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Author(s)	Charlene Tan
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Two Views of Education: Promoting Civic and Moral Values in Cambodia Schools

Charlene Tan

Abstract

This paper discusses the Cambodian government's attempt to promote civic and moral values in Cambodia schools through the subject "Civics and Morals". The paper argues that the tensions and challenges associated with civic and moral education are linked to a fundamental difference between the traditional view of education in Cambodia, and the modern view of education promoted by the Cambodian government and external donor agencies. It is further argued that policymakers need to promote the effective teaching and learning of civic and moral values with the support of the local community and religious institutions in Cambodia.

Key Words

Cambodia; curriculum; development; educational policy; Civics and Morals

1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of civic and moral education in Cambodia schools take place against the backdrop of the country's traditional political and social culture. This paper discusses the Cambodian government's attempt to promote civic and moral values in Cambodia schools through the subject "Civics and Morals". The paper explores how the prevalent practice of corruption and the cultural preference for social harmony, conformity and passivity make the desired outcomes of civic and moral education difficult to achieve. The paper argues that the tensions and challenges associated with civic and moral education are linked to a fundamental difference between the traditional view of education in Cambodia, and the modern view of education promoted by the Cambodian government and external donor agencies. The paper proposes that policymakers need to understand and appreciate Cambodia's traditional view of education, and encourage schools to make the inculcation of civic and moral values central to their educational endeavours. The evidence for this paper is obtained from literature review, official documents, the author's role as a visiting lecturer to a university in Cambodia, and interviews conducted with a school principal, a vice-principal, three school teachers, seven students, and four university lecturers in the province of Sihanoukville, Cambodia in December 2006.

2. A Brief History of Education in Cambodia

Cambodia was ruled by the Funan and Chenla empires from the second to the eighth centuries. That was followed by the Golden Age under the powerful Angkor empire from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries which was characterised by territorial expansion, economic prosperity and architectural splendour (Sodhy, 2004). But the Angkor rulers fled south after repeated attacks by the Chams, Javanese and Siamese, and the next few centuries were marked by bloody struggles among the rulers, civil wars, disasters and territorial loss (Fergusson & Le Masson, 1997). The French took control of Cambodia in 1863 and made some attempts to integrate French-oriented curriculum into the traditional Cambodian curriculum from the early 1990s. For example, the French established the French-language School of the Protectorate in 1873, a college for interpreters, and three French-language primary schools in 1885 (Clayton, 1995). The French had limited success in educating the Cambodians due to several reasons. First, the enrolment in these schools was kept small because the French government only wanted to educate an elite group of Cambodians to serve the colonial powers. Many Cambodians also preferred to send their children to *wat* schools which were Buddhist temple schools where their children could learn Khmer and religious teachings. Efforts to “modernise” *wat* schools were less than desirable due to resistance from some Buddhist monks who objected to the French attempt to romanticise the Khmer scripts (for a fuller discussion, see Osborne, 1969; Chandler, 1991; Shawcross, 1994; Clayton, 1995; and Dy, 2004).

The French colonial period lasted till 1953 when King Sihanouk became the ruler for the next two decades. The education system during this period reached its peak as King Sihanouk embarked on an ambitious plan to build many schools and universities. A coup d'état by General Lon Nol led to the abolition of the monarchical rule and the establishment of the Khmer Republic in 1970. But his success was short-lived as he was defeated by the Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot in 1975. For the next five years, at least 1.7 million people out of about seven million died, including most of the educated population. Backed by Vietnam and other socialist bloc countries, Heng Samrin gained victory over the Khmer Rouge and ushered in the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) from 1979 to 1989.

Civil conflicts and political unrest continued until 1991 when the Paris Peace Accords was signed which paved the way for free elections organised by the United Nations in 1993. Subsequently millions of dollars from international financial institutions and external donor agencies were poured into Cambodia in the early 1990s. But aid was temporarily suspended due to political struggles between the two coalition prime ministers, Hun Sen of the Cambodia People's Party (CPP) and Prince Norodom Ranariddh of the FUNCINPEC party. Another election was organised in 1998 which led to Hun Sen's party winning the majority votes and assuming the office of Prime Minister, a post he still holds today.

The 1993 Constitution of Cambodia states that the state is obligated to provide nine years of free education to all citizens in public schools.¹

The State shall provide free primary and secondary education to all citizens in public schools. Citizens shall receive education for at least nine years. The State shall protect and upgrade citizens' rights to quality education at all levels and shall take necessary steps for quality education to reach all citizens (Chapter VI, Articles 65 & 68).

Since 2001, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) has published several documents which outline the government's Education Strategic Plans (ESP): ESP 2001-2005; ESP 2004-2008; and ESP 2006-2010 (MoEYS, 2001, 2004a, 2005). The overarching aim for MoEYS is for all Cambodian children and youth to have equal opportunity to access education by 2015.

About 113 organisations support 233 education projects in Cambodia at an estimated cost of US\$225 million from 2003-2008 (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005). After more than two decades of external aid, Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita income of US\$320. Only about 30 per cent of the adult population has some school level completed, and the illiteracy rate is 63 per cent (World Bank, 2005). 11 per cent of children do not attend school in Cambodia, 56 per cent of children between 15 and 18 years of age that enter school complete primary school, and 35 per cent of those who start school actually complete the basic education cycle (World Bank, 2005). For the year 2004-5, the enrolment rate nationwide dropped drastically from 81 per cent in the primary level to 26.1 per cent in the lower secondary level, and further to 9.3 per cent in the upper secondary level (MoEYS, 2005). Children take an average of between 7 and 10 years to complete 5 years of primary school (Duggan, 1996). The repetition and dropout rates are so high that it takes an average of 19 student years to produce a primary school graduate (Thomas, 2002).

3. Civic and Moral Education in Cambodia

Historically, Cambodian male students learned civic, moral and religious values in *wat* schools run by Buddhist monks. As a school subject, civic and moral education was used as a tool for political leaders to transmit their political ideologies and consolidate their power. King Sihanouk attempted to erase the colonial mentality and promote a sense of national pride among the Cambodians by emphasising Cambodian history, culture, literature, civic and moral instruction (Clayton, 2005). Pol Pot, on the other hand, made the Cambodians learn about the history of the revolutionary struggle, Khmer Rouge's politics and anti-American ideology (Ayres, 1999). Civic and moral education was used by Heng Samrin, the leader of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), to influence the students to support the solidarity of the three Communist countries in Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam), as well as the Soviet Union (Neau, 2003). Rather than pointing to Vietnam as a threat, as what Lon Nol did, Heng Samrin's government promoted the Vietnamese socialist system as a model for Cambodia.

The aims and contents of civic and moral education in Cambodia today reflect the country's adoption of liberal democracy based on market economic practices (Clayton, 2005). MoEYS hopes to engender in the Cambodian students a sense of "national and civic pride, high standards of morals and ethics and a strong belief in being responsible for their own future" (MoEYS, 2004a, p. 11). The ministry's philosophy and policy on civic and moral education are set out in the document, "Policy for Curriculum Development 2005-2009" (MoEYS, 2004b). MoEYS states in the document that it aims to achieve the key priorities of equitable access to basic education; high quality upper secondary provision; pro-poor financing policy; efficient management of resources; and accountability through development of standards (MoEYS, 2004b). The policy for curriculum development is for a period of five years (2005-2009) and will be reviewed in 2009. In terms of civic and moral values, MoEYS aspires to produce students who should have "the capacity to exercise judgment and responsibility in matters of morality", possess "a public spirit characterised by

equality and respect for others' rights", "be active citizens and be aware of social changes, understanding Cambodia's system of government and the rule of law, and demonstrating a spirit of national pride and love of their nation, religion and king" (MoEYS, 2004b, p. 5). MoEYS has also specified the desired outcomes for different levels. For the Basic Education curriculum (Grade 1-9), MoEYS wants to ensure that every student has acquired "knowledge of the national identity" and "an understanding of morality and civic responsibilities" (MoEYS, 2004b, p. 9). The desired outcomes of the Upper Secondary curriculum are similar to those for Basic Education curriculum, except that students are expected to have a "deep knowledge of the national identity", and a "more complex understanding of morality and civic responsibilities" (MoEYS, 2004b, p. 11).

Civic and moral values are promoted through a subject "Civics and Morals" which is taught as one of five subjects under Social Studies. The other four are History, Geography, Home Economics, and Art Education. According to two Cambodian teachers teaching Morals and Civics in a secondary school in Cambodia, Social Studies for grades 7 to 12 comprises two parts, each with its own textbook: Part 1 consists of History and Geography, and Part 2 consists of Morals and Civics, and Housekeeping (also known as Home Economics). The topics for Morals and Civics for grade 7 to 12 include knowing oneself; planning for one's future; relating with others; living in a community; and understanding Cambodia's customs, religions, traditions and political system. In particular, students learn about concepts such as democracy, election, human rights and freedom. Students at grade 9 also learn about other countries in Asia and Cambodia's foreign policy. For Housekeeping, students learn about topics such as living a healthy lifestyle; managing the family's finances; family planning; and the process of production such as making cloth.

4. Tensions and Challenges in the Teaching of Civics and Morals

How effective is the subject Civics and Morals in helping MoEYS achieve its goal of inculcating in students "high standards of morals and ethics and a strong belief in being responsible for their own future", with "the capacity to exercise judgment and responsibility in matters of morality", possessing "a public spirit characterised by equality and respect for others' rights", and "be active citizens and be aware of social changes, understanding Cambodia's system of government and the rule of law, and demonstrating a spirit of national pride and love of their nation, religion and king" (MoEYS, 2004a, p. 11; MoEYS, 2004b, p. 5)? Situated within Cambodia's social, cultural and political realities, the successful promotion of civic and moral values through Civics and Morals is vitiated by a number of tensions and challenges.

4.1 The Social Culture in Cambodia

For Cambodian students to internalise and apply the civic and moral values learned, they need a conducive social and political culture that goes beyond the classroom environment. Despite improvements in political stability, living standards and increased educational opportunities, Cambodia has yet to recover from decades of war and conflicts. It is still plagued by poverty, corruption and violence in what writers have termed a culture of impunity. There is a decline in *sammaki* - solidarity and community spirit among the Cambodians (Kamm, 1998). Community structures are broken and social cohesion has been replaced by a deep distrust at all levels of society (Morris, 2000). One Cambodian teacher

estimates that about 70 per cent of Cambodians today are selfish. The limited trust between individuals prevents a more active involvement of individuals in spaces of participation (Pellini, 2005). Given the sociocultural reality, it is challenging for students in Cambodia to possess “high standards of morals and ethics” with “a public spirit characterised by equality and respect for others’ rights” (MoEYS, 2004a, p. 11).

The breakdown of social solidarity and community spirit is evident also in the relationship between the teachers and the students’ families. It is important for teachers teaching Civics and Morals to be role models, be respected by their students, and work in partnership with the students’ families to inculcate civic and moral values in the students. However, the relationship between the teacher and the student (as well as the parents) is hampered by the prevalent practice of teachers openly charging money for supplementary tutoring and other contributions. A recent report by the World Bank highlights this problem:

In Cambodia, much of the tutoring takes place in the students’ own schools and is provided by their own teachers. Thus, when the official school day ends, the unofficial school day begins – with the same teachers and the same pupils occupying the same desks in the same classrooms. This situation creates an environment potentially conducive to exploitation, where teachers deliberately cover only part of the standard syllabi during mainstream classes in order to promote demand for their after-school private lessons (World Bank, 2005, p. 65).

Students who cannot afford or refuse to pay their teachers risk failing their exams, repeating the grade or dropping out of school. This widespread practice has been attributed to the low pay of teachers. In 2003, experienced teachers are paid about US\$29 per month in primary schools, and US\$37 per month in lower secondary schools (World Bank, 2005). Interviews with Cambodian teachers in 2006 show that experienced teachers teaching in urban areas are paid about US\$35-\$40 per month in primary schools, US\$40 per month in lower secondary schools, and US\$60 in upper secondary schools. The official teacher’s salary is barely enough to support even the teacher himself or herself, and is definitely not enough for a teacher in Cambodia to support even one additional person. An average Cambodian family living in the city needs about US\$200 per month to survive. Consequently many teachers need supplementary income to provide for their family. Many teachers therefore resort to “forcing” their students to attend their supplementary tutoring classes, buy extra teaching materials or even snacks from them. A Cambodian teacher could earn close to US\$200 through such means, with the extra income funded by the grudging students’ families. The cost of schooling is especially steep at over US\$250 per year for students at Grade 9, due mainly to tutoring charges and opportunity costs (World Bank, 2005). The perennial need for students to pay the teachers means that the cost of schooling is extremely high at 79 per cent of the per capita non-food expenditure of the poorest 20 per cent of the population (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005).

Teachers interviewed, while acknowledging that they charge their students illegally, countered that they had “no choice” due to their very low salaries. A 35 year old male Cambodian teacher who has taught in a Cambodia public school for eight years said:

In public schools, I collect money from students and give extra questions [with answers] to students. Some students do not want them but they are afraid of me. So they think if they do not buy them, they will not get high scores. I told the students, I

am a teacher but sometimes I cannot be a real teacher. I am a fake teacher. The question you ask me, sometimes I can answer, sometimes I cannot. ... I told them it's because of my salary (interview with a Cambodian teacher).

The collection of such fees by the teachers has adversely affected the relationship between the teacher and the local community. The report by MoEYS and UNICEF notes the “lack of cooperation and communication between teachers and pupils/parents”, and adds that this “poor relationship between teachers and the community is partly due to the collection of ‘illegal’ fees from pupil by teachers, which is in turn a reaction to low teacher salaries” (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005, p. 11). The report also points out that the low pay of the teachers contributes to poor teaching quality, which in turn leads to poor learning achievement of children. Although the collection of fees and contributions is officially banned by the ministry, many teachers are still practising it, using the school premises for their tutoring with the acquiescence of the school leaders.

It is not just teachers who perpetuate the practice of collecting money from their students. It has been observed that parents also readily pay for school repairs and building projects, and offer gifts in kind to teachers to assure their children’s success in exam (Kamm, 1998). The requirement of bribes for students to pass their exams, obtain their educational qualifications and generally to advance in society contradicts the desired outcomes of imbuing in students “high standards of morals and ethics and a strong belief in being responsible for their own future”, and “the capacity to exercise judgment and responsibility in matters of morality” (MoEYS, 2004a, p. 11; MoEYS, 2004b, p. 5). It is tempting for the students to believe that their future is not so much due to their hard work and honesty, but determined by how much money their families could afford to pay towards the teachers and those in authority.

A number of writers (e.g. Duggan, 1996; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; Ayres, 2003) and official reports (e.g. MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005; World Bank, 2005) have drawn attention to this problem, and the Cambodian government has affirmed time and again its resolve to eliminate informal fees and increase the teachers’ pay (MoEYS, 2004a; MoEYS, 2005; MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005). To eradicate the practice of informal and illegal fees, the World Bank has recommended strategies such as reviewing teacher remuneration, improving the service conditions, and introducing minimum standards and performance-based incentives within a sustainable budget framework (World Bank, 2005). But it is difficult to translate these measures into practice as they require an overhaul of the civil service system and the full cooperation of the Cambodian government and officials. More importantly, to ensure long-term and sustained success, these measures need to be accompanied by a major change of mindset by the government officers, school leaders, teachers, parents, students and other educational stakeholders to promote greater accountability, meritocracy and community spirit in the country (Tan, 2007). Unless and until a sea-change in the social culture takes place, the teachers will continue to charge their students illegally and contribute towards the poor relationship between the teachers and the community.

4.2 The Political Culture in Cambodia

Besides moral values, MoEYS also aims to inculcate civic values in the hope that the students will “be active citizens and be aware of social changes, understanding Cambodia’s system of government and the rule of law, and demonstrating a spirit of national pride and

love of their nation, religion and king” (MoEYS, 2004b, p. 5). In line with the state-sanctioned ideology of liberal democracy in Cambodia, the textbook for Civics and Morals introduces topics such as human rights, the right to vote, and the electoral procedure. But there are tensions and challenges in the promotion of these democratic values due to existing sociocultural and sociopolitical norms.

First is the tension between the goal of Civics and Morals to create active citizens, and the predominant Cambodian culture of social harmony, conformity and passivity. The emphasis on social harmony is not unique to Cambodia; it is also observed in other Asian countries influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism.² The focus on collective entity entails that the individuals are subject to the greater good (Kennedy, 2004). The concept of harmony is in turn linked to the Asian concept of individuality. Lee (2004) avers that Asians generally do not underscore individualism which centres on one’s rights and responsibility in the course of political development. Rather, the attention is on individuality – a concept which is apolitical, focusing instead on self-enrichment and spirituality. He explains:

To Asian citizens, it does not matter who rules and in what way the country is ruled, as far they are in a situation where they can live their lives, maintain their relationships, and pursue their individuality (in terms of spiritual development). Then they will live with whoever the ruler is, unless the situation becomes intolerable (Lee, 2004, p. 31).

It has also been argued that the Buddhist philosophy has unwittingly led to an emphasis on conformity at the expense of individual thinking (Cormack, 1997; Eng, 1998; Bray 1999; Morris, 2000; O’Leary & Nee, 2001; Pellini, 2005). The Buddhist doctrine of relative merit encourages many Buddhists in Cambodia to accept the injustice and sufferings in this world as the consequence of one’s deeds in his or her past life, and to accumulate more merit to enjoy happiness in the next life (Morris, 2000). The prevailing passivity and even apathy have resulted in a sense of powerlessness before figures of authority and resignation regarding one’s life situation (Eng, 1998). Given the primacy of respecting the leaders and not challenging the authority of those in power, “Khmer social and cultural traditions contrast therefore with Western democratic ideas of participation” (Pellini, 2005, p. 213). The concept of democracy is therefore foreign to most Cambodians. About 80 per cent of Cambodians live in rural areas and they retain a recessive posture in politics as found in a monarchic system with feudal political relationships (St John, 2005).

Secondly, it is challenging for Cambodians to participate actively in the process of political democratisation due to the patronage system in Cambodia. The patronage system can be traced to the Angkor era where the Angkor kings adopted the Indianised concept of *devaraja* (God-King) (Ayres, 2000). This patronage system rests on the notion of “the-winner-takes-all” attitude where there is no tradition of real power sharing (Morris, 2000; Pellini, 2005). St John (2005) avers that “the Western concept of a loyal opposition was an imported idea alien to traditional political culture in a country where no government had ever given up power without fighting” (p. 408). Opposition to the ruler or ruling party, no matter how “democratic”, is seen as an act of disloyalty. Instead, the ruled are expected to maintain the patronage relationships by accepting the patron’s authority. On the other hand, the patron is expected to maintain his network of clients in order to neutralise his opponents and keep the loyalty of his followers by funding them. Political leaders who are at the top of a

pyramidal structure of relationships can elicit bribes from both domestic and international sources (Roberts, 2002). Such a system, where people secure jobs and favours from their patron, interferes with the development of democratic institutions such as parliamentary institutions, independent judiciary and a strong civil society (Morris, 2000). Given the ubiquity of corruption and the culture of social harmony, conformity and passivity in Cambodia, it is difficult to see how MoEYS can achieve its aim of using civic and moral education to nurture students who possess “the capacity to exercise judgment and responsibility in matters of morality”, with “a public spirit characterised by equality and respect for others’ rights”, be “active citizens”, and appreciate “Cambodia’s system of government and the rule of law” (MoEYS, 2004b, p. 5).

5. Two Contrasting Views of Education

5.1 *Traditional View of Education in Cambodia*

The tensions and challenges associated with civic and moral education stem from a fundamental difference between the traditional view of education in Cambodia, and the modern view of education advocated by MoEYS today. Dy (2004) notes that the traditional social and cultural perspective of education in Cambodia views education as “an honest route to better the human condition, intentionally aimed at shaping individuals for a better lifestyle, knowledge, and good manners for living in their respective societies” (Dy, 2004, p. 93). This traditional understanding of education where morality is central to education is demonstrated in the *wat* schools in the past. The Buddhist monks started *wat* schools since the seventh century where male students learned to read and write the Khmer language, memorise the principles of Buddhism, learn rules of propriety and some arithmetic, as well as engage in collaborative work with the monks to build temples, buildings and other infrastructure (Torhorst, 1966; Gyallay-Pap, 1989, both cited in Neau, 2003, p. 254). In these schools, civic and moral education was not merely an academic subject, nor was the learning of moral values confined to the textbooks (Buddhist texts) or the classroom (the confines of the monastery). The students’ spiritual and moral development, as well as their social and emotional learning, was monitored by the Buddhist monks who served as their spiritual mentors. The religious teachers were accorded a high status in society due to the Indianised notion of royal headship where religious leaders were regarded as intellectuals and *guru* (teachers) in society (Dy, 2004).

That schooling was financed mainly by the villagers in the community further enhanced the close ties between these *wat* schools and the community. These *wat* schools served to support social solidarity by ensuring social cohesion and the maintenance of traditional values (Clayton, 1995; Dy, 2004). There was therefore a conducive social and cultural environment for the students to be instilled with the desired civic and moral values. Neau (2003) explains that Cambodian parents believed that “when their children left the monastery, they would become good citizens and would be respected by the whole community because of their education in the spiritual life, religious counselling, and how to live in harmony in society” (p. 254). Although only boys could attend these *wat* schools, the girls and other members of the community were also positively influenced by the pervasive moral atmosphere, and were similarly infused with *sammaki* - solidarity and community spirit among the Cambodians.

Besides *wat* schools, Buddhist institutions such as the pagoda-monasteries also played a pivotal role in moral education, community decision making, political advice, and conflict resolution in the community in the past (Morris, 2000). The dominant influence of Buddhism in the past also had a salutary effect on governance. The ruler and the Buddhist establishment shared a symbiotic relationship: while the Buddhist monkhood pledged its royal support to the ruler and provided legitimacy for him, the ruler maintained their support by observing the Buddhist teachings (Morris, 2000). In doing so, the ruler was obligated to be an exemplary Buddhist ruler by abiding by the religious and moral principles such as caring for the people's welfare, integrity, kindness and non-violence. Buddhism therefore functions as a social glue to keep the traditional Cambodian society together, and provides a moral check to prevent the political leaders from abusing their power. As the social, cultural and religious centre of the community, Buddhist institutions "dominated every community, and permeated every aspect of the social, political, intellectual and spiritual life of the Khmer people" (Cormack, 1997, p. 30).

5.2 Contemporary View of Education in Cambodia

The traditional view of education which makes the betterment of the human condition through moral inculcation central to the educational endeavour is contrasted with the view of education promoted by MoEYS since the 1990s. A technocratic view of education is adopted by MoEYS where education refers to "a process of training and instruction which is designed to give knowledge and develop skills" (Dy, 2004, p. 93). The overriding aim of schooling in Cambodia is the development of human capital for the economic development of Cambodia. Such a view reflects the modernisation theory which links a country's progress to economic growth. This theory, advocated by the World Bank for Third-World nation-states such as Cambodia, posits that human resources development, free trade and minimum state intervention are the priorities for these countries to progress (Ayres, 2000). The education system in Cambodia today is based on "an inherited Westernised education system" (Ayres, 2000, p. 460), propagated and planned by Western consultants from international organisations and external donor agencies. This focus on developing human capital is evident in the vision and mission of MoEYS (MoEYS, 2005, p. 1):

The MoEYS vision is to establish and develop human resources of the very highest quality and ethics in order to develop a knowledge-based society within Cambodia.

In order to achieve the above vision, MoEYS has the mission of leading, managing and developing the Education, Youth and Sport sector in Cambodia in responding to the socio-economic and cultural development needs and the reality of globalisation.

In its effort to promote capacity building and human resources development, MoEYS recognises that it is not sufficient to impart technical, scientific and entrepreneurship skills to the students. It acknowledges that there is a "shortage of civics/values education and life skills orientation in many current programmes" (MoEYS, 2004a, p. 5). The ministry claims that this partly contributes to an increasingly number of under-employed and under-productive young people aged between 12 and 24 years old. It is believed that moral qualities such as "responsibility, discipline, morality, virtue, professional ethics, and honesty" will help the Cambodians to be gainfully employed and economically productive in a knowledge-based economy (MoEYS, 2005, p. 8).

In short, while the traditional view of education sees the promotion of civic and moral values as the chief end of education, the contemporary view of education sees moral inculcation as a means to achieve “modernisation” and “development” for Cambodia. Based on the latter view, Civics and Morals is taught in Cambodia schools mainly as an academic subject, under the responsibility of teachers assigned to teach that subject. Parents and the community at large are not directly involved in the teaching and learning of Civics and Morals. Interviews with seven students in Grade 9 (aged from 13 to 16 years old) show that they recognise the importance of learning about civic and moral values in school. One student said that Civics and Morals is “good for me” and “make[s] me to walk in the good way, a good life in the future”, while another student said that the subject “help[s] us to know the life that we live”. However, they are less than positive when asked about the way the subject is taught in school. They said that their teacher’s teaching method was to go through the questions printed in the textbook and tell them “the correct answers”. This observation is corroborated by the teachers interviewed. When asked how he taught the subject, a Civics and Morals teacher said that he typically began by writing the title of the lesson on the board, read aloud the passage in the textbook, gave time for the students to answer the accompanying questions, and went through the questions by getting some students to answer the questions by writing their answers on the board. The teaching is largely based on prescribed textbooks, worksheets, teachers’ guidebooks and timetables, with little reference to Cambodia’s sociopolitical and sociocultural constraints. There are limited opportunities for the students to go beyond the textbook to discuss moral dilemmas, personal struggles, and real-life applications.

This point has also been pointed out in the report by MoEYS and UNICEF which notes that the teaching-learning process in Cambodia schools is “often based on rote approach with very little opportunities for active learning by children” (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005, p. 10). The report adds that the content is too heavy for children to master given the short learning hours in Cambodian schools. Civics and Morals teachers interviewed also mentioned that a number of their students found concepts such as “human rights” too foreign, abstract and philosophical. Some students are also uninterested and inattentive in class as they do not find the lessons interesting and relevant to their lives. Coupled with this is the fact that many teachers in Cambodia are not trained to teach their assigned subjects; about one-third of teachers in Cambodia are still untrained ([Dy & Ninomiya, 2003](#)). One History-trained teacher shared that he has been assigned to teach Civics and Morals on top of History, as the school management reasoned that both subjects come under Social Studies. But he does not feel competent to teach Civics and Morals as he thinks (and rightly so) that these two subjects cover different contents and require different pedagogies. Popkewitz (1988)’s comment about how the cultural distinctions of a country are transformed and constrained by the norms and patterns of bureaucracy is appropriate for Civics and Morals in Cambodia:

Priority is given to a sense of abstract relations and functional anonymity. Teachers are to make decisions that concern the administrative and organisational requirements of schooling, often requiring them to recast the folk knowledge and craft skills associated with teaching into more rationalised systems that can be more readily monitored... . Older forms of community solidarity based on face communication are denied, as pedagogical emphasis is given to unitary patterns of social relations (Popkewitz, 1988, p. 83).

Such a MoEYS-endorsed view of education which spotlights on building up human capital to develop a knowledge-based society within Cambodia neglects the important roles played by religion and the community in educating the child. Without the moral support of the community and religious leaders, there is a gap between the moral imperatives in the subject Civics and Morals, and the existing social, political and cultural realities. Commenting on the state of education in Cambodia, Ayres (2000) writes that “the provision of formal education in Cambodia has been embraced to build a nation-state that looks modern, yet is concerned almost exclusively with sustaining the key tenets of the traditional polity” (Ayres, 2000, p. 459). “Modernisation” is promoted in Cambodia within an authoritarian political model, with patronage at the heart of the Cambodian political system (St John, 2005). Given this context, it is unsurprising that the Cambodian government’s attempt to promote civic and moral values in schools is besotted with tensions and challenges.

6. Conclusions

For the teaching of Civics and Morals to be contextually meaningful and effective, the Cambodian government needs to build up the social and cultural capital of Cambodia. It is noteworthy that initiatives such as decentralisation of education through the school cluster system have been implemented with the purpose of involving the local community. But a greater engagement of civil society and private sector groups is critical for decentralisation to succeed in Cambodia (Forsberg & Ratcliffe, 2003). This includes a greater involvement of religious groups and community-based associations in peace-building and education (e.g. Morris, 2000; Pellini, 2005). The Prime Minister of Cambodia Hun Sen acknowledges the significant role played by religious leaders in education. He cited the example of Samdech Venerable Monk Tep Vong who spearheaded a “Children Assistance” that takes care and educates orphans and children from the poor families, and helps them “gain understanding in both secular and Buddhist worlds” (Hun Sen, 2005). Not restricting to Buddhism, he added that all religions in Cambodia are welcomed to be involved in educational and humanitarian work (*ibid.*).

One example of a religious school that attempts to function like a *wat* school by making the teaching of civic and moral values central to its mission is Life School.³ It was established as a private Christian school in 2000 in southwest Cambodia. The school provides an integrated programme by allowing and encouraging students enrolled in the kindergarten to continue their primary, secondary and university studies in the same premises. Currently it has a total enrolment of 538 students from the kindergarten to the university level. The principal said during the interview that the inculcation of civic and moral values is emphasised in Life School. The school uses Christian principles to reinforce moral precepts during the daily morning chapel, classroom lessons and school activities. For example, the biblical commandments to honour one’s parent and love one’s neighbour as oneself are highlighted to the students. Civic values such as obeying the government and caring for the environment by picking up trash from the floor are also imparted to students. He added that students need to see that civic and moral values are not confined to the textbooks but are being practised in the day-to-day running of the school. To achieve that, the school aims to provide a loving and caring environment by developing the students not just academically but physically, socially and morally. Unlike public schools where lunch is not provided, Life

School provides full meals to students at a highly subsidised rate (about 80 per cent). The school has a clinic room where sick students could consult the resident doctor and obtain medicine for free. The school also provides free school uniforms for the children, and free clothes donated by Christian organisations outside Cambodia. Students are encouraged to participate in sports such as taekwando and table tennis, and pick up musical skills such as playing the piano or guitar, singing or drawing. The Chaplain and Christian teachers are expected to be spiritual mentors to model exemplary behaviour and guide their students. All teachers must sign a contract stating that they will not offer fee-collecting tuition classes to their students. No teacher is also allowed to use the school premises for such purposes. To ensure that teachers are paid sufficiently for their livelihood, they are paid a relatively high salary: US\$100 per month for primary school teachers, US\$150 per month for lower secondary school teachers, US\$180 per month for upper secondary school teachers, and more than US\$200 per month for the university lecturers. The school has also taken steps to work closely with the parents for the children's education and well-being. Good relationships between the teacher and the parents are helped by the fact that the school strictly prohibits teachers from collecting extra charges from their students. The form teacher must visit every child's home every semester to give feedback on the child's progress. The teacher must contact a parent if his or her child has been absent from school for three days to ensure that there is low absenteeism and truancy. Every parent is given a student report of his or her child per semester which updates the parent about the child's academic performance and behaviour. Invitation letters are given to parents to visit the school to meet the principal and teachers and attend the school's functions.

It should be pointed out that Life School does not and cannot fully mirror the principles and practices of *wat* schools since it is fundamentally a Christian school with salaried staff and receives financial support from external organisations and donors. By contrast, *wat* schools are supported by the Cambodian community itself and the teachers are full-time Buddhist monks who live in the temple compound. However, what is similar between Life School and *wat* schools is that both schools subscribe to and apply these three principles: civic and moral values are part and parcel of the school culture; teachers provide spiritual and moral examples and mentoring to the students; and the school works closely with the parents. The model of Life School, however, is not easily replicable in Cambodia. As a private Christian school, Life School enjoys the managerial autonomy and engages external curriculum consultants to design and implement a curriculum that integrates religious, moral and civics values. Another distinctive feature of Life School is its strong external financial support which enables it to pay the teachers relatively high salaries, subsidise the students' daily meals, and pay for their medical need. Public schools in Cambodia have neither the autonomy, expertise nor ability to do what Life School is doing for the teachers, parents and students. A recommended strategy is for MoEYS and external donor agencies to encourage more private religious organisations to set up schools such as Life School that are based on the principles and practices of *wat* schools. This is in line with the aim of MoEYS to "enable greater private and community involvement in all stages of schooling", and "forge new partnerships with the private sector, community groups and international community" (MoEYS, 2005, p. 19). Such partnerships with religious organisations will allow the establishment of more schools that promote a more culturally appropriate conceptualisation of education – one that defines education more holistically as shaping individuals for a better lifestyle, with the knowledge and good manners for living in their respective societies.

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Notes

¹ The Basic Education (Grades 1 – 9) curriculum in Cambodia comprises nine years and refers to three stages:

- Primary Grades 1 – 3
- Primary Grades 4 – 6
- Lower Secondary Grades 7 – 9

The Upper Secondary Education (Grades 10 – 12) curriculum comprises three years and is divided into two stages:

- Grade 10
- Grades 11 - 12

² This does not mean that all Asian countries share the same level of commitment to the principle of social harmony. Morris (2000) avers that Cambodian culture is more individualistic compared to other Asian countries due to the Buddhist idea of individual responsibility for sin and salvation. Morris is right here as some Asian societies such as Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan may be less individualistic and more collectivist due to the influence of Confucian teachings. However, the “individuality” which emphasises self-enrichment and spirituality in Cambodia should not be confused with “individualism” that focuses more on one’s rights and political participation (see Lee, 2004 for details). The individuality that exists in Cambodia exists side by side with the principles of collectivism and harmony in Cambodia, especially in the village areas.

³ The example of Life School serves two purposes: first, it illustrates how civic and moral values can be inculcated through a religious approach. A number of writers have pointed out how religion(s) can help a person to think and act morally. Haydon (1997) argues that religion beliefs provide the wider framework of meaning for moral demands to be experienced. By underscoring things that are metaphysical and transcendent, most religions also promote “less pragmatic and utilitarian attitudes and dispositions [such] as faith, hope, charity, forgiveness, chastity and so forth” (Carr 1995, p. 95). Some parents also share the belief that religious knowledge is salubrious for their children’s moral development. It is reported that non-religious Chinese parents in Hong Kong are keen to send their children to religious schools because they perceive that these schools have more effective moral education ([Cheng, 2004](#)). In their empirical research, Taris and Semin (1997) also conclude that the religious faith of mothers helps in the transmission of moral values to their children. They further note that widely shared and objectively important core values such as caring, honesty and fairness are passed down from the mothers to their children. Secondly, the example of Life School in Cambodia echoes Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen’s call for all religions – Buddhist and others - to be involved in educational and humanitarian work in Cambodia. My point is not to argue that only Christian schools should be encouraged, or that only such schools are commendable. I chose the case study of Life School as it is one of the many religious schools and centres set up by Christian organisations in Cambodia today with the encouragement of the Cambodian government. It should be noted, however, that a majority of Cambodians are Buddhists so all non-Buddhist religious organisations in Cambodia should be sensitive to avoid causing religious tensions and conflicts.