary curriculum structure (students choose a minimum of one and a maximum of two Subjects from each Subject Area)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT AREA</th>
<th>SUBJECTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KHMER</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MATHEMATICS</td>
<td>Basic OR Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY</td>
<td>Physics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Earth Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ICT/Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREIGN LANGUAGES/ SELF-STUDY</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL STUDIES</td>
<td>Geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home Economics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The most significant aspect of this reform was the capacity for student choice that was introduced. The following Khmer proverb points to the break this marks not only with previous practice in education but with the foundations of Cambodian culture:

Don't reject the crooked road and don't take the straight one; instead, take the road travelled by the ancestors (Khmer proverb cited in Fisher-Nguyen, p. 99).

The concept of the value of personal choice is a profoundly culturally-relative value and reflects a deeply individualistic world-view. The concepts of individual pathways and autonomy that are the assumptions behind a system that allows for student subject choice are anathema to a society with a cultural orientation that is collectivist rather than individual, and where the emphasis in the moral education of young people is on the importance of demonstrating an attitude of respect for elders rather than making a capacity for independence. For a culture based on filial ties and patronage, individual choice is not something to be valued or sought-after.

Was the proposal to introduce a system of student choice, so profoundly connected with Western traditions and practices and so anathema to Cambodians, an example of aid as cultural imperialism? Did it represent an attempt to break down traditional patterns of Cambodian life and replace them with the kinds of patterns associated with modernity? If so, what was it that caused Cambodian officials to change their views so significantly? How does an examination of this instance reveal more broadly the interactions between donors and recipients, in particular the agency exercised by recipients?

One starting point to examining these questions is to ask: How did the issues around the number of subjects students study at upper secondary school come to be identified and defined as a ‘problem’? What set of values was brought to bear to determine that these issues should be categorised as problems? Were these values made explicit and shared or were they values held only by those whose positions enabled their opinions to be most heard? Were these issues generally regarded as ‘problems’ or were they only regarded as ‘problems’ by a few?

The identification of the number of subjects students were required to take as a problem was the result of views expressed by the present writer, and set out in an initial proposal by the present writer and a colleague from the MoEYS, Prak Polla, who strongly supported the proposal. It is important to note the Prak Polla was one of the few younger officials from the Ministry of Education who had studied abroad (in England and Singapore), and in a non-French system. Arguably, Polla had internalised the values of the western system during his time of international study.
This proposal was first presented to a workshop of officials of the Pedagogical Research Department on 5 June 2003 to obtain initial responses. The workshop was chaired by H.E. Koeu Nay Leang, the Director-General of the General Department of Education.

An analysis of the feedback from the workshop records that, in response to a question about whether to implement the new proposal or not, 6 of 8 groups ‘voted for the new proposal’ while the other 2 did not support the new proposal. The notes from the meetings concluded that ‘although there were few participants thought that the new proposal of the upper secondary curriculum cannot implement, majority of participant agreed with the new model and showed their understanding and support for the implementation’ (Polla, 2003).

In response to the focus question, ‘What, in your view, are the three most important benefits that will be produced by the new proposal?’ the most common responses were that teachers and students would have more time for each subject, that students would be happier because they could choose their subjects and this would help them to ‘learn to take responsibility for themselves’. These initial responses in themselves already showed a shift toward an alignment with ‘Western’ values of individual independence and responsibility. There were, however, a number of senior officials who were resistant to the proposals. One such official was the Director of the Pedagogical Research Department, Mrs Ton Sa Im, who expressed concern that students would not have the knowledge necessary to make the right choices about subjects.

However, following a visit to Australia for a conference and study tour from 15 – 21 June 2003, just two weeks after the initial workshop, that included visits to secondary schools in Australia, Mrs Ton Sa Im became an enthusiastic and effective advocate of the proposed reform.

The impact of Mrs Ton Sa Im’s advocacy was apparent as the process for debating the proposed reform continued. It is important to note that this debate continued following the end of the external technical assistance. For example, a consultation meeting held on 17 March 2004 was chaired by H.E. Im Sethy, Secretary of State, and attended by 28 participants. The purpose was to discuss and reach agreement on what was now the 5th draft of the Policy for Curriculum Development. The now general support for the principles behind the proposals for the new upper secondary curriculum were evident in the opening remarks of H.E. Im Sethy and H.E. Keou Nay Leang. H.E. Im Sethy commented, ‘Grades 11-12 is not a streaming model but a combination to allow students to choose which subject to study according to their preferences and talent. Although, it is foreseen that the new structure may not be fully implemented for the next 2 or 3 years but it provide a future vision for us’. H.E. Keou Nay Leang added, ‘Much reform occurs in upper secondary level … This change is to cater for students’ interests and benefit. If we let them learn all the subjects like the current curriculum it is a waste of time for some students who learning subjects do not reflect their future careers’. (Minutes of third MoEYS roundtable consultation, 17 March 2004)
How is this process to be regarded? Was the introduction of the idea of choice of subjects, which was such a central component of the new proposal, an imposition of a mode of thought and analysis or was is closer to a process of borrowing, where the ‘culture and ideologies of powerful countries are borrowed by less-powerful countries, not imposed on them’ (Clayton, 1995, p. 13)?

There is a growing literature on the process of educational ‘borrowing’, both between developed countries and borrowing by developing countries from developed countries. Researchers in this field argue that the phenomena of borrowing cannot be examined ‘using an approach in which the unit of analysis is solely the nation-state’, rather, an approach that acknowledges the ‘multiple clusters of interrelations’ is needed (Vavrus, 2004, p. 144).

Prak Polla’s reflections on the crucial factors that contributed to the decision to finally approve the new curriculum policy indeed reveal ‘multiple cluster to interrelations’ that produced this outcome.

Polla argues that the initial key factor was the proposal initially came from a significant donor, and so the Ministry had to at least give the appearance of giving serious consideration to the model. But, he argues, there were then three other factors that then became more important.

The first of these was a recognition that the existing system of upper secondary education was ‘not working’. There was an awareness among Ministry officials, Polla argued, of the findings of the Tracer Study that showed upper secondary education was of little benefit in its existing form and structure, and hence that change of some form was required.

The second was that the majority of officials were convinced, especially when presented with studies that showed how many other countries, especially other Asian countries, incorporated a form of choice into their upper secondary curriculum structure, that the proposed model was a structure that would provide a better quality of schooling. In this was found a clear example of the process of externalisation examined by Schriewer and Steiner-Khamsi, that is ‘how the borrowing of educational models external to a country serves to legitimise controversial changes in the home country’ (Vavrus, p. 141). Steiner-Khamsi has noted that externalisation is ‘particularly relevant during periods of social and political transformation when past domestic experiences may be cast aside in favour of models and ideas from elsewhere’ (cited in Vavrus, p. 147).6, while Spreen argues that in the stage of ‘external transactions’ groups outside the dominant system ‘engage external references to negotiate with the government of the day … interest groups use das internationale argument, whereby foreign models and ideas are circulated

6 Spreen, however, argues that the process of externalisation is more complex than this. She argues that a model proposed by Archer to describe policy formation is also applicable to externalisation. Archer’s model (see Spreen, p. 103) proposed three stages of policy formation: external transactions, political manipulation and internal initiative. There is not the space in this paper to explore this issue more fully.
and reviewed for their relevance and applicability; often, their international status alone lends them credibility and authority (Spreen, p. 104)

Polla’s third reason for the eventual support for the reform is that on-going UNICEF funding for his own position as a technical consultant enabled the advocacy of the reform to continue which resulted in the eventual general support. Polla argues that had UNICEF funding not been available to support his position, then the Ministry would have had their attention taken by other projects and the Policy would have languished. This is a critical point because it suggests the policy agenda is not simply influenced but is determined by the external donor agencies. The stage and process of ‘ownership and internal initiative’ can clearly be identified and observed, but what is owned and shaped is not that which is identified by local actors as most important but that which donors determine should be supported.

This ‘micro-level’ example suggests a mechanistic or linear application of the concept of hegemony as framework to analyse the processes that constituted this particular instance of an educational aid and development process is unsustainable. Clearly, the ‘recipient’ officials were active agents in determining the course of the project.

Neither is an interpretation of their agency as a form either of counter-hegemony (or resistance) or anti-hegemony sustainable. Maclure (2006, p. 165) defines counter-hegemony as an expression of confrontation and opposition to a dominant hegemony, while anti-hegemony is a process that works to oppose the singular ideology of any form of hegemony or counter-hegemony.

Rather, the metaphors that may provide a more productive tools of analysis are those that can be appropriated from the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, namely the application of Bourdieu’s concepts of the ‘field’ and the ‘game’ to this particular site of educational aid and development. For Bourdieu, fields are ‘networks of social relations, structured systems of social positions within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over resources, stakes and access’ (Mathewson, 2001), while the ‘game’ is Bourdieu’s metaphor for the interactions that take place within a particular ‘field’.

The agency of Cambodian officials suggests the decisions that were made about the reform of the upper secondary curriculum in Cambodia were not examples of a crude form of neo-colonialist imposition of an imported set of views and values. Nor, however, were they decisions made in a vacuum, unaffected by the actual and prospective availability of material resources and the influence that the carriage of such resources brings.

Rather, they were decisions made within the constraints of the rules and patterns of the aid and development ‘game’, decisions that resulted from myriad interactions between the different players in the ‘field’ of this instance of aid and development.


