



POLICY BRIEF

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Teacher Trainees and Students:

The Case of the National Institute for Special Education (NISE) and Five High Schools for Special Education in Cambodia



Disclaimer

This study was supported by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through The Asia Foundation's Ponlok Chomnes: Data and Dialogue for Development in Cambodia Program. The views expressed in this study are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government or The Asia Foundation, nor National Institute for Special Education.

Policy Recommendations

These policy recommendations are the results of the research study on “Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Teacher Trainees and Students: The Case of the National Institute for Special Education (NISE) and Five High Schools for Special Education in Cambodia.” This policy brief proposes six policy alternatives:

Provide

social supports and raise awareness about how to support youth and children with disabilities during crises

Create

learning pods, which are small groups of children who come together to learn and socialize. The learning pods are used for students who do not have internet access or adult support at home

Reduce

content delivery and adjust instructional methods, which is one of the factors that determine deaf students’ success in education using online distance learning

Formalize

training for the students on the use of the online platform prior to the first class, with support from IT experts and an interpreter

Provide

necessary high-quality equipment and technology and improve accessibility and usage of learning materials. Many institutions have digitized their content; however, it is still inaccessible due to a lack of captioning and unclear audio, among other issues

Improve

collaboration and partnership, focusing on the important role played by the government, teachers, parents, and specialists in improving education outcomes for deaf students

Introduction

IN CAMBODIA

689,532

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

74.3%

PARTIAL DISABILITIES

19.4%

SERIOUS DISABILITIES

6.3%

ABSOLUTE DISABILITIES

Persons with disabilities are protected by international conventions and local laws aiming to ensure that persons with disabilities can fully enjoy freedoms and rights, including but not limited to the right to non-discrimination, right to participation and inclusion in society, right to equality in opportunities, right to accessibilities and equal treatments, and that their dignities are respected as human beings.



Similarly, Cambodia's Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities promulgated on July 3, 2009.

The rights of persons with disabilities specifically to education are protected and materialized through other legal instruments including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Constitution of Cambodia, and Cambodia's Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Persons with disabilities have been recognized through various policies, including National Strategy on Persons with Disabilities 2019-2023.

Related to the promotion of the education of persons with disabilities in Cambodia, special education has been the focus of the Government of Cambodia through adoption of the Policy on Education for Children with Disabilities in 2008 which was revised as the Policy on Inclusive Education by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) in 2018.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cambodia starting in 2020 caused a widespread public health crisis and consequently led to social and economic difficulties for individuals, businesses, and the government.

The crisis had adverse impacts for persons with disabilities due to

- 1 job loss because of the suspension or closure of businesses;
- 2 adherence to social distancing measures;
- 3 travel restrictions;
- 4 gathering restrictions and lockdowns;
- 5 suffering from school closures;
- 6 and other COVID-19 pandemic preventive measures.

COVID-19 has also impacted education on many fronts, which pose a challenge to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 4. The MoEYS made the decision to close all educational institutions, including all public and private schools, on March 16, 2020. The school closures resulted in the disruption of learning in all of Cambodia's **13,482 schools**, affecting **3,210,285 students (50 percent female)**, and **93,225 teachers** (MoEYS, 2021). Within the education sector, students with disabilities are found to be uniquely and severely impacted by the pandemic. This analysis is based on this case study conducted at the National Institute for Special Education (NISE) and five High Schools for Special Education in Cambodia.

Methodology



Desk reviews



Secondary data analysis



Qualitative interviews

The research team reviewed laws, policies, and existing reports on the social and economic impacts of Covid-19 on peoples with disabilities in Cambodia. The team also reviewed published articles, journal articles and grey literature, as well as websites and reports, related to the impacts of Covid-19 on students with disabilities both in Cambodia and in other countries. A workshop was also organized to verify the results with relevant stakeholders.

Desk reviews of laws, policies, strategies related to disabilities and COVID-19 responses for disabilities

Key informant interviews and focus group discussions (9 school management members, 22 teachers, 35 deaf students and 33 blind students from 5 high schools for special education, 21 teacher trainees from NISE, and 10 parents)

Findings from the interviews were grouped into themes

Findings were triangulated with literature – reports, journal articles, websites, etc.

Dissemination/Validation Workshop

Key Findings

Impacts of COVID-19 on Students with Disabilities in Cambodia

Students with visual and auditory disabilities were impacted by the changes to their learning environment. All schools were closed after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a few months later, online learning modes were introduced.

Online learning modes to assist students with visual and auditory disability



TV programs



Video clips

In addition, teachers were encouraged to produce short videos to send to students.

The delivery modes of teaching or communication between the teachers and students



Facebook Messenger



Telegram

Teachers sent video clips and study materials to students using the two apps. Based on the interviews with students, teachers, and the school management, these materials did not cater to the special needs of disabled students.

Instructions from the MoEYS during the school closures were very general. There were no specific instructions for dealing with students with disabilities. When asked to describe the situation at the National Institute for Special Education (NISE) during the Covid-19 outbreak, the director of NISE mentioned that there was no specific instruction for NISE; however, NISE followed the government's instructions for normal high schools such as social distancing and improving hygiene among students. He also added that all the staff members and trainers were required to wear masks all the time for protective measures.

Impacts of COVID-19 on Students' Emotional Wellbeing

Visually impaired students and hard hearing students felt that it was more difficult for them to move during social distancing and restrictions. This also caused negative impacts on their physical and mental health. There were also noted differences between students with different types of disabilities. Social distancing made it very challenging for visually impaired students as they needed certain services for their movement. During the COVID-19 restrictions, students with visual impairment found it extremely difficult to navigate. Hard hearing students also found it hard to navigate to work or to get necessities. Because communication required sign language, hard hearing students/teacher trainees felt that it was harder to move around for them than for normal people.

In addition, because of their limited understanding of the event, both visually impaired students as well as students with hearing difficulties experienced worry and stress. When asked about the difficulties they experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, the students claimed that they were afraid of getting infected, and they were scared of contacting other people or their friends. Moreover, special education schools offered accommodation and food to students from remote areas and students who needed support. School provided three meals per day to students staying at school and one meal to those not staying at school. Learning from home meant that their family had to take care of their meals, which posed a financial constraint for the poorer families. Moreover, students who managed to get a paid job ignored the online learning. After school resumed, they did not want to return to school as they were happy with the money earned from their jobs.

Impacts of COVID-19 on Student's Learning

Limited Knowledge and Availability of Assistive Technology

One significant impact of COVID-19 has been the shift to online learning. Assistive technology does help students with disabilities to learn. Across Cambodia, during the school closure, learning and teaching were moved online. Both types of students with disabilities' learning impacted severely as each type of disability required a specific method or specific assistive technology. The pandemic came unexpectedly, which meant that both teachers and students were not ready to shift entirely online. Students with disabilities felt the impact of challenges in online learning more than students without disabilities.

Online teaching and learning required much more effort from both the teachers and students. Teachers were unprepared for the transition to online learning. They also lacked technical knowledge or experience with online teaching platforms and were not provided with any training even after the school closure. Facebook Messenger was the common platform they could use for communication and teaching students. Moreover, teachers worked together to produce videos and soundtracks for the students.

In order to assist students to learn during the pandemic, the MoEYS and development partners recorded videos. However, the videos were recorded for students in general, without special attention to students with disabilities except for sign language translation. Students with vision impairments claimed that even with the recorded videos, they could not really see what was inside the video because things in the videos were too small. In addition, students with hearing difficulties also found that it was very hard for them to understand the contents even with sign language translation as they were not able to follow the contents and the translation at the same time well. Nonetheless, in the physical classrooms, hard hearing students were able to ask for clarification or further explanation.

Lack of Smart Device and Internet Connection

Access to smart devices and the internet was very limited to students. Donors provided some devices, but the number available was very limited compared to the demands by the students. The quality of the devices was also questioned as some did not meet the needs of the students.

In addition to the lack of smart devices and internet costs, lack of reliable internet also made it difficult for students to attend online classes.

For Example

When Battambang Special Education High School and Siem Reap Special Education High School were required to close temporarily during the COVID-19 outbreak, students were required to learn online.

To engage students in the online learning, the teachers managed to contact students' parents and provided them with instructions for online learning; however, according to a school administrator, less than 50 percent of the students participated in online learning due to the lack of internet connection and smart devices.

Effectiveness of Teaching and Learning Online

The effectiveness of online teaching has been questioned due to the compounding factors already noted. In terms of teaching and learning, a school director mentioned that all learning and teaching were switched to online, yet he believed it was not really effective as many trainers did not have stable internet connection and knowledge of online platform for teaching. He added that there was no special training for the teachers to improve their capacity in online teaching due to COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing measures. He also claimed that the teaching approaches commonly used before the pandemic by trainers were not effective at all when applied to online teaching. Many activities such as teamwork or group discussions were not used, making the online teaching quite boring and less interactive. Moreover, the teaching pace was very slow compared to physical teaching; thus, many lessons were not covered. The teachers were also unable to control the students' attendance. He added that some teachers complained about the extra cost of the internet for teaching as there was no budget support to cover this.

When asked to describe their challenges and concerns during the COVID-19 outbreak, the teacher trainees expressed several frustrations. Most trainees complained that they had to work from home due to lockdowns. They were required to use Zoom and other online platforms for working and teaching; however, it was very inconvenient because sign language required interaction to make communications more effective, but such interactions were impossible with online teaching and learning. They also noted that most students from rural areas did not attend online classes.

Impacts of COVID-19 on Parental Selective Behavior

Limited financial resources for buying smart devices and paying internet fees, combined with parental stress were noted to affect parental decision making in regard to their children. Some parents were noted to favor children without disabilities in education.

The director of the NISE also stated that online teaching put a lot of pressure on parents as the teachers required parents to provide extra care for their children and help them learn virtually.

When asked about the situation after resuming physical classes, the director mentioned that although physical classes have been resumed, some online tools are still used for teaching; for example, Telegram is still being used by the teachers to distribute documents and assignments for their trainees. This can prove that online learning can be beneficial if the teacher is skilled and the assistive technology and the internet are available.

COVID-19 Impacts and Inclusive Classroom

Inclusive education recognizes the right of every child and young person – without exception – to be included in general education settings. It involves adapting the environment and teaching approaches to ensure genuine and valued full participation of all children and young people. Besides challenges related to COVID-19, students with vision impairment also claimed to have faced a few other challenges. Students at special education high schools were required to study one shift at public school. As the teachers at public school needed to cover a lot of lessons, and there were a lot of students in the class, most teachers seemed to pay little attention to the students with vision impairment. Students also accepted that they sometimes lost motivation to study at public schools, but they did not have choices.

Regarding inclusive education for students with disabilities, the director stated that students with disabilities had faced numerous challenges in a normal classroom even before the COVID-19 outbreak. Most of them could not catch up with the rest of the class and were not given enough attention.



**For hard
hearing students**



**For visually
impaired students**

They needed to have sign language interpreters to help them understand the lessons better; however, this would require many interpreters.

They found it difficult to understand when the teachers used demonstrative pronouns such as 'this/that' to explain since they could not visualize what the teachers was referring to.

When asked to describe their students' learning at normal schools, they claimed that there was no inclusiveness at normal public schools. They added that the teachers at public schools did not know sign language even if they used to attend short sign-language training sessions, it was not enough. Most of the teachers believed that it could be good to have sign-language interpreters in each class at normal public schools.

Conclusion

This study focused on only two types of disabilities – students with auditory and visual impairments.

Visually impaired and hard hearing students were emotionally impacted by the COVID-19 due to fear and communication constraints. Students from disadvantaged families who required food assistance and accommodation were even more severely impacted.

Online learning impacted these students' ability to receive quality education due to the lack of:



Students with disabilities need specific services and material supports for daily life and study. In addition, inclusive classrooms require more effective organization and support so that visually impaired and hard hearing students can learn more and not be afraid to attend classes.

Recommendations

To support students during the crisis, this study proposes 2 main types of support:

Emotional Support

- **Parents and families should provide emotional support to help students with disabilities feel more secure.**
- **Family members should spend more time talking with them, making sure that they are not left behind.**
- **Parents and communities should learn sign language to communicate with hard hearing students.**

Learning Support

1

First, communities, schools, and local authorities should explore learning pods (a small group of students who come together to learn and socialize) for students who do not have Internet access or adult support at home.

2

Second, authorities and teachers should explore reducing the quantity of the content covered and adjusting instructional methods.

3

Third, formal training for the students on the use of the online platform prior to the first class should be provided with support from IT experts with an interpreter.

4

Fourth, students need to be provided with the necessary high-quality equipment and technology. Many institutions have digitized their content; however, it is still inaccessible due to a lack of captioning and unclear audio, among other issues.

5

Lastly, the government, teachers, parents, and specialists must improve collaboration and partnership in order to improve education outcomes among students with disabilities.

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