Takayo Ogisu

Reforming Pedagogy in Cambodia
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Reforming Pedagogy in Cambodia

Local Construction of Global Pedagogies
For my husband Shinya and daughter Fumino, who always believe in me and provide unconditional love and support.
Series Editor’s Introduction

This important and innovative book, by Ogisu Takayo, on Reforming Pedagogy in Cambodia, is the latest book to be published in the long-standing Springer Book Series “Education in the Asia Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects.” The first volume in this Springer series was published in 2002, this book by Ogisu Takayo being the 62nd volume to be published to date.

Reforming Pedagogy in Cambodia examines the complex and important matter of what concrete action is necessary concerning effectively reforming teaching practices. This has important implications for school reform in Cambodia. The book explores the ways in which, and the extent to which, the education system in Cambodia has (and continues to) adapt over time, placing a greater emphasis on student-centered teaching and learning, in order to help meet the diverse learning needs of students. The reform of teaching pedagogy (along with curriculum reform), is a particularly important way to promote educational innovation for development in Cambodia.

The book also provides a historical overview of the interrelationship between power and pedagogy in education and schooling in Cambodia, and the often contradictory messages generated by policymakers, concerning diversifying school practices.

This volume of seven chapters seeks to answer the question: why is there such a persistent gap between official policy and actual practice in Cambodia with regard to the reform of pedagogy?

The book explores vested interests and differing “constructions of reality” regarding education and schooling in Cambodia, which can inhibit and slow down reforms in pedagogy that aim to transform education and schooling at a system-wide level.

This book will be of interest to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners concerned about exploring, and better understanding, the main ways in which teaching practices can be most effectively reformed in a developing country, such as Cambodia. Although many in Cambodia have worked diligently since the 1990s to replace teacher-centered teaching with more student-centered practices, more traditional teaching practices continue to persist. As the author points out, “the gap
between policy and practice is a product of repeated negotiations and sense-making over the meaning of the pedagogical reform policy.”

This book will not just be of interest to those in Cambodia, but will no doubt have an Asia-Pacific and worldwide audience amongst those interested in the tensions, stresses, and strains that occur during any process involving educational change, which, in most countries, is politically charged.

In terms of the Springer Book Series in which this volume is published, the various topics dealt with in the series are wide-ranging and varied in coverage, with an emphasis on cutting-edge developments, best practices, and education innovations for development. Topics examined in the series include: environmental education and education for sustainable development; the interaction between technology and education; the reform of primary, secondary and teacher education; innovative approaches to education assessment; alternative education; most effective ways to achieve quality and highly relevant education for all; active aging through active learning; case studies of education and schooling systems in various countries in the region; cross country and cross-cultural studies of education and schooling; and the sociology of teachers as an occupational group, to mention just a few. More information about the book series is available at https://link.springer.com/bookseries/5888.

All volumes in this series aim to meet the interests and priorities of a diverse education audience including researchers, policymakers, and practitioners; tertiary students; teachers at all levels within education systems; and members of the public who are interested in better understanding cutting edge developments in education and schooling in Asia-Pacific.

The main reason why this series has been devoted exclusively to examining various aspects of education and schooling in the Asia-Pacific region is that this is a particularly challenging region. It is renowned for its size, diversity, and complexity, whether it be geographical, socioeconomic, cultural, political, or developmental. Education and schooling in countries throughout the region impact on every aspect of people’s lives, including employment, labor force considerations, education and training, cultural orientation, and attitudes and values. Asia and the Pacific are home to some 63% of the world’s population of 7 Billion. Countries with the largest populations (China, 1.4 Billion; India, 1.3 Billion) and the most rapidly growing megacities are to be found in the region, as are countries with relatively small populations (Bhutan, 755,000; the island of Niue, 1,600).

Levels of economic and sociopolitical development vary widely, with some of the richest countries (such as Japan) and some of the poorest countries on earth (such as Bangladesh). Asia contains the largest number of poor of any region in the world, the incidence of those living below the poverty line remaining as high as 40 percent in some countries in Asia. At the same time, many countries in Asia are experiencing a period of great economic growth and social development. However, inclusive growth remains elusive, as does growth that is sustainable and does not destroy the quality of the environment. The growing prominence of Asian economies and corporations, together with globalization and technological innovation, is leading to long-term changes in trade, business, and labor markets, to the sociology of populations within (and between) countries. There is a rebalancing of power, centered on Asia and
the Pacific region, with the Asian Development Bank in Manila declaring that the twenty-first century will be ‘the Century of Asia Pacific’.

We know from the feedback received from numerous education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, worldwide, that this book series makes a useful contribution to knowledge sharing about cutting-edge developments concerning education and schooling in the Asia-Pacific.

Any readers of this or other volumes in the series who have an idea for writing or co-writing their own book (or editing/co-editing a book) on any aspect of education and/or schooling, that is relevant to the region, are enthusiastically encouraged to approach the series editors either direct, or through Springer, to publish their own volume in the series, since we are always willing to assist perspective authors to shape their manuscripts in ways that make them suitable for publication.

August 2021

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I first landed in Siem Reap, Cambodia as a student volunteer in Spring 2005. At that time, fully motivated to do something “good” to Cambodian kids, I was struck by the fact that they were very eager to learn new things and happy to be in school, even though school buildings were almost collapsing and there was no material for learning—textbooks, notebooks, or even pencils—available to them. This was a quite shocking experience for me, because what I always saw in Japan was students who lost interest in school subjects and dozed off during classes while they sit in high-tech classroom with trained teachers and bunch of colored pencils. This was the time when I started realizing teaching and learning is more than just what happens in classrooms.

This book is a product of my 15+ years of explorations into education in Cambodia. I got to know a lot of Cambodian people in the course, who helped me encounter their cultural values and worldviews. In particular, I cannot thank enough to 13 teachers participated in this research, who were kind enough to let me observe their classes, spare time to answer my endless questions, and even accept me as a “younger sister”. Their students also welcomed me in classrooms and sometimes corrected my Khmer accent. School principals invited me to coffees, lunch, or school events, and shared their hopes and enthusiasms for educating children. I also owe policymakers for their invaluable inputs and insights regarding the future of education in Cambodia, despite their busy schedule. I, of course, owe uncountable Cambodians other than the participants of this research their friendship and kindness. To name a few, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Ms. Sineth Khanrith, my neighbor and best friend, who always took me out for walk and coffee, and my host father Mr. Eng Phyrun, my host mother Ms. Sarapich Heng, and their beautiful children, who were always there like as my family in Cambodia. Special thanks also go to Mr. Kim Dara for his friendship and continuous support. He always gives a helping hand whenever I am in need, either as an education expert or as a friend.

In the past 15 years, many people have guided me through my journey of becoming a researcher. First, and foremost, I am deeply grateful for having Dr. Jack Schwille and later Dr. Lynn Paine as my supervisors for the PhD program at Michigan State University. I still remember when I first met Jack at the Comparative and International
Education Society held in New York. I ran to Jack soon after he finished his session and asked if he was interested in my research. It was this moment when I realized I wanted to pursue PhD. Lynn, through her excellent teaching and supervising, opened a door for me to the academic world. Lynn is actually the person who first introduced me to different theories of globalization in education, on which this book heavily draws. She gave a lot of invaluable comments and feedback on my dissertation drafts, and more importantly, strong encouragements even after the defense. Having Jack and Lynn in my hometown (Nagoya, Japan) and visiting a rural school together was such an honor and pleasure for me.

This book would not be out without continuous support and guidance from Dr. Yuto Kitamura, currently a professor at the University of Tokyo, who is the very person who encouraged me to publish my work and actually taught me how to write a book proposal. I was so fortunate to have Yuto as my supervisor at Graduate School of International Development, Nagoya University 2007–2009, because his care and support has never ended even after both of us moved to different places. I have dreamed of working with Yuto in a research project, not as his student but as a full-fledged researcher, and now I am so excited to sit in several research projects with him.

I am also grateful to Dr. Manabu Sato, Professor emeritus of the University of Tokyo, who supervised me in my undergraduate program almost 15 years ago, for his care and support. He is like my lifetime mentor.

My deepest love and gratitude goes to my family. My husband Shinya has kept encouraging me by saying “you can do this” from the beginning of this book project toward the end, even during my pregnancy and maternity leave in-between. He became a wonderful dad after our daughter Fumino was born in 2018, and without his support—both physical and mental—it was impossible to write a book while being a mom of a newborn baby. Fumino, who is turning three soon, has also been very supportive by sleeping well at night and rarely catching colds! I feel bittersweet to see her always pretend to type and say, “Mom is busy now” when she plays house. The very existence of Shinya and Fumino has been a motivation for me to do a good job worth their cooperation. Finally, my parents have always believed in me and led me to do what I wanted. We had some difficult times, and they—father, in particular—may not be happy with my career choice yet, but I will keep trying my best to convince them that what I do is important to me, to the world, and to them, too.

Last, but not least, I would like to express my sincere thanks to two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and questions to the draft chapters. Their comments and questions made me clarify what I truly wanted to express in this book, realize different value of this book than I had imagined, and encounter updated information and new lines of relevant research.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Reforming teaching practices is a challenging mission. Cambodia has worked on this tough mission since the 1990s in order to replace teacher-centered teaching with more student-centered teaching, but it has been documented that teacher-centered practices are still prevalent at the classroom level (Courtney, 2008; Wheeler, 1998). My interest, which guides this research, emerged from a simple question: Why does such a persistent gap exist between policy and practice?

This book is a product of my journey to find reasonable answers to the above question. In the chapters that follow, I argue that the gap between policy and practice is a product of repeated negotiations and sense-making over the meaning of the pedagogical reform policy, which took place in a unique political circumstance—the global post-Cold War geopolitics and the national post-conflict circumstance—and in specific sociocultural contexts in Cambodia. Pedagogical reform is difficult, I argue, because it is an attempt as profound as political, social, cultural reforms.

In this introductory chapter, I aim to situate my simple question in academic discourses by clarifying objectives, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, research questions, methodologies, and the scope of the research. A snapshot of the whole book is also provided.

1.1 Reforming Pedagogy

Research about student-centered reforms in the context of low-income countries provides various reasons for the persistence of traditional practices, such as teachers’ misunderstanding or inability to understand the policy, limited resources, and local culture that does not go well with Western-origin pedagogies (Brodie et al., 2002; Guthrie, 1990; Pontefract & Hardman, 2005). Another explanation for the gap between policy and practice is provided by a group of researchers who claim that local actors are not passive policy implementers but actively engage in applying, interpreting, and sometimes contesting the policy (Brook Napier, 2003; Cuban, 1998),
and that we cannot assume that an education policy can and must be disseminated and implemented “as is” (Anderson-Levitt & Alimasi, 2001, p. 51).

Building on these existing explanations, in my previous research I tried to understand what the series of student-centered reforms are about and examined the documents related to them. I found that the series of reforms, which the Cambodian ministry of education has undertaken since 1996, involved contradictions in itself—the image of teaching and learning advocated in the reform contradicts what it requires teachers to do. Overall, this reform is informed by a participatory image of learning on the part of both teachers and students, and it is for replacing traditional, teacher-centered “chalk-and-talk” types of pedagogies with modern, student-centered, active-learning pedagogies. Teachers are supposed to learn the set of teaching strategies through monthly meetings where teachers from nearby schools get together and help each other (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2007), but what this reform actually requires them to do is to implement highly scripted tasks, based on which their performance is checked and evaluated (Bunlay et al., 2010). The pedagogical reform is informed by a participatory, bottom-up approach to teaching and learning, but a paternalistic, top-down approach is taken to bring about such changes at the local level.

Given these contradictions within reform, it is no wonder teachers interpret and practice this reform differently from its original intentions. Anderson-Levitt (2003) has already pointed out that such contradictions, or conflicts, within a single education reform can be seen in many places, but few researchers have actually explored these contradictions as a possible factor that maintains or even widens the gap between policy and practice. Even why such contradictions exist in one reform is yet to be identified. Therefore, in this research, I investigate conflicts within Cambodian pedagogical reform in order to better understand the gap between policy and practice. More specifically, I want to understand: (1) why contradictory ideas coexist in this reform, and (2) how various actors make sense of these contradictions and enact this reform within the political, social, and cultural contexts in which they work.

In order to answer these questions, Cambodian pedagogical reform should be looked at from “both near and afar simultaneously” (Anderson-Levitt, 2002, p. 20). From afar, we must pay particular attention to the historical contexts that shape how current education is structured and operated in Cambodia. Such contexts have significant implications for what made Cambodia adopt student-centered pedagogies. We also cannot ignore the influence Cambodian education has received from global discourse about education, because student-centered pedagogies are the most widely circulated educational ideas across the globe (Ginsburg, 2009). Cambodian education also relies heavily on financial and technical assistance from various aid agencies (Steiner-Khamsi, 2000). Understanding the pedagogical reform from afar (both historically and geographically) would guide us to explore how and why this reform was initiated.

At the same time, we cannot dismiss the importance of the political, social, and cultural world in which the current pedagogical reform is implemented, together with active roles played by various actors—national policymakers, provincial, and district education officials, school principals, and especially teachers—because they
1.1 Reforming Pedagogy

do not passively accept globally circulated practices (Anderson-Levitt & Alimasi, 2001). Rather, they actively engage in the construction of this reform by interpreting and enacting student-centered pedagogies. Exploring contradictions involved in this reform will help us deepen our understanding of the complexities involved in the process of changing local practices in a globalized world (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010).

This research, therefore, aims to better understand the complexities involved in reforming teaching practices resting on an ongoing reform experience in Cambodia. This book explores how various actors from international, national, and local levels make sense of and enact a pedagogical policy reform, called Effective Teaching and Learning (ETL), by examining the contradictions involved in it. Reforming teaching practices is already a challenging task by itself.

Although extensive literature on the gap between written policy and its implementation exists, little is known about the process in which conflicting ideas are absorbed in a single pedagogical reform and how various actors interpret and enact them. ETL is a great case for this purpose because it is a relatively new policy (ETL was first implemented as pilot in 2002 and then expanded throughout the country in 2007) and it is ongoing. ETL is also good as a case to situate this process within a matrix of globalization and local diversification. Understanding how various actors in Cambodian education reform make sense of ETL and how political/economic/organizational context shapes the meaning of ETL will enrich our knowledge about the dynamics that this pedagogical reform brings about.

Here I need to clarify my stance as not a proponent of student-centered pedagogical reform in the context of Cambodia. To share one of the conclusions of this book here, my research findings indicate that student-centered pedagogies and their liberal democratic ideologies do not fit well into the current political, social, and cultural structures in Cambodia. For student-centered pedagogies to bring substantial changes in classrooms, radical political–social–cultural transformation must take place, which is unrealistic and probably not so desirable. The current research is, therefore, not to evaluate how far ETL is actually implemented as stated in the policy documents and provide technical solutions for the issues identified, but to understand the gap between the written policy and actual practice by focusing on why contradictions exist in this reform and how various actors interpret and enact this contradictory reform. To put it differently, this research is to make better sense of Cambodian pedagogical reform by examining its political, social, and cultural implications in the contemporary Cambodia.

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1 As Kim and Rouse (2011) lamented, the active roles of teachers have been particularly sidelined in Cambodia: teachers have been treated as at “relatively low education levels,” they have “not been trusted to use their professional ability or discretion,” and thus need “further development and training” (p. 12).