



Journey to Cambodia

a first-hand account of World Education's work in Cambodian schools

By Rachael White, World Education Program Officer for Southeast Asia

As he steered along the dirt road, maneuvering to avoid the foot-deep potholes, Chieth, the World Education driver, explained that the name of the province, Prey Veng, means “long forest” in Khmer. Looking around, however, it was hard to imagine that the many rice fields that surrounded us had ever been covered with trees. Outside of the provincial capital, where we had stopped to eat before continuing on our four-hour journey from Phnom Penh, most of what I saw of Prey Veng was vast rice fields and small clusters of traditional Khmer-style stilted houses.

As one of World Education's newest program officers, I was in Cambodia on the first of what will likely be

many field visits, to meet with project staff and to visit the schools where World Education projects take place. It was my first trip to Cambodia, and, aside from the weeks that I had spent reading project reports and reviewing contracts in our Boston headquarters, I had little exposure to World Education's work in action. This was my first site visit, to the rural province of Prey Veng, where World Education works with youth in secondary schools.

Prey Veng has a predominantly agricultural economy, and is one of the poorest provinces, burdened with problems of food insecurity and limited opportunities to earn an income. That is part of the reasons for

the high rates of migration from the province, with youth frequently dropping out of school to find work in one of the garment factories that have sprouted up in recent years, or in other provinces and abroad.

When youth migrate in this way they are often uninformed of the dangers they can face, including the risk of trafficking and abuse. Beyond these very serious concerns, many youth who migrate from Prey Veng also have no experience of living away from their families, and have difficulty adjusting to their new work and living environments. Few have the experience with modern technology to keep in touch with loved ones via cell phones or the Internet.

World Education helped to pioneer work on child labor issues in Cambodia, and for thirteen years has maintained a strong presence in Prey Veng. Since 2010 World Education's work includes the *Youth on the Move* Project, supported first by the Oak Foundation, and now by other private funders.

Youth on the Move has changed over the years of its operation. The original model of the program was to work with out-of-school youth, providing them with literacy and life skills training in the community, including training on migration and safety, and, whenever possible, trying to help them get back into school. Unfortunately, however, World Education staff began noticing that out-of-school youth rarely stayed in the community for long; they frequently migrated before the project could reach them.

To address this challenge, *Youth on the Move* began a new approach to its work in Prey Veng at the beginning of 2015, working with in-school students to reduce drop-out rates and provide life-skills training. That was what had brought me to Prey Veng on this visit; I had come to observe a pair of workshops that was taking place that day.

When we arrived the workshops were already underway, and I was able to see Sroeng, the *Youth on the Move* Project Manager, at work,



Youth participants at the civic engagement workshop brainstorm ideas for a community development proposal



Youth on the Move staff, from left to right: Phearom (IT Coordinator), Sokeen (Nonformal Education Technical Assistant), Maridee (Administrative/Finance Manager), and Sroeng (Project Manager)



A view from the roadside

teaching a group of about thirty students about the structure of their local Commune Councils, and the youth leadership roles available to them. These youth were all members of Student Councils and clubs that *Youth on the Move* has been working to re-establish in schools.

Next door, Sokeen, the non-formal education technical assistant for *Youth on the Move*, was leading a workshop on gender equity. In both workshops, an introductory lesson led by a *Youth on the Move* facilitator was followed by small group sessions where the youth participants applied their learning, whether by writing an article about gender-based violence for the Newsletter Club, or by developing a proposal for local government action.

The youth participants were lively and engaged, and when I had the opportunity to interview them in small groups they spoke about their aspirations for future careers and leadership roles (you can read about those interviews in other *Youth on the Move* feature articles). One student told the story of a friend who had left school to work in a garment factory, after the death

of her father placed a financial strain on the family. Such stories are distressingly common. All of the students whom I interviewed said that they planned on graduating from high school, defying the odds for students in Cambodia, where the latest education statistics show a 21% enrollment rate in upper secondary school.

High dropout rates start in the early grades in Cambodia, with the current enrollment in lower secondary school (Grades 7-9) cited by USAID at 34%. A number of factors contribute to high dropout rates, one of which is the perception of the irrelevance of schooling; parents are often not convinced that attending school past the primary grades will bring

opportunities to their children. One of the *Youth on the Move* Project objectives is to encourage parents, and their children, to think differently about the value of schooling. Giving youth leadership opportunities empowers them, and helps enact change and improvements in their schools, such as the establishment of clubs, planting of gardens, and school clean-up campaigns that the students I interviewed spoke of. Even more, however, youth trained by World Education become leaders in their communities, delivering house-to-house workshops on important topics like safe migration, hygiene, and nutrition.

Another way of raising the perceived relevance of schooling



Sroeng and I interview some of the youth participants

is to improve the overall quality of education, and to engage parents in their children's learning. Recognizing this, World Education has completed many projects that take a holistic approach to improving education in Cambodia, including the recently completed 5-year Improving Basic Education in Cambodia Project, funded by USAID, which benefitted over 130,000 students at 301 schools across several Cambodian provinces.

A critical stage for improving education is in the early grades (Grades 1-3), because it is then that children learn to read, and lay the foundation for later academic success. In early grades the focus of education is "learning to read," whereas in Grade 4 and beyond the emphasis shifts to "reading to learn," a model of education that assumes that students have mastered the basic literacy skills necessary to comprehend grade-level texts. When that mastery isn't accomplished in the early grades, it can mean that low-literate students will continue to fall further and further behind their peers in all subjects. That's why World Education has increasingly been focusing on improving early grade reading in Cambodia, and that's what took me to Siem Reap Province in northern Cambodia.

The road to Siem Reap from Phnom Penh is long and dusty, with six hours of villages and rice fields,

potholes and construction. The journey was a great learning experience for me, as I got to see more of the countryside, and experience some Cambodian "road snacks" along the way, including kao lam, a delicious mix of sticky rice and beans cooked inside of a bamboo tube, and fried crickets, which are collected from the many field traps that we saw along the way.

I traveled to Siem Reap with Chieth, the World Education driver, and three project staff: Sambathrorth, who collects information for the monitoring and evaluation of World Education projects, and Daravuth and Barang, who were checking on the status of some of the reading games and technology that World Education had placed in project schools.

The primary schools that we were visiting in Siem Reap were sites of the *Technology for Education Systems Transformation (TEST)* Project, funded by USAID, and the *Total Reading Approach for Children Plus (TRAC+)* Project, funded by World Vision. Both projects are aimed at improving early-grade reading in Cambodia using an innovative, holistic approach. Working alongside the Ministry of Education, World Education and its local partner KAPE have established a series of benchmarks that students in early grades should reach to show that they are progressing in their literacy development, with corresponding interval



Barang demonstrates a game from the TRAC+ Reading Toolkit to some primary-school students



Left: A peer tutor and her tutee use the mLearning app to practice basic reading skills
Right: Students spend their breaktime reading at the school library

assessments. When assessment results reveal that a student is falling behind, he or she is matched with an intervention to address her or his area of need. These interventions include inviting parents to check out targeted reading games home from the school library, peer tutoring, and an mLearning app with reading games and interactive stories developed by the project. Literacy coaches are the key movers of the system, conducting workshops for parents on how to support their children's reading, and assisting early grade teachers in reading instruction.

The *TEST* Project complements *TRAC+* by digitizing and automating the benchmark assessment in an app which scores the assessments and suggests interventions to classroom teachers, as well as collecting student reading score data at a national level, so that the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport can track large-scale trends. Since many Cambodian schools do not have electricity, the *TEST* Project also sometimes equips schools with solar-powered battery systems.

When I arrived with the World Education team at our first school visit, students were still at their lunch recess, and were playing games of jump rope and hopscotch in the school yard. They crowded around to get a look at our camera, and many of the younger students made a game of mugging and photo-bombing our shots. Then a hand bell was rung, and the students lined up to enter the row of classrooms.

We observed a Grade 1 classroom where the teacher was leading a lesson on reading that included some of the games provided through the *TRAC+* project. The children, despite their confusion at having a strange American woman in their school, were eager to participate in the lesson, and after individual students gave correct answers to the teacher's questions the whole classroom would give quick cheers. The games were brought out after the introduction to the lesson, and students clustered together in small groups, absorbed in the activity. Nearby, in the school library, students were using tablets donated through the *TRAC+* Project to practice reading skills in peer-

tutoring pairs. Fifth or sixth grade students are often matched with first and second graders who are struggling in reading, to explain the app to them and to encourage their learning. At break time these students were joined by a crowd of others who had come to read books and play games. As a former teacher, it was a great experience for me to see so many students who were clearly so engaged and eager to read. In the library, the librarian and literacy coach joined groups of students to explain new games to them, and to encourage their progress. Overall, it was a hopeful sight.

Leaving Cambodia, I had the sense that things were on the right track. Having seen World Education's projects in action, both with youth and with early-grade students, I recognized the progress that is being made, and the ways in which schools have adopted new materials and technology to engage students, and I look forward to my next chance to see World Education field staff in action.

For more information about World Education's work in Cambodia, visit our website at: cambodia.worlded.org