



## **Final Report**

**Cambodian primary school children with learning difficulties:  
psychosocial and environmental aspects of children, parents,  
teachers and school authorities. A qualitative case study in  
Battambang and Kampong Cham province.**

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## **Summary Notes and Acronyms**

**ADEPASE** – Association pour le Développement de l’Education et de la Psychologie en Asie du Sud-Est

**APA** – American Psychological Association

**IDI** – In-depth Interview

**FGD** – Focus Group Discussion

**MoEYS** – Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports

**NGO** – Non-Governmental Organization

**PSE** – Pour un Sourire d’Enfant

**PTSD** – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

**SIDA** – Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

**VVOB** – Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance

**UNICEF** – United Nations Children’s Fund

# 1. Introduction

Learning difficulties are a pressing issue globally and, importantly, in Cambodia. These difficulties have a connection with psycho-socio, economic, school and other mental or neurological factors. That makes the issues more complex to understand, not only for the Cambodian parents but also for educators as well. Although children with learning difficulties at school can be sometimes identified by their teachers during the learning activities, there is no practical solution to address these issues yet. Moreover, due to the low level of education of some Cambodian parents and lack of continuing training for teachers, the knowledge of dealing with the children's learning difficulties remains limited.

It's important to note that between 1975 and 1979, most of Cambodia's education system was destroyed under the Khmer Rouge regime. It was almost four decades before the public schools reopened. Since this time the education sector has been developing, with a focus on primary education under the political reforms raised by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS). Through this educational reform, the MoEYS established new curricula, published updated textbooks, manuals for teachers and other pedagogical guides. It also developed modern teaching strategies and learning approaches broadly called '*student-centered*' pedagogy (Song, 2015). Moreover, in 2014, the MoEYS passed three sets of regulations related to the child enrolment policy (MoEYS, 2014, p. 22) which includes a flexible policy of children enrolment at primary school, the quality assurance at school as well as the improvement of the managing system at school.

Recently the MoEYS initiated a pilot program of 'New Generation Schools', aimed at guaranteeing "high standards of governance, transparency, accountability, and participation" (MoEYS, 2016, p. 7). The primary aim of this initiative was to create new systems of financial investment in education that were not possible previously under the public sector governance of education (MoEYS, 2016). Recently there have been additional education programs implemented by various NGOs (Krousa Thmey, PSE, SIDA, UNICEF, VVOB, CARE), in collaboration with the MoEYS, to address and support the needs of children with learning difficulties in schools. These include New Generation Schools, inclusive education and accelerated learning programs.

In order to complete the efforts by the government in terms of budget allowances, the development of the Cambodian educational sector has also been supported through financial and technical assistance from local and international Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)

and other development partners such as the European Union, UNICEF, World Bank, the Global Partnership for Education, and the NGO Education Partnership. Evidence suggests that the number of students enrolled in primary schools has increased from 94.8 % in the school year 2008-2009 to 97% in the school year 2012-2013 (MoEYS, 2014). Nevertheless, the proportion of primary school students who stay until the end of secondary school (grade 9) is reportedly lower due to the increasing rate of drop-outs; especially at the secondary education level (UNICEF, 2015). The report stated that the cause of these ‘drop-outs’ were linked to socio-economic factors, family migration and discrimination toward children with a disability.

Additional findings were also determined such as teacher’s motivation and the lack of teaching materials contributing children’s experiencing learning difficulties. Some educators have viewed these difficulties as either an issue related to intellectual impairment or global development delay while those who work in the special education have a better perception of the characteristics of learning disabilities (Bano, 2012). However, it could be argued that the learning difficulties may be the result of multi-dimensional factors rooted in psychosocial issues and the school environment. Furthermore, the learning difficulties of primary school children seem to be a more or less neglected issue in some low-income countries such as Cambodia, especially for the families in which parents are the former victims of Khmer Rouge regime (Eng & al., 2009). In Cambodia a national survey done by the Department of Psychology of the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), found that 7.4 % of the parents who were interviewed stated their child was facing the learning problem at school (Schunert & al., 2012). A project report indicated that the learning result and poor performance of students at the primary school level are strongly associated with social environments and psychological or psychosocial factors such as attachment issues, domestic violence, teacher-student communication and child neglect (Ret, Lescarret & Pruvost, 2016). It is often the case with children who display some possible symptoms that link to the learning problems at school such as aggressive behaviour, language problems, attention deficit, poor concentration, participation problems or difficulty with reading or writing (Op, 2008, 2017). Therefore, the study of the interplay between psychosocial and economic factors that play a role in the learning difficulties may provide a clearer understanding on how to address the issue.

The significance of this qualitative study is to promote the understanding of the characteristics of children’s learning difficulties and the psychosocial problems at Cambodian primary school amongst parents, educators, education authorities and the public. Three main factors will be raised as the theoretical and analytical framework: family, school environment and psychological factors.

## **2. Aim and objectives of the study**

The aim of this qualitative research is to better understand children's learning difficulties at the primary school level and to identify whether, and if so, how learning difficulties may be related to psychosocial problems experienced in the school and/or home environment. Furthermore, the research aimed to gain understanding of and provide ways forward to improve current practices implemented by teachers, school directors and education authorities. Through our findings, we hope to inform decision makers how the development of new systems, structures, policies, and procedures can help them to address the issue of learning difficulties effectively and to improve the school environment for all learners, no matter their learning difficulties.

## **3. Literature review**

### **3.1. Theoretical perspectives on children's learning difficulties**

#### **3.1.1. Definition**

Despite clear conceptual differences, the concept of 'learning difficulties' is often interchangeably used with 'learning disabilities'. In brief, learning difficulties arise when learners face emotional problems or distress that impact on their '*ability to learn, get along with others and follow school disciplines*' (APA Dictionary, 2007, p. 78) ; whereas a learning disability is usually defined as deficits in various psychological processes that affect certain areas of academic achievement, such as working memory and attention. Learning disabilities are seen as being neurological disorders in various mental processes that make it difficult to acquire certain skills, notably in reading and mathematics (Penney, 2018).

For the purpose of this study, the definition of 'learning disabilities' as a cognitive impairment, originated by different kinds of pathological mental features or neurological disorders that exacerbate learning difficulties at school is the considered context.

When children are affected by learning disabilities, they fail to interpret what they see and hear or they are unable to link the cognitive form of information stemming from different parts of brain. These limitations may appear as specific difficulties with written and spoken language, coordination, self-control or attention deficit (Marshall, 1996). Therefore, this study

was also designed to explore the characteristics of the learning difficulties at the Cambodian primary education.

### **3.1.2. Learning difficulties and their possible origins**

The causation of learning difficulties has been studied widely in both developing and developed contexts (Schneider & Lee, 1990; Gomes-Neto & Hanushek, 1994; Khan & Malik, 1999). Research exposed three main factors contributing to the learning difficulties of primary school students which include family, school and students themselves (Chohan & Qadir, 2013)

#### **Family factors influencing children's learning difficulties:**

Parents and the family members play vital roles in the academic results of the student (Chohan & Qadir, 2013). A research study conducted in 2005 by the Academy of Educational Planning and Management, Ministry of Education, Islamabad, Pakistan (AEPAM) found that almost 83% teachers agreed that in public primary schools, students repeated classes due to the lack of appropriate guidance at home. The similar study in Uganda also indicated the effect of parental involvement on the child's academic achievement (Mahuro & Hungu, 2016). Khajehpour and Ghazvini (2011) indicate the significant difference between the level of parental involvement on the child's academic achievement. According to their study result from 10 Iranian schools, they also found that parents have skills to foster both cognitive growth and achievement motivation of their child, and these skills can be progressively learned by other parents who did not know it.

Based on their result of their meta-analysis, Fan and Chen (2001) suggest all teachers of students who were slower to learn, had complained about the parents' apparent lack of awareness of how important family support was for their child to achieve. The study found that parents of slower learning students gave inadequate support to their children, including emotional support and financial support (*ibid.* p. 18). Indeed, there was an association between low socio-economic background, home environment and children's learning difficulties. Another study showed a link between parental involvement in helping children to do homework, with a significant positive impact on students' achievement (Singh, Granville & Dika, 2002). Furthermore, Chohan and Qadir (2013) found that parents who were more likely to provide support to their child, also agreed that the relationship between the parent and child was very influential in the success, failure and well-being of the child. They also found there

was a strong link between the emotional and academic support of the family and the academic success of the child. Factors such as illiteracy of the parents or inability to support their child, contributed to children failing within the school system (*ibid.* pp. 31-32).

Other evidence suggests that the characteristics of the family such as the social status of the family, family size, cultural features of the family, educational background, language, occupation, and uneasiness at home, are also contributing factors that may affect a child's ability to learn (Sahin & Gülmez, 2000).

### **Teacher and school factors influencing children's learning difficulties:**

Notwithstanding the role of the family, school factors are also responsible for the success or failure of students (Fan, 2001). The result of an analysis of the interviews with primary school teachers in Texas showed that teacher and school characteristics such as quality, experience and motivation of teacher, class size and school policy, had an effect on the student's learning outcome (Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005). School discipline is also a factor that can facilitate or hinder the process of teaching and learning (Chohan & Qadir, 2013). Researchers also report that if teachers are vigilant and responsible, students' results would improve, and they would be able to achieve the academic milestones to progress to the next grade. It was further suggested that these poor learning students would be less likely to fail if they received 'special attention and care' from the teachers. The researchers suggested that if the teachers felt more responsible and attentive to the failure of their students, they would be more likely to implement effective strategies to improve the situation (*ibid.* pp. 34-35). Sahin and Gülmez (2000) state that the qualities of the teachers and school administrators influence student's academic results, as well as other school-related factors such as school facilities, curricula and textbooks, which all impact on learning and may interfere in the academic process at primary school level. Likewise, Khajehpour and Ghazvini (2011) suggest that when teachers and educational administrators make a strong commitment to draw parents into their children's education, the academic outcomes for children can be very positive.

### **The influence of student factors on learning difficulties:**

Personal characteristics also contribute to learning difficulties and potential academic failure (Chohan & Qadir, 2013). Psychological factors, for instance, such as low self-esteem, depression, traumatic experiences, anxiety and other recognized cognitive difficulties (global developmental delay, poor language acquisition and behavioural problems) can greatly impact the student's ability to learn (Marshall, 1996). Because of the repeated failure they experience



as they struggle through the educational system, learning difficulties may also reinforce or cause new psychological difficulties (Marshall, 1999). In a study with 132 Italian school children, for example, a correlation was established between learning disabilities and psychological problems such as depression, school anxiety and lack of self-esteem (Alesi, Rappo & Pepi, 2014). Sometimes, psychological factors are caused by domestic violence, impeding parent-child communication and hence parental support to children's learning. Another factor associated with academic failure for East-Asian students is a lack of interest in studies (Scheider & Lee, 1990). East-Asian students who spend more time studying than participating in group activities with friends were more likely to achieve academically (Scheider & Lee, 1990). However, the positive impact of social interaction with peers on psycho-social well-being also needs to be considered in future studies.

The problem becomes more complex when the students' needs are misunderstood or ignored, or when their academic struggles and failures are met with disapproval by teachers, peers, and parents. Such disapproval can take the form of negative labelling of a child such as slow, lazy, or dumb. Instead of developing a sense of pride in their accomplishments, children end up with feelings of frustration and shame (Marshall, 1999). Marshall also asserts that as many as 75% of children with learning difficulties will also have social difficulties, such as making and keeping friends (1996). These children are less integrated in their peer groups; they are often rejected by other students and teachers. There is evidence that there are adults who hold negative views of children with learning difficulties (Marshall, 1996). The social rejection that the students experience can result in low self-esteem and the apparent negative representations of themselves; thus resulting in feelings of loneliness, leading to psychological difficulties such as anxiety and depression (Marshall, 1996).

## **4. Methodology**

This study used a qualitative approach to explore whether, and if so, how psychosocial factors and the school environment impact on children experiencing learning difficulties.

### **4.1. Sampling and Participants**

Initially four primary schools of Battambang and Kampong Cham provinces were randomly selected. In each province, we chose one school from the list of the municipal office of education with no randomization and another one from the random list of district offices of

education. In order to reduce the location bias, we discussed and verified the selected schools with education authorities and school directors. Besides the different location, the four selected schools were not reportedly under the technical support of NGOs. Nevertheless, our main objective was not to be focusing on the comparison of the effect of different location.

We made direct contact with the directors within the office of education, who forwarded our request to their staff. The essential authority and orders were passed down to the local management of the schools that we had selected. The second stage of the process was to approach the school directors, the head teachers and the teaching staff to organise the sessions of IDI and FGD at school. In each school, we interviewed a group of students, their parents or guardians and the pupils' teachers and school director. In addition, we also set up interviews with the administration at the selected offices of education of the two province. All the sessions of IDI took place in the school libraries. The sessions of FGD took place in the school library for the groups of parents/guardians, in the school administration offices for the teachers and the offices of district education for interviews of the education authorities.

The total number of participants in the study was 86 including 21 students, 30 parents and guardians, 23 teachers, four school directors, and 8 officials from the four different offices of Education, Youth and Sports (see Table 1).

Key informants (research sample)	Number of Participants by type of interview		Number of participants by location				Total number of participants	
	IDI n (%)	FGD n (%)	Battambang n (%)		Kampong Cham n (%)		Total	Female n (%)
			urban	rural	urban	rural		
Primary school students	21 (100)	0 (0)	4 (19)	5 (24)	4 (19)	8 (38)	21 (100)	5 (23)
Parents/guardians	12 (40)	18 (60)	2 (6.7)	13 (43.3)	13 (43.3)	2 (6.7)	30 (100)	24 (80)
Primary school teachers	7 (30.4)	16 (69.6)	10 (43.5)	2 (8.7)	2 (8.7)	9 (39.1)	23 (100)	18 (78.3)
Primary school directors	4 (100)	0 (0)	1 (25)	1 (25)	1 (25)	1 (25)	4 (100)	2 (50)
Education authorities at district level	2 (25)	6 (75)	1 (12.5)	1 (12.5)	2 (25)	4 (50)	8 (100)	5 (62.5)

*Table 1: Number of the research sample by categories (n = 86)*

## 4.2. Methods of data collection

In this qualitative study, we applied various methods to acquire the comprehensive information regarding children's learning difficulties at primary school: in-depth interview (IDI), Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and additional methods of data collection such as observation, field notes, play and case study. Different types of semi-structured questionnaire were used during the sessions of IDI and FGD.

**In-depth interview (IDI)** is the most common method in the qualitative research. It was used to gain a better understanding of the individual's perception of a particular phenomenon or topic. In this research, we used the IDI to collect the information regarding the children's learning difficulties from all selected participants.

**Focus Group Discussion (FGD)** is also one of the popular data collection methods in the qualitative research. The purpose of using this method is to fulfil a gap in understanding between professionals in a particular field of expertise and their target audience. It also helps simplify the investigation process of the some particular behaviour and motivation as well. This technique will allow the the group participants (between 8 and 12 members per group) to create a dialogue amongst them that broadens and deepens the information gathered through the dynamics of discussion. In this study, we only selected the group of teachers and parents for the sessions of FGD.

### **Additional methods of data collection:**

**Observation** involves watching, listening, reflecting and also engaging with the children in conversation. Through this technique, we aim to discover repeating patterns of behaviour and the relationship between behaviours and particular environments. We also used field notes during the sessions of IDI and FGD, the classroom observation as well as the school environments. In this context, the field notes served as the basis for developing categories and themes to explain some behaviours or perceptions of children's learning issues.

**Facilitating play** is an additional method we used during the IDI with the child participants. It allowed them to expressed their thoughts more naturally. This technique was used only with child participant and it was companied by some expressive tools such free drawing, colouring and constructing an object.

**Case study** consists of selecting different occurrences of a problem, such as in this study of the learning difficulties amongst students. The case study plays important role in providing a rich qualitative information about the particular research themes, behaviours or categories

stated in the findings. The construction of case study in this study was based on the information from the field notes, the interview transcripts as well as from the genogram<sup>1</sup>.

#### 4.2.1. Semi-structured questionnaires

Five different semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect data from children, parents/guardians, teachers, school principals and education authorities.

- The questionnaire with children included questions on learning difficulties at school, relationship with peers and teachers, psychosocial and attachment issues, and family history (genogram). In addition, researcher observation was used within the 'physical moment'. The researcher also observed non-verbal expression and attention/engagement, visual and auditory, along with general functioning throughout the interaction; exploring logical thinking and other emotional-behavioural problems during the interview session.

- The questionnaire with parents/guardians focused on parenting style of educating; such as child-parent communication, understanding of learning difficulties and parent's coping methods in relation to the children's school problem; including psychosocial and educational issues and family history (genogram).

- The questionnaire with the primary school teachers focused on their level of understanding and knowledge of children's learning difficulties and psychosocial problems, the existing technical assistance or helping mechanisms, availability of identification/assessment processes, supportive network and intuitive methods of coping with these issues.

- The primary school directors' questionnaire focused on the working modality and practical interventions for helping with identified cases of learning difficulties within school; including identifying the need for further support for children with learning difficulties.

- The questionnaire with education authorities from the office of 'Education, Youth and Sports' at district and provincial level, focused on the understanding and knowledge of children's learning difficulties, and awareness of existing technical assistance or helping mechanisms. The knowledge of supportive networks and/or intuitive approaches to address learning difficulties and the process of identifying specific areas of need were also explored.

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<sup>1</sup> A genogram is a representation of a family tree that depicts data on relationships among individuals. It goes beyond a traditional family tree by allowing use to analyse hereditary patterns and psychological factors that explain relationships.

### 4.3. Data analysis

A qualitative descriptive analysis of the data was undertaken. The content analysis which is typical method used to evaluate documents or qualitative data collected from the IDI and FGD was applied in this study. This analytical method can be also conducted in general on written text, transcribed speech, verbal interactions, visual images, characterisations, nonverbal behaviours, sound events or any other message type. Basically, it is used to analyse the theme or content of each communication act which is coded from the individual messaging for IDI and from the interpersonal and group messaging for FGD. In this study, data included interview transcripts, field notes and observations; IDI/ FGD were transcribed ad verbatim, stripped of any identifying information and checked for accuracy. The method of data analysis involves managing the data manually. This human coding process allowed us to read, code, view and interpret the qualitative information as the target content carefully. The result from the content analysis was discussed and verified among the research team. The Case studies of some participants were presented in this report (see in Appendix A) based on the result of sessions of IDI and FGD.

For interpreting the data collected separately from the answers given by the different groups (students, parents/guardians, teachers, directors and education authorities), a specific psycholinguistic analysis of the salient features was applied as they appeared in the discourse of the concerned persons.

We gathered a series of concepts that persons used to characterise the conditions in which they teach, the difficulties encountered by the teaching staff, and the director involvement. From the observation of the student behaviours, the form and content of the language they used to describe their difficulties, a pattern developed that characterised the different psychological and sociological issues related to the study of learning disabilities and learning difficulties. The dispatched features were recorded, noting a system of categories depending on their nature, origin and effect on the learning process.

## 5. Findings

The results of this study consists of three different aspects which help depict the causes and effects of children's learning difficulties: the main features accounting for children's learning difficulties, the potential factors of learning difficulties and current assistances and methods used to assess and address the issues. The field notes and classroom observation were complementary to the responses of students, parents/guardians, teachers, school directors and education authorities from the interviews. For the parent participants, it is important to note that there was a similarity amongst the responses regarding their economic status and level of acquired education; which was regardless of their different living location or geographic areas. The parents'/guardians' occupations were farmers (27%), vendors (33%), workers (17%), self-employed (13%) and unemployed (10%). Three quarters of the participants had been to primary school; however, one quarter of participants were illiterate.

### 5.1. The main features accounting for children's learning difficulties

During the interviews and play sessions with children it was observed that many of them appeared to have difficulties with reading, writing, mathematical calculation, concentration, attention, and memorization. Almost all children interviewed experienced difficulties in writing, reading and dictation of Khmer studies, with nearly two thirds of the children experiencing difficulties with simple math calculations. Reading problems often caused additional struggling for children in terms of learning difficulties. Struggling with Khmer consonants or Khmer vowels appeared to lead to difficulties in spelling, reading, and writing for the children. In some cases, the children with learning difficulties were only able to read the simple words and write incomplete sentences. Their reading and writing abilities were often not in keeping with their grade study level.

*'I found it very difficult to teach S.K (an 8-year-old girl, grade 2) because she doesn't know the vowels and the consonants, so it is impossible for her to spell, read and write [...] I think because she doesn't know the consonant and vowels, If I were her grade 1 teacher, I would haven't allowed her to pass the grade'. (43-year-old teacher, grade 2, Kampong Cham province).*

For teachers this represented a mismatch between the anticipated grade the student should be performing at and their ability to be able to achieve this. Many children with

learning difficulties had to repeat their grade because their annual results fell below the average:

*'I used to fail in grade one because I had missed the final exam session [...] I was absent during the final exam because my mother brought me to visit my grandmother who had been hospitalized for one month in Pursat province [...] at the end of the year my teacher told me that I could not pass the grade because I was poor at reading, writing, and mathematical calculation'. (11-year-old boy, grade 5, Kampong Cham province).*

Both the teaching staff and education authorities mentioned that the rate of children with learning difficulties (those who repeated the grade and were reportedly regarded as slow learners) was approximately 10%.

Our observation during the interviews and play sessions also revealed that around one-third of the children seemed to have ***problems with hearing or visual perception***. Thus, it could be more difficult for them to receive or deliver information clearly during social interaction or communication with peers and teachers at school. Many of these symptoms were not easily identified unless the researcher was actively focusing on them during the interview/play. Therefore, it is possible in a normal busy class environment these symptoms might go unnoticed. However, these symptoms may also link to some psychological aspects as well.

It was also found that about 30% of the students who experienced slower learning also seemed to have difficulties linked to ***logical reasoning skills***. They had notable difficulty in understanding and explaining some simple concepts they were given to elaborate on. About 30% of the interviewed children were found to have some cognitive limitations, lacking the ability to express themselves clearly and accurately on any subject that requires some logical construction. In addition, they appeared erratic in trying to build up some sense of reasoning about simple phenomena. They seemed to have a lot of difficulties associating concepts that could be interconnected in simple language.

*'P always forgets, sometimes at school, then we never find these materials [...] He has lost a lot of things. Sometimes he comes from the school with a torn shirt [...] I am exhausted with him'. (64-year-old grandmother, Battambang province).*

It seems moreover that many of the children with learning difficulties faced a severe difficulty in calculation in the subject of mathematics.

*'I am inferior in mathematics, especially in the multiplication and division [...] I try my best to study math, but I can't do it! I got 4, 71/10 of the total score in grade 6, so I am repeating the grade'. (13-year-old boy, grade 6, Battambang province).*

Children were unable to calculate additions, subtractions, multiplications, and divisions. In some cases, a small number of children interviewed could perform operations of addition and subtraction, but for most multiplication and division were a big challenge.

*'From my experience of more than 30 years in teaching, a child with learning difficulties presents with a problem of reading and writing in Khmer language; followed by mathematical calculation'. (57-year-old School Director, Battambang province).*

Teachers' perceptions reinforced the fact that many children faced learning difficulties in multiple areas of literacy and numeracy which can be assessed via the exams and daily learning.

Most of the children presented with some signs of **memory problem (short-term and working memory):**

*'V.K is a slow learning student, he records a zero in reading, spelling, writing and mathematics [...] I think this child has a memory problem and that is why he doesn't catch anything from my teaching'. (Teacher, grade 3, Kampong Cham province).*

They were asked for more detail in order to understand the difficulties. About 70% of them linked memory issues to the problems they encountered within their family. The social challenges and anxiety around their home environment made it difficult for them to keep pace with what they were supposed to learn in the lessons, in some instances because family unrest prevented them from doing their homework.

*'...I cannot remember what I have learned from school after class [...] yes, I was worried often about my family problems, my parents and everyone at home [...] my parents are in Thailand working and my grandma is often sick...'. (A 11-year-old girl, grade 4, Battambang)*

Memory problems also impacted on the child's ability to organize effective strategies, to speak and write. Thus, it made learning more difficult for the children, especially to learn a mechanism of multi-step procedures to process information quickly. This disorder can also be linked to some cognitive aspects.

*'C.M doesn't remember the lesson and I taught the first Khmer consonant "kor" for three days. Sometimes it takes her a moment to answer my question. I don't know if she has a 'brain problem' or memory issue...'. (Teacher, grade 1, Kampong Cham province).*



We also found that *lack of interest and poor concentration or attention* in school activities was reported by most of the slower learning students. They were easily distracted during their study. Children with learning difficulties did not seem to listen to what the teacher said to them. They were unable to work in the group, and they often disturbed the others in the course of class activities. In this case, the teaching effort as well as the creativity of their teachers might be helpful to optimise the children's participation or their learning process.

*'S.V is very active, and misbehaves. He always disturbs everyone in the class and sometimes he doesn't listen to me when I ask him to stop doing these disturbing behaviours'.* (Teacher, grade 6, Battambang province).

Some students were also presenting with problems with 'self-care' in their everyday lives. They were identified as having poor hygiene, smelling unpleasant and not dressing in a socially acceptable level of clean clothing; also often 'forgetting' or losing school materials (books and pencil). Most of the slower learning students were not able to complete the homework assigned by their teachers either due to family circumstances or due to poor concentration.

Most of the teachers said that the activities in the classroom can allow them to assess the problems of learning difficulties for students. Teachers perceived that students with learning difficulties seemed quieter than others, often lacked confidence and did not want to participate in class activities as they didn't know what to do. Based on our observation, however, we have not seen this practice yet in our four selected schools for data collection.

*'...we observed to identify those with slower learning during our daily teaching [...] these students were not brave enough to answer the question, and they seemed quieter [...] we ask them to change their seat or to turn back to the special blue board so that they could get help from other classmates or the teachers' and pay more attention to them...'*. (All teachers, Battambang and Kampong Cham)

For the parent participants, eighty percent of them stated they did not fully understand their child's learning difficulties or what some of the contributing factors might be.

*I know that my son was poor in learning because he doesn't know how to read or write. I don't know why he is below average like this; maybe he has a brain problem. I don't know what to do, but I just put him at school hoping that he can play with others and he can adjust to proper relationships in the community with other kids'.* (V.K's mother)

In summary, teachers and other educators identified students with learning difficulties based on some characteristics as follow:

**Causes:** Most of the students with learning difficulties suffered from Khmer study, they cannot read or write. Children who did one year or two in elementary school have been believed by teachers to study more easily at primary school than those who didn't. The immigration issue or parental displacement for job was one of the reasons that some students have missed their elementary school before entering the primary school was because. There are too many cases in the primary schools regarding immigration for a job. Students are reportedly stubborn and don't listen to the teacher.

**Attitude:** Their communication was poor, and they were quiet. They were mostly left by their parents at home staying with their siblings and/or a guardian (grandmother, uncle or ant). Students don't pay much attention to teaching activities, they are forgetful or easy to forget. Some students keep playing alone and pretend not to care about the explanation of teachers. Some others students have some behavioural problems and their absenteeism was so high that's why they cannot get a good score in the class.

**Attention problem:** Some students skipped class often because either they wanted to play outside or were afraid of the school or teachers. Some students cannot concentrate on the study while staying in the classroom because they might have some family problems, when it comes to parental divorce or domestic violence.

**Cognitive aspect:** Some students tried hard to study and came to school regularly, but they cannot understand or remember the lesson easily. While some students study was good at Khmer literature but very poor in mathematics. (They might reportedly have more or less the conduct disorder because they tried to disturb their classmates all the time).

## 5.2. Factors of children's learning difficulties in primary school level

### 5.2.1 Family factors

For the student participants, more than half of them reported that they could not get assistance from their parents for their schooling. Thus, the *parents' involvement* seemed very poor in the child's learning process. Many parents were not able to provide their children with support during homework time; therefore, some children didn't seem to study hard at home. Other children said that they sometimes got assistance from another family member, instead. While some parents didn't know how to help their children at home, others were reportedly too busy with their business or work. Some parents had never contacted the teacher or school

director to find the solution for their child's learning problem. For some parents this was influenced by their own experiences of education.

*'I never check my child's book at home or helped to teach him because I don't know how too. I never go to school in my life, so I can't read and write. My husband is the same as me'. (Mother of a 12-year-old student, grade 5, Kampong Cham).*

Often a child's ability to attend school is greatly impacted by the economic needs of the family. Almost all children in this study were from low-income families, where economic insecurity meant children had been either forced to do menial tasks or used by their parents/guardians to do a low income-job to survive:

*'I am 17-years-old [...] ...After school I go to work at a place near roundabout [...] I don't know how much money I get per month, but they give me a lot [...] they give me a lot of pieces of 500 and 1000 Riels [...] At school I don't understand the lesson [...] mathematics and Khmer are very difficult for me to understand...'. (A 15-year-old boy, grade 6, Battambang).* Some children were reportedly absent from their class because they were collecting waste or finding food in the rice field. Some were required to do the chores in the home, due to the absence of their parents/guardians. During the interview/play session, many of the students who came from families experiencing economic deprivation talked about the discrimination they had experienced.

*'... sometimes I came to school without money. My family is poor while many classmates are rich. I only can play with those who don't discriminate me [...] Most of the time, I was playing or sitting alone during the break'. (13-year-old boy, grade 6, Battambang province).*

Child labour may well be implied that fact that the child was subconsciously willing to take a father role by working and earning money to support his/her divorced or widowed mother or parent.

*'... sometimes I could not go to school because I needed to go to collect waste such as beer can or water bottle during the wedding ceremonies. This was to sell to support the family, especially my mother [...] After school I sometimes went to find fish in the rice field'. (11-year-old boy, grade 3, Battambang province).*

In addition to the economic aspect of the family, some children also raised the issue of other types of **family crisis** such as divorce, parental mobility or short-migration for work, alcoholism and domestic violence. All participants in the study confirmed that these factors could have an adverse impact on children's learning process or academic achievement. Children

experiencing any form of family crisis reported difficulties with remembering the lesson they had learned. They seemed pre-occupied with their family issue, rather than their schooling.

*'...Although I think Khmer study and Mathematics are easy to learn, I cannot remember the lesson I have learned from school [...] Most of the time, I feel worried about the security of some of my family members as well as their future...'. (11 years-old boy, grade 4, Kampong Cham province).*

In this study we found that children from ***divorced families*** were often confronted with learning difficulties. Before the divorce happened, the child had been experiencing a lot of family conflict with their parents often being less supportive and less affectionate. Children discussed that after the divorce, the discipline became less consistent and less effective; with divorced parents sometimes indulging in harmful psychological compensation such as the use of alcohol, drugs or gambling. The children stated changing schools, moving to a new home, living with a single parent who felt anxious or was aggressive, were all big challenge for them and negatively impacted their school performance. Divorce also led to financial issues for the family (or now single parent), which meant that some children had to actually leave school.

Significantly, almost half of the children interviewed discussed the issues of ***domestic violence or other forms of family conflicts***. Almost all incidents of domestic violence occurred when mainly the father, or occasionally the mother, got drunk. Children experiencing family violence in the home, were reportedly behaving badly or aggressively at school; thus the frightening or shocking experiences at home made it more difficult for them to concentrate and attend school.

*'I am living at my grandparents' home with my parents, aunts, uncle, cousins and my siblings [18 people]. Sometimes my mom asked me to call him for dinner [...] sometimes my parents conflicted with each other [...] I saw my aunt and her husband beating each other and sometimes insulted each other almost every day [...] I come to school every day with my two brothers and one sister, but I cannot study well [...] at school sometimes I felt anxious, sometimes I felt angry when I played with others...'. (A 9-year-old boy in grade 3, Kampong Cham)*

Sometimes the children stated that they were worried about their victimised parent and so they refused to go to school. If children were the victim of violence or abuse committed by an adult in the family, they may also, in some probability, develop symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Violence exerted onto children has a damaging impact on the psychological mechanisms by which they build their personality; their self-awareness imprinted

permanently from what they perceived in the behaviour of the parents. The use of violence on the children may produce a constant feeling of fear and guilt about their parents' expectations:

*'...I am terrified of my mother. She beats me very often, even though I followed her all the time. She always gets drunk and hits me...'. (9-year-old girl, grade 2, Battambang).*

This can affect all the dimensions of individual development, especially education and psychosocial development. (Please see case study 3, N.S, and case study 5, H.D, in the Appendix A). The stress that the parents experience in their lives can be transmitted to their children as they feel 'ill-at-ease' at the sight of their parents' discontent. Not knowing the reason for their parents' mood, they may develop some kind of anxiety that stems from a feeling of guilt and reason not known to them.

Lack of communication between parents/guardian, teacher or school director is not the only factor that exacerbates children's learning difficulties; however, in this study, it was found to contribute to some children experiencing slower learning and actually dropping out of school.

Remarkably the parents' own experience of poverty and lack of opportunity for education, appeared to be a motivating factor for wanting their children to have an education and opportunities they did not.

*'I don't know why my son can't study well [...] I tried to tell him that I did not have a chance to go to school when I was young [...] so he has to try his best to study. Sometimes I did not have money for him to go to school [...] he did not want to go...'. (A 43-year-old mother, Battambang).*

On the other hand, some of the parents interviewed were not convinced of the importance of schooling and thus condoned it when their child missed school, or even intentionally refused to attend any school. They tried to justify the idea that schooling was not necessary.

*'... I think that my son is not as intelligent as his older sister. He would not be able to benefit from the school besides playing with other classmates. (A 35-year-old mother of a student, grade 3, Kampong Cham).*

Poverty continued to strike some families who were not benefiting from the social or economic progress that an education might offer. The type of economic struggles that the participants put forth to characterize the difficulties that their children encountered were very similar to the ones that they had met when they were young; namely the obligation to send their

offspring to work on menial tasks and low-grade jobs to supplement the low income of their parents. This is a hugely significant issue related to education. As almost all parents agreed that schooling was essential for the betterment of their children's future, one third also stated the need for money forced them to send their children out to work to help support the family.

Parents did recognise how the family situation might impact their child's ability to learn:

*My husband beats me when he is drunk and he drinks almost every day. Although he behaves violently to me, I could not divorce him because I prioritize my children's future and schooling. Sometimes I run away from home for hours to escape the violence [...] Anyway, I believe that this family problem affects my children's study negatively. Let's say my daughter who is in grade 4 here, she is often scared once her father beat on me. As a result, she cannot concentrate on her study'. (A 37-year-old mother of the FGD, Kampong Cham),*

Almost half of the parents interviewed also pointed to the responsibility of the school to ensure their child's attendance at school:

*'We don't understand why children like playing game a lot [...] they follow their classmates and skip class to play games [...] maybe school directors or teachers don't know how to deal with this issue [...] some parents are careless about that, while others try to convince their children to go to school, but it as impossible...'. (5 parents and guardians from the FGD, Battambang).*

However, even though many parents did want their children to attend school, there were other factors that meant children did not attend. Sometimes the children had to accompany their parents who had jobs in other provinces, or they are left in the care of some aunt or uncle or grandmother who did not always provide them with enough affection, love, and encouragement that would convince them to go to school.

*'I don't have any idea of why he cannot study well at school [...] his mother is working in Rattanakiri with his step-father [...] last time he went there with my daughter for more than one month [...] and then he came back to school again [...] he rarely talked to me about himself so I don't know much about what he's thinking'. (A 51-year-old grandmother, Kampong Cham).*

There were also those parents who were aware of their child's learning difficulties, but didn't know what to do to help them. Often they could not afford to pay for extra courses or even afford the required school uniform.

*'...almost all students in the school said that if they did not attend the extra or special course sessions, they were unlikely to pass the grade. Those who could afford for the*

*extra paid classes would have the high probability of learning more or to be outstanding students in the class...'. (Four parents/guardians from FGD, Battambang).*

For the teacher participants, we did not note any specific problems that differentiate rural and urban schooling as far as the performance of the students were concerned. During the interviews, a wide range of issues were reported. One of the predominant issues reported was communication difficulties between educators and parents. A common theme was the difficulty convincing some parents to participate in the educational process of child. The teachers seemed to place the responsibility on the parents for not helping their children learn more at school.

*'...if parents or guardians can help their children learn at home, we could easily help them at school [...] we need to work with parents to explain to them why their children have problems [...] but most of them, especially for those having children with difficulties, did not collaborate with us or school...'. (Teachers from FGDs, Battambang and Kampong Cham).*

For the school directors, they often mentioned the relationships between them and the families were often hectic and confusing. This can be linked with the chaotic contexts many families found themselves in. The directors suggested a collation between the lack of parental interest in their child's performance and the parent's own lack of education when they were young. Other issues they identified included malnutrition, domestic violence, alcoholism, immigration, mobility, constant displacement or absence from home. The directors recognised that these not only accounted for the children's difficulties at school, but they also contributed to the parent's lack of awareness of the problems. Moreover, they seem to understand very well the socio-economic issues of parents that prevent children going to school regularly or studying hard for their future.

#### 5.2.2. School factors and its environment

Most of the participants, including the teachers, agreed that school is one of the factors that can contribute to learning difficulties of primary school students. This may refer to a teacher's professional and personal context (for example teaching style and knowledge, personal problems or lack of motivation), a teaching issue (technical issue, personal problem, and lack of attention and motivation). This, along with large class sizes and school fees, were also contributing factors within a school environment, where students might be more at risk for learning difficulties. (Please see *case study 6* in the Appendix A).

*'...I can't understand the lesson [...] I don't ask my teachers for explanation [...] my female teacher last year was so nasty [...] the male teacher this year stays near my house, he knows my dad [...] when students were talking in the class, he just tried to write down on the board and went out to talk around with other teachers...'. (An 11-year-old girl, grade 3, Kampong Cham).*

All the teachers considered that their difficulties in teaching were due to the lack of teaching materials.

*'...we don't have a teachers book anymore to teach student's [...] we can't find or know all relevant stories to tell the study when teaching Khmer [...] we try to produce the teaching materials by ourselves [...] The MoEYS should produce the short stories as many as possible, so that the students and teachers can read...'. (7 teachers, Battambang and Kampong Cham).*

About 70% of the interviewed teachers stated that they had psychological tension resulting from the disruptive behaviour of some students and from the pedagogical difficulties to cope efficiently; especially with those students who presented with learning difficulties related to the home or school environment or global developmental delay. Approximately half of them mentioned that there was a lack of understanding between challenging students and teachers. This situation made it difficult for them to enhance channels of communication.

Almost all interviewed teachers indicated that a lack of proper pedagogical training or counselling hampered the identification of the problems and the full comprehension of the causes of learning difficulties. Teachers identified there was a need for building up some efficient and professional method of action in addition to the MoEYS support. The need for external expertise and counselling in the fields of psycho-pedagogics and clinical psychology was also mentioned by more than 50% of the teachers. The teacher's self-confidence is also an important factor to ensure the quality of teaching.

Most of the teachers identified some practical solutions to the learning problems in terms of financial support and better organization. One of the recommendations was reducing the number of students in each class. The launching of additional lessons or extra courses for the students that couldn't follow the class content was also seen as important. Teachers also argued that examination procedures and rules needed to be clear, to clarify when a student had to repeat one grade.

*'... the ideal number of the students per class should be below 30 [...] sometimes teachers cannot control all the students in large numbers [...] they were so noisy and did not listen to us [...] when the students are perceived as slower learners, they*



*should be provided with special attention and extra class for free in the vacation...'. (Teachers, Kampong Cham and Battambang).*

Almost all the teachers stated that they believed that pedagogical focus on mathematics and Khmer language would build up some cognitive basis before imparting other subject matters.

*'All students with learning difficulties faced problems with Khmer and mathematics [...] it's important for us as teachers to teach well from the earlier grades [...] some teachers don't seem to care so much about that...'. (A 43-year-old teacher from grade 5, Kampong Cham).*

The school directors believed that to perform well with challenging students, teachers must acquire enhanced and efficient teaching skills. Many directors identified a lack of basic initial training for teachers. Consistent 'on the job' training was identified as rare and insufficient, in spite of the efforts of staff and the occasional support supplied by the office of education. The lack of a standardized professional 'benchmark' caused a discord over qualifications, which may also be seen as an explanation why some teachers were not as dedicated to their job compared to others. It was perceived that the lack of adequate training, qualifications and a high standard of professional skills impacted on the teacher's ability to identify students with learning difficulties and provide some form of intervention.

For problems related to school, the education authorities identified a range of issues such as a lack of classrooms, few books, documents and other pedagogical equipment. The low salaries of the teachers were also seen to account for a lack of motivation and dedication; alongside a shortage of staff in many schools. The education authorities discussed that along with the MoEYS structure, teachers should also receive more help in the field of initial training, on the job training (continued professional training), assessment procedures and general knowledge of educational strategies.

Both educators and education authorities mentioned that the number of students per classroom was above 35. They preferred to have an ideal number which is below 30 in order to assure the quality of teaching. The smaller number of students per class, the quicker the teachers could know their students very well.

They identified that the lack of direct connection with the department of education might prevent the teachers from getting technical support in difficult situations. The education authority identified better contact between teachers and the local community within the school

district, as a means of obtaining valuable information regarding their students and the reasons for their learning difficulties.

The school authorities felt that lesson plans were not adequately designed due either to a lack of knowledge, interest or attention. The school authorities discussed that this might contribute to the difficulty experienced by teachers in identifying students with learning difficulties and building solutions to deal with the problems. Variation in competence between one teacher to the next was also an issue as well as the impact of personal/social issues that infiltrated their professional life. School authorities believed it is up to the supervisors, directors, and inspectors to monitor teachers and redirect the struggling teacher to an alternative career if required.

It may be interpreted as there being a need for new pedagogical techniques in each subject matter, imparted to all of the teachers to help alleviate the difficulties of the children. Once the impairment in the school systems described above has been addressed, learning will become more attractive and teaching enhanced in a much more efficient way; captivating the slower learning students or to those who are barred from receiving adequate basic education for all the reasons developed in this research.

### 5.2.3. Psychological factors

During the interviews, we tried to understand some of the feelings, thoughts, verbal and non-verbal expressions shared by the children who reported slower learning. We found that each child presented with different psychological problems. These will be reported with the presentation of a case study in order to make a connection between these psychological problems and children's learning difficulties (see in Appendix A).

Approximately half of the children interviewed presented with at least one of the following psychological symptoms: depression, loss of interest, anxiety, PTSD, low self-esteem, and other emotional and behavioural regulation issues. At least one traumatic event or other form of psychological trauma was reported by half of the respondents.

In this part, the result was additionally collected from our observation, play and drawing during the interview with children only. The further clinical assessments with validated tools would be helpful to diagnose the specific psychological syndromes of children.

### ***Symptoms of Anxiety***

Just under half of the children with learning difficulties in this study described experiencing symptoms such as a feeling of anxiety, stress and panic. This was often related to not being able to catch up with their lessons and feeling different from their peers; as well as feeling anxious about their home situation. Moreover, the higher the anxiety experienced, the more this appeared to contribute to their risk of academic failure. (Please see **case study 1 (S.K)** in the appendix A).

*'...I felt very anxious before coming to school [...] when the teacher pointed to me to answer a question, I felt ashamed and scared [...] my dad drinks almost every day...'* (An 8-year-old girl, grade 2, Kampong Cham).

### ***Symptoms of Depression***

Throughout the interview sessions we found that some students with learning difficulties seemed to have some signs of depression, expressing feelings of sadness, loneliness, hopelessness and low self-esteem. Our findings indicate that about 30% of the interviewed children displayed some depressive symptoms, which is significant as depression can affect all aspects of an individual's life, including learning ability. These students faced remarkable challenges related to their learning difficulties. (Please see **case study 2, S.V**, and **case study 6, S.C**, in the Appendix A).

*'Sometimes I cried alone when I missed my mother [...] I don't want to go to school because I can't see my future [...] I pretended to be sick because I could skip class [...] I sometimes felt hopeless, unhappy and lacked confidence in studying...'* (A 13-year-old boy in grade 6, Battambang)

### ***Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)***

A quarter of the children in this study identified as having experienced traumatic events and presented with symptoms of PTSD, such as feeling anxious frequently, having nightmares related to the incident, having trouble focusing at school, acting impulsively, or having difficulties in social interactions and feeling lonely. Four children also expressed fears related to a family member dying as a result of domestic violence or following an accident. (Please see **case study 3, N.S**, and **case study 5, H.D**, in the Appendix A).

*'...I easily forgot what I have learned from school [...] When my dad was drunk he beat my mom [...] My aunt also conflicted with my uncle almost every day [...] when others spoke loudly it made me scared or loss of control [...] I am afraid that my mom or aunt might die ...'* (A 9-year-old boy, grade 3, Kampong Cham).

### ***Behavioural problem and emotional regulation***

Some children's learning difficulties manifested as behavioural problems such as avoiding doing homework, refusing to adhere to discipline in the class, skipping the class, or bullying their peers. These disruptive behaviours not only affected their interactions with family members, peers and teachers, but they created a disturbance for those people around them. The lack of social communication skills and strategies contributed to them being rejected or discriminated by their peers, teacher, and family; which in turn further exacerbated their learning difficulties. Students difficulty with social interaction and behaviour created challenging situations for teachers and family members to deal with. Students themselves identified the behaviours that would contribute to an environment where they would require discipline:

*'... I think they said that I was smoking cigarette [...] my teacher hates me because I did not follow him [...] I skipped class and went outside to meet my friend, we smoked cigarettes [...] sometimes they forced me to use drugs, but I did not...'* (A 13-year-old boy in grade 5, Battambang)

The presentation of a case study (D.V) indicates the relationship between learning difficulties and behaviour problem. *(Please see case study 4, D.V, in the Appendix A).*

Although almost no parents mentioned particular medical or psychological syndromes that would explain the difficulties that their children may encounter at school in the learning process, they were aware of the impact that particular traumatic events might have on their child. The different sorts of psychological trauma that a student may suffer from can have roots in childhood' experiences within the family life, but also within his personal development. It may present as psychopathological patterns or mental disabilities. In this case, a clinical psychologist will be required to determine what the problem is, before any pedagogical procedure.

*'I have been so worried about my 8-year-old daughter. She has been scared for the last 4 months, shortly after seeing the deadly traffic accident in front of my home and other domestic violence of neighbours. It affects her study because she easily feels numb and forgets things quickly when hearing the thunder of the horn of a vehicle.'* (A mother participant of FGD, Battambang province).

#### 5.2.4. Other independent factors

Regardless of the school factors, two children out of 21 reported health conditions. One was allegedly suffering from leukaemia and another reported a leg operation. Their absence from school for medical treatment and their subsequent suffering, disrupted the learning process. Either the students could not study regularly or they had a lack of attention due to their health conditions.

### 5.3. Response to the issue of children's learning difficulties in primary school

#### 5.3.1. Identification methods of educators for children's learning difficulties

Most of the teachers interviewed stated that there was no any assessment tool to measure their student's learning progress. Instead, they were worried about the large number of student to teach per class, around 40, which prevent them from carefully measuring each student's progression. Moreover, the teachers are not available to work with parents to access the cause of learning difficulties of their students.

In contrast, all school directors and education authorities stated that there was an assessment tools provided by the MoEYS to allow the teachers to measure their student's progression at all grades twice per academic year. Nevertheless, they also recognised that not all the teachers were able to do this assessment while the assessment, in reality, could not be done regularly and with every single student due to the budget and time constraints as well as the lacking of practice.

All the interviewed teachers stated that they don't have any assessment tool to identify a student carried a psychological problem and they don't know clearly how to detect the psychosocial problems of their students.

*We don't have the knowledge about psychosocial problem or mental health problem, we never get such training about this topic. So I don't understand when we talk about this subject but I recognize that when a student has psychological problem, it can effect on his/her studies results. (A teacher participant of FGD, Kampong Cham province).*

Anyway most of the teachers apply some simple technics such as observation and daily communication with the students to detect a student who presents some psychological difficulties.

Despite the absence of psycho-pedagogical approaches and other relevant tools of assessment to detect the psychological problems of children's learning difficulties, there are three fundamental elements that both educators and educating authorities often mentioned in the interviews in terms of the psychological aspect. These are attention problem, emotional state and behavioural manifestation that have been habitually remarked during their daily teaching.

a. Pedagogical aspect

All the teachers interviewed explained that they have identified each of their students slow learning during their teaching activities based on homework, student-teaching interaction in the classroom, their observational skills and their pedagogical knowledge they have learned. They measured the daily learning progression of their students by asking them to read, to write, to practice mathematic and to work on other subject areas in science and social studies. Some teachers stated that assigning homework to the students also helps them study the level of parents' or guardians' involvement in the child's education. Some characteristics of slower learners below were indicated by most of the teachers and authorities:

- they forget quickly how to read or write words even with repeated practice.
- they are poor in mathematic.
- they copy words with difficulty, they are slow in learning, and they often make mistakes in copying. Overall, they are not able to copy the words and write down on the board.
- they find it difficult to understanding the word and simple sentences or to follow the teacher's instructions.
- they easily misunderstand the meaning of questions and give irrelevant answers; and sometimes they refuse to answer the question.
- they find it difficult to understand the content of some subjects such as social study and the study of science, and they were notably unable to do the assigned homework.

*For me, to evaluate a student, I ask them to write the word, to spell the word and I always correct the homework. If she/he is a smart student she/he can write, spell and do mathematic well [...] the smart students always complete the homework correctly. [...] a child with learning difficulties always has trouble in reading, dictation and*

*math [...] she/he always miss or fail to do the assigned homework ... (A teacher participant of FGD, Battambang province).*

b. Physical aspect

Most of the teachers and educating authorities believed that both children living in the very poor family and those having the developmental delay could be observed through their physical appearance. The way the students get dressed for schooling and how they care about your daily hygiene were highlighted by the educators.

c. Psychological aspect

According to the interviews and our classroom observation, students with learning difficulties did not pay much attention to teaching activities. Some teachers mentioned that some of their students were forgetful (easy to forget), and they kept playing alone and did not care much about the teacher's explanation or teaching. Moreover, the large number of students per classroom worsens the teacher-student interaction in the learning process.

The participants defined the term “*attention*” as a child's ability to concentrate on a specific object or activity in the classroom: reading, interpersonal interaction and playing alone or with other classmate rather than listening to the teacher in the classroom. In this aspect, the teachers interviewed shared their remarks of the attention problem on the slow learning students as follows:

- they find it difficult to concentrate during classes, and they are easily distracted by the sound or activities coming from outside of the classroom or often look out of windows.
- they are unable to concentrate well when talking with others and often unable to follow instructions from especially their teacher.
- they seem to be forgetful or careless and often lose their belongings.
- they are reportedly having a high rate of absenteeism.

All the teachers interviewed identified the students having psychological problems as those who have a weird behaviour compared to other ordinary students at school or in the classroom.

*A student who has psychosocial problem may have social skill problem such as lack eye contacts, speak in a rather awkward and flat tone [...] she/he rarely uses facial expressions, gestures or body language in communicating with others...*

*A teacher participant of FGD, Kompong Cham province*

Almost all the educators and educating authorities defined the “behavioural problem” as the psychological characteristic of the slow learning students. There have been some behavioural patterns reported during the interviews such as sitting position, participation, hyperactivities, some forms of objection and disturbance in the classroom. Most of teachers described these behavioural problems as follows:

- they often leave their seats, climb up and down, or move around in the classroom.
- they are restless in seat, hyperactive, and they fidget with their legs, stretch their bodies, or frequently drop things on the floor while learning in the classroom.
- they have a problem of self-control and tend to be impulsive. They often interrupt a conversation or answer questions in class without raising their hands.
- they sometimes refuse to follow instructions and often argue with others or disturb other classmate while learning. As the result, the educators find it difficult to communicate with these students.

In terms of the “emotional state”, all the teachers and educating authorities believed that the poor learning students often manifest the remarkable signs of being unhappy, quiet, worried, lonely or shameful during classes. They also present the lack of courage or confidence in studying. In this psychological perspective, most of the educators stated that the main cause of change of the emotional state was from the family problems such as domestic violence, family separation, etc.

*Students can be sad or stressful of the family problem. Some of them stayed still and alone, they did not want to play with their peers because their parents, especially their mothers were away [...] They sometimes cried because they missed their parents [...] They show no interest in many things, being passive in class activities or games [...] Some students feel afraid of going to school or they might fail to adapt to school life even after starting school for a period of time.*

*Teachers participant of FGD, Battambang province*

### 5.3.2. Supporting system and intervention aspect

In order to help the students with learning difficulties, the teachers and school directors indicated various actions and strategies which have been implemented. These include student-teacher interaction, additional learning, informal education, learning and teaching materials, teacher training, technical support, peer learning club, teacher-parent communication and referral service for serious cases.



**Student-teacher interaction:** some teachers also tried to console the children and asked them for a better understanding about the cause of the psychological or learning problems. All educators indicated the importance of student-teaching interaction during the learning and teaching process. Due to the big number in a class, the teachers know their students well because they were in the same village while those living far from school or in the different village could not be easily identified or known by their teachers.

While some schools were trying to optimise the teacher's creativity, some teachers were not yet so creative to explain the lesson to their students with simple word or in a concrete way. Some teachers mentioned that they found it hard to know or recognise their students well at the beginning of the academic school. However, some teachers just focused on writing on the board while some students were talking.

*During the teaching session, a few teachers were still outside of the class for a while and talking with their teaching colleague leaving their students note down the lesson from the blue board. However, there are many teachers who performs their duty very well during the teaching sessions.*

*Every Thursdays, from week 1 to week 3 of the month have been reserved for the free-of-charge extra course or class together with the ordinary students [...] But the teachers would pay more attention to the poor learning students.*

(A deputy director of a primary school from Kampong Cham province)

**Additional learning, informal education:** two months of support for the extra course during the school vacation to failing students or those having reportedly poor performance at school. they encouraged the students and suggested them to received the extra lessons in the lower grade. Doing this way would give them a chance to study what they failed to understand from their previous grade again, especially for the Khmer study such as reading skills.

**Learning and teaching materials:** Most of the teachers interviewed stated that they lacked of the teaching books, story books for teaching, experimental materials for the session of science study. That is an obstacle for them to transfer their knowledge to the students. As a result, some teachers taught their students with feeling of hesitation. Moreover, the school facilities are thus still limited for the daily teaching activities.

*[...] the teachers could go to find a book entitled "the method of helping the slow learner" granted by the MoEYS for the additional help. However, this book did not help much as the written guidance was just about what they already did to their students during their daily teaching. (Teachers of the FGD from Battambang province)*

As teaching materials were not sufficient for allowing teacher to teach well in the classroom, some school directors encouraged their teaching staff to create it or do additional research from internet to improve their teaching method. Due to the budget constraint, the production of these creative materials for teaching purpose was very limited. Sometimes, the teachers need to use their own resources to maintain this production.

**Teacher training and other technical support:** most of the teachers mentioned that they have attended the meeting of technical supports to discussed the issues with the school directors and other experienced teachers. Nevertheless, some psychosocial and learning problems remain unresolved due to the limit of expertise and knowledge on the issues.

*Poor learning students were asked by their teachers to turn to the back and exceptionally watch the board which was so close to their eyes [...] to do that, they will be easily explained by their teachers in a special way during the teaching session or during break time [...] Or, they were moved by their teacher to sit next to the outstanding students so that they could get help from these clever students. (A deputy director of a primary school from Kampong Cham province).*

**Peer learning club or self-learning groups:** some teachers used the outstanding students to explain and teach the poor learning students instead. Some slower learning students were asked by their teachers to practice and participate in the self-learning activities or group at school. However, they did not come many.

**Teacher-parent communication:** all teachers and school authorities believed that working together with the parents or guardians of the slow learners would be more effective in helping them learn better. Some teachers tried to contact students' parents to understand the reasons for learning difficulties with children. Most of the parents said they tried to help or monitor their children' study while they did not know much about their children's learning progress.

**Referral service for serious cases:** in case of domestic violence or other forms of physical or sexual abuse, the teachers always report the student case to the local authorities (village or commune chief, police...). In this case, they tried to encourage and explain their students to protect themselves from being physically or sexually abused by a father or an adult.

Despite all the proposed and implemented actions mentioned above, teachers were still worried about how to invent the practical method to help the poor learning students much better.

Moreover, taking care of each student during the teaching activities while the number of students per class is numerous was a difficult task for teachers.

## 6. Conclusion and Discussion

Based on our result, there is a link between the socio-economic and cognitive factors and causes of the children's learning difficulties. The cognitive impairment was perceived by almost all participants as the main cause of these learning difficulties at school. The following causes mentioned were poverty, family problems, lack of teaching materials and unqualified teachers.

The results of family, school environments and the psychological factors we found in this study are similar to the findings of some relevant studies in the field of education and psychology. They strongly depict the interconnection between different factors. In our study, we found that family factor has strongly influence the stability of child's schooling as well as the academic failure (Fan & Chen, 2001; Chohan & Qadir, 2013; Mahuro & Hungi, 2016). In this study, we found that parents'/guardians' involvement in their child schooling is still poor. Instead of collaborating with teachers or helping their children study at home, many parents consequently believed that trying hard to earn money to support their child's schooling was a prominent involvement in their study process. It is to be noted that most of the teachers blame the parents for their child's behaviour regarding the failure of the schooling and student's subsequent lack of progress. In addition to that, we noted that the reverse feeling exists among parents who show a lot of mistrust toward to the alleged incompetence and lack of dedication among certain elements of the teaching staff. Thus, the teachers'-parents' collaboration in this schooling context remains problematic. Both parents and teachers were wondering how to help children or students overcome their learning difficulty. They need effective intervention from the experts in the field of education and psychology. The school directors, teachers and education authorities identified that most of the students came from contexts of economic deprivation, therefore faced additional challenges and obstacles within their studies. They were aware that many of the parents were underprivileged and consequently faced economic and financial problems that deterred them from concentrating on their children problems at school. They acknowledged that parents were too busy working hard to earn a meagre living and therefore could not spare the time to ensure follow up with the school around their child's progress. Adding to this was the knowledge that many parents had to move around the country, or even to travel to Thailand to find work; thus leaving their children to the care of their extended family. Directors stated that when parents did take their children with them, they never stayed long enough in their temporary jobs for their children to get accustomed to their, often numerous, school environments.

The school environment and teaching strategies are also indicated in this study as factors of children's learning difficulties as well (Chohan & Qadir, 2013; Khajehpour and Ghazvini, 2011; Sahin & Gulmez, 2000). In this context, providing paying courses in the classroom or after class tuition has been reportedly a huge challenge that prevents students from receiving equity within education establishments. Although most of the teaching staff wished to get rid of the current paying courses in the classroom, which was an option preferred by parents/guardians, some of them believed that these paying courses could help improve the slower learning students. Some of the participants also mentioned the financial difficulties of teachers and the parents' lack of concern as causes of the children's learning issue. Besides the fact, the communication between the educators and education authorities for dealing with the student's learning issues and other administrative challenges at school was not yet sufficiently effective due to either a budget constraint or lack of expertise in the relevant field. All the concerns and comments regarding children's learning difficulties were reported by teachers to school directors, then from school directors to the office of education and also to the department of education. The reported concerns of the education subordinates regarding technical and administrative problems, were reportedly not answered promptly by the education authorities. Finally, lack of teaching materials and as well as the neglect from some teaching staff during the teaching duty have been also the factor that contribute to the learning difficulties at the primary school.

Most of the psychological factors found in this study have a remarkable link with the socio-economic problems of the students' family which may lead them face a wide range of problems. All student participants who were reportedly slow learners presented at least one family problem (domestic violence, divorce, immigration for job, alcoholism and poverty) and psychological difficulties (loneliness, relationship issue, depression, anxiety, attachment issues, low self-esteem) which lead to school failure or low performance (Chohan & Qadir, 2013, Marshall, 1996; Scheider & Lee, 1990; Alesi, Rappo & Pepi, 2014). All contribute to the development of children, but sometimes the appearance of psychological hindrance may lead to learning difficulties that hamper their full potential in mental and emotional development. Nevertheless, these factors also affect the occupational health of some educators as well. Most of the teaching staff including school directors seemed more or less stressed with the psychosocial and education problems of their students, which remained unresolved. The use of intuitive methods of identifying them did not produce any remarkable effect in helping the slower learning students. No practical means of teaching or other technical supports were satisfactorily reported.

The contribution of our study to the existing body of research is that we gather salient factors that imamate from the structures within the Cambodian society. The economic situation and challenges within a section of the population, is such, that it produces effects that go far beyond the scope of pure schooling and education. Family difficulties, lack of efficient social services or support schemes, make it difficult for the underprivileged students to address their personal difficulties whether they are social, psychological or medical. The studied difficulties connect the fact that schooling problems and learning hindrances appear in the everyday life of schools in certain districts.

For general data of children's learning issues, the result of the study with the teaching staff and education authorities shows a rate of children with learning difficulties (those who repeated the grade and were reportedly regarded as slow learners) of approximately 10% while the number of students per classroom was above 35. Most of teachers and education authority preferred to have an ideal number which is below 30 per class so that they would be able to identify and understand better the students' learning progress.

The identification of slow learning students was made on a basis of students' study results especially in Khmer study, their daily learning activities and the assessment test proposed by the MoEYS every semester of the academic year. This assessment test was not easily organized and administered by most of the schools especially in rural areas. It was difficult to be applied to every student in all subjects. Besides, some teachers remained uncertain on how to do it. Most of the educators emphasized on students' difficulties in learning Khmer language.

They were unable to specify the types of the learning difficulties in view of starting some proper pedagogical intervention. When it comes to the observable characteristics of students with learning difficulties, most of the educators, including school directors, do not know how to identify possible simple signs of psychological syndromes.

Although some educators tried to help optimise the learning process, most reported that financial and technical support from the education authorities and the NGOs, is the key element to improve the situation. Both parents and teachers realized that they were unable to understand thoroughly the real problem linked to the learning difficulties of the students or children, regardless of their efforts. The level of knowledge of all participants about the psychological problems was low, while a lot of mental issues in children were observed during the interviews. Almost all adult participants required the basic training from the psychological experts about how to identify and help students having psychosocial and learning problems.

## 7. Recommendations

**For future research study:** We recommend there should be a further research project to assess specific symptoms or even syndromes of learning disabilities, in addition to the psychological problems. The study should aim to consolidate data or prevalence in the primary school students and in the larger population, for the purpose of intervention at the national level. However, this problem [both learning issues and psychological syndromes] requires an expertise in the field of clinical psychology and a series of psychological training and intervention, so must be conducted by experts.

**To boost teaching ability of the teaching staff:** Teachers should be trained to identify a range of signs of possible mental health issues/disabilities that they may face in their classrooms; along with access to a clear referral pathway for additional support. A brief flyer or a series of short video regarding the identification of the student's psychological problems or symptoms should be produced and dispatched. Psychological first aid should as well be provided in order to help the teaching staff deal with the issues.

**In the perspective of interventions,** there could be two main points of suggestion: (1) psychological intervention and (2) psycho-pedagogical perspectives.

- Given that there is a link between the learning difficulties and the psychosocial problems, the availability of one school or clinical psychologist in at least every district would be helpful initially, to deal with the psychosocial issues. There would be various types of clinical approaches organized by the expert to improve the learning process at school, working directly with students [for psychological counselling or psychotherapy purpose] and with their teachers and parents. However, we recognise that this proposed solution might take time to get this supporting structure established, due to the limit of the human resources and the financial support.

- Since lesson plans and other teaching activities were reportedly not well or regularly monitored at school by the education authorities, especially the school principals, there should be at least one class per school to be selected for assuring a regular evaluation of students' knowledge as well as the teaching pedagogy of teaching staff. This class management should aim to progressively enhance the teaching quality in the field of Mathematics and Khmer as well. In this case, the impact evaluation and learning outcomes should be measured before and after the implementation.

- Teachers should be regularly trained or invited to participate in the psycho-pedagogical trainings organised by the MoEYS to improve their teaching and pedagogic skills in dealing with the children's learning difficulties.

**Improve teacher-parent communication:** the teaching staff and school directors should optimise their communication with the parents or guardians of each student and provide opportunity for updates on the students' learning process. In the interviews, parents/guardians were reportedly invited by the school principals to attend the gathering on the first day of the start of the school year only. Thus, there should be more opportunity offered to encourage parental involvement; information given about their children's schooling and the communication should be clear, regular and easy for the parents to understand. In addition to that, it is also important that teachers should try their best to contact with the parents/guardians of their students in order to deal with the issues more effectively and on time.

The importance of the characteristics that we have defined and that accounts from many aspects of the learning difficulties, seems obvious. It remains important to assess which of these characteristics are predominant in assessing the failure in the learning process. It could indeed be the subject of a debate in order to better understand how the factors noted in this study can combine and produce greater clarity about the hindrances and the impediments affecting the learning process among the children that draw our attention. The nature of these factors are numerous, and not necessarily or naturally interconnected in the appearance of the learning difficulties. It would be interesting to proceed with further research, or to collect other opinions from scholars and educational staff, to evaluate the mechanisms by which the factors that are so different by nature, can concur in producing the same effect in the school.



## 8. Limitation of the research

We did not use any form of psychological or cognitive assessment tools/questionnaires in this study to categorise the characteristics of children's learning difficulties or other psychological syndromes. The study was not to compare the differences among the participants based on their gender, location or socio-economic status. Some terminological terms regarding learning disabilities and psychological symptoms were only used to interpret the psychological and cognitive phenomena based on the clinical observation and on the analysis of the interview scripts conducted by clinical psychologists and researchers. The terms presented in this report imply the possible symptoms listed in a recognized checklist or inventory. It means that the children reported with probable symptoms of a psychological syndrome or learning disability should be referred to sit in a validated test for an accurate evaluation.

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## Appendices

### 1. Appendix A: Case studies of the interviewed children

#### Case study 1: S.K, 8-year-old girl, grade 2 from Kampong Cham province

S.K is living in a low-income family in which there are four people. Her brother and parents are farmers. The father gets drunk almost every day, and the conflict often happens between her parents. S.K did not attend kindergarten, she has enrolled directly in grade 1. S.K knows only some vowels and consonants; she cannot write or read. She knows the number, but she is unable to calculate it. Her teacher stated that: *'I found it very difficult to teach her beaucoup she doesn't know the vowels and the consonants. Thus, it is impossible for her to spell, read and write... I think because she doesn't know the basis of consonant and vowels. If I were her teacher of the grade 1, I would have decided to keep her one more year in the same class'*.

S.K always feels anxious before going to school. She feels scared when the teacher points at her and asked to answer a question. In class, she never looks at the teacher's eyes. *'I feel ashamed of everyone in the class because I can't read or write. I feel scared of my teacher, and I never looked at him because of I was afraid that he would point me and ask to read the lesson or to do something. Sometimes, I did not want to go to school; I wanted to stop studying ...'*

Her mother said that: *'at home, S.K always avoid to talk to the other, especially to an adult. She is lonely; she never demands for something like food, clothes, toys...'*

#### Case study 2: S.V, 13-year-old boy, grade 6, From Battambang province.

S.V is an orphan. He is living in a NGO shelter. His parents have died. S.V doesn't have any information about the death of his parents.

We have interviewed a social worker who is responsible for taking care of S.V at the NGO. But he doesn't have any information related to S.N's family. S.N was transferred from NGO's school to a primary school located in Battambang province due to his learning difficulties. S.N is at the period of adolescence, so it is the moment he investigates the social relationship, especially with the peers to develop his identity. Consequently, S.N did not find himself as handsome as his male friends. He doesn't have the materials, the proper clothes or money as his friends. He realises that he is an orphan, and he is different from the others. As a result, he feels hopeless, sad, lonely and low self-esteem. *'Sometimes I cried alone at night because I missed my mother when I had some difficulties. I wanted to have a mother and a father as my friends. I don't have the money and clothes. When I felt unhappy, I liked playing football, so I skipped the class so often...Sometimes I did not want to go to study because I don't see my future. I felt headache. I didn't want to follow the teacher's advice. I wanted just to go out and play football. Only football that could help me forget everything. My friends who are in my football team never looked down on me!'*

S.N is poor in reading, writing and doing maths. He repeated the grade 6. *'I am very poor in mathematics, especially the division and also Khmer language'*. His teacher did not understand his situation related to his psychological problems. The teacher said: *'S.N is a delinquent because he behaved bad, he was very active, he manifested the opposite behaviour with everyone. He does not respect the school's discipline, and sometimes he doesn't respect me. S.N is a poor student; he always disturbs other. He expressed the inappropriate behaviour in the class...I think this student has watched*

*porn video [...] Sometimes he pretended to be sick (a headache, stomach-ache) because he wanted to escape the class, and he wanted to play outside'.*

### **Case study 3: N.S, an 11 years old boy in grade 4**

N.S is living in the extended family with his 14-year-old sister studying in grade 8, his mother and his maternal grandmother, and another family (two aunts, one uncle and their son). The father of N.S is a construction worker in Phnom Penh, and he came to visit the family once or twice per year. His mother is the vegetable vendor at the market. N.S has repeated the grade 1 and 2. He likes colouring the family image during the play. He loves mathematics. But he can perform well neither in math nor Khmer language. While his sister goes to school by bicycle, he rides the motorbike to go to school. He said that he was very good at mathematics but poor in Khmer study. The problem is he forgot things easily shortly after the class. During the play, he could not even recognize the colours.

He seemed worried very much about the family problem due to the continued domestic violence in the family between his uncle and aunt. His father also drank the alcohol or beer and sometimes committed the violence against his mother. He presented us his fear of the death of his family members. He seems to tend to be a powerful man and hang out around with other male friends. When seeing other conflicted with each other, he started to feel stressful and frightening because it reminded him sometimes of the violence between his parents. His parents finished primary school, so rarely helped. He sometimes found it hard to control his anger and easily felt disturbed by other classmates. He has poor concentration, and he had sometimes conflicted with other kids.

According to the interview session with his mother, he did not pay much attention to his study while his mother did not have time to care about his schooling. Despite the simply encouragement, his mother does know how to help him study at home effectively; she sometimes asked her older daughter to help explain him some homework. His mother seemed very too much on how to earn money to support her children's study. She also believed that the family economic condition could impact the learning problem of her children as well. She also thought that the family conflict could have a negative impact on the child's study. Nevertheless, she habitually feels the children could overcome and learn by themselves in their way.

### **Case study 4: D.V, 13-year-old boy, grade 5**

D.V is living with the grandmother who is very frustrated and his older sister who is a student in grade 10. D.V's parent divorced since D.V has 4 months old. Actually, the father moves to live with a new partner. At home, he doesn't listen to his grandmother and his sister, he does what he wants, he always steals the money of family member, he always escapes home to go to play outside, football, gambling...

He spends much time to play the game on his smartphone. At school, he always quite when confronting difficult tasks or frustrating tasks. He doesn't take note and never does homework. He doesn't follow the teacher's advice or teacher's instruction. Sometimes, he escapes the class to go to play the game outside or smoke the cigarettes with other young delinquents, *'I escape to go to meet my friend and we smoke the cigarette. Sometimes, my friends force me to use the drogue, but I never try it, I smoke only the cigarette'.*

The grandmother doesn't have any strategies to correct him: *'I am so tired, I don't know what to do more to correct him... let it go, I don't care now...'*. The grandmother used to demand **D.V**'s teacher and school director to help his grand-child, but there is no solution. The grandmother was worried about **D.V**'s future. She was afraid that **D.V** will follow the young delinquent. **D.V** is facing learning difficulties issue. his ability of mathematical calculation is very poor and he can read only some simple sentences. He is poor or inaccurate spelling; he is unable to understand the meaning of a word. He is unable to organize the study material and time. Everyone in the class doesn't like **D.V** because they consider him as a delinquent: *'my classmates don't want to talk to me because they don't like me... I think they say that I smoke the cigarette, I think the teacher hates me as well because I did not follow him...'*.

### **Case study 5: H.D, a 9-year-old boy in grade 3**

During the playing session with **H.D**, he presented the series of difficulty as follows:

- poor concentration;
- symptoms of dyslexia (he could not read or write);
- his hearing and visual perceptions are problematic (direction, form, organization issues);
- he can't be good at math (counting, simple calculation) or Khmer study whereas he persisted in saying he was good at all subject;
- parental affection explained by the way parents give money or buy a cake for the child;
- the problem of short-term/working memory;

He is living in an extended and impoverished family in which about 18 people were living together. He said he was so anxious and often obsessed with thoughts about his mother or other female family members dying one day since he has been witnessing various cases of domestic violence in the family. There has been his mother and his aunt who presented their suicide attempt. A disturbing memory of his parental conflicts occurred last years and the personally traumatic experience in an accident has been making him poor concentration, more occupied about the family issues. At school, he also presented his aggressive behaviour under the form of the irrational self-defence or fighting. That leads him to poorly perform at school; in addition to the cognitive problem. Most of the domestic violence resulted from the alcoholism.

### **Case study 6: S.C, a 14-year-old boy in grade 6**

**S.C** is a 14-year-old boy in grade 6. He intended to further his study after the primary school level. His father left his family since he was 10-year-old staying with a new wife. His parents were the fisherpersons before the separation. His mother is now selling groceries at home. He is the oldest son of 4 siblings. He regrets that his father no longer stays with him and the family because he was good at fishing to earn money to support the family. He had been repeating the grade 1 for two years shortly after his father left the parental divorce. He communicated with the interviewer with a hopeless voice.

Although he comes to school regularly, he finds it hard to catch up the lesson. He quickly forgot the lesson about one hour after class. He wishes he could save his daily expense up (about 0,25 cents) to buy his study materials. At home, he often helps his mother do housework or

carry the water. That prevents him from additionally study at home while his mother and other siblings cannot help him much on his homework.

He looks so depressed and hopeless in his daily life. He feels discriminated by other classmates who are rich due to his family and financial problems. He feels very shameful when he was at school. He consequently stayed or played alone during the small break at school. He seemed to present the symptom of dyslexia because he can't read or write well while he is already in grade 6. During the session, he showed us his ability to follow the instruction and the possibility to learn well on condition that there are the academic supports from teaching staff and the family. He seemed good at calculation. He wants to be a medical doctor in the future.

### **Case study 7: A female teacher 43-year-old, grade 5, Battambang province.**

She has 20 years of experience in teaching. She teaches a class of 43 students. The students become careless of their study. There were about 22 students of 43 who seemed to study hard and care of their learning activities. The rate of student absenteeism increased this year. The rate of slow learning students was about 20 percent.

She believes that the children's difficulties can result from family, personal factor, school. Most of the parents don't care about their children's study. They merely signed the student follow-up book. Once a student is absent many times, she tried to understand the causes of this absenteeism. She said the students were usually facing the parental conflicts where their parents conflict with each other. That sometimes leads to parental divorce as well. She sometimes observed that some students were intelligent, but they could not do homework at home with the help of a family member. Those students seemed to be hyperactive and more or less aggressive within the communication with other classmates. Their parents don't know their innate ability to learn while the child-parent communication remains paradoxical. Some parents responded to their children that they would slap in exchange for a gift or reward as a return to learning smart at school). The students having this kind of parents were depressed and disappointed, and they often reported it to the teacher. As a result, she tried very hard to educate them at school, and sometimes they needed to do homework at school with me before going back home. Students who have a father drinks too much, commits domestic violence or has a mistress or step-wise, were very passive in their study. That explains the psychological factors that were behind the children's learning difficulties.

The salary of primary teachers is not yet equivalent to their real expenses. Since most of the teachers have their children learning in a secondary or higher level, their children, including hers, progressively need more money to pay for their extra courses and daily expenses at school. *'I admire the fact that our government has been trying to increase the teacher's salary from time to time, but I can't support my daily expenses while my daughter is studying in secondary school. She sometimes told me that she was so hungry at school, and she could not have enough money to pay for her school meal while she also pays for her extra courses [...] I don't want to provide my students with the paying course in the classroom, if possible. Because I think that it would affect the parents' involvement in the process of their children. They would be overthinking about how to earn money to support their children's schooling instead of helping them to deal with the learning problems'.*

To support her daughter's study and to deal with the daily expenses, she needed to borrow some money from the bank. That makes her additionally stressed. She tried to put her stress



apart and console herself before teaching the students. Teaching students could both help her feel better or more stressed. Most of the time, she helped her students having learning difficulties by observing and encouraging them during the small break, and she also tried to talk to some of parents to explain them the causality of their children's learning problem. She said it was crucial to be fair with all students for the process of the scholastic evaluation. To teach slow learning students better, she needs the professional and additional trainings from the experts.

### **Case study 8: A 42-year-old mother of a 11-year-old student in grade 3, Battambang**

She has many children, one of her children is staying with her mother. She said she has definitely given this son to her biological mother. She has been remarried to her new husband who is about 10 years younger than her. The latter is the father of her son who is in grade 3, and he has been alcohol dependence since the last three years. This father has been seriously sick due to the effect of alcohol. Her son is a second child of the three siblings in this recomposed family. She feels pity her second son the most because he often listened to her although he likes hanging out sometimes with friends a bit far from home. This son helps her a lot by trying to find food for her and doing a menial job or going to pick wastes such as beer cans and plastic bottles for sale during a wedding ceremony. She said that sometimes he went to find fish with other villagers for feeding the family members. She said she was very occupied about her family as well as her daily living due to the financial problems. Sometimes, she did not have money to buy food or even support her three children for their daily schooling. She borrowed a small amount of money from her relatives and returned them back on the following days or weeks.

From a psychological perspective, she realised that her second son hates his father because this father broke down the valuable things in the family when he was drunk. As a result, he was worried about this family issue, and he felt very pity his mother.

Regarding the parent's involvement in the child's study, she said she could not help her children do homework or in their learning process: *'I stopped studying at grade 2 when I was a child. Sometimes, I saw my son doing homework, but I could not help him. What I am worried about was about how to earn money to support this family'*. Normally, she has two meal times (lunch and dinner) to survive the family.

## **2. Appendix B: Semi-structured questionnaires**

### **1. Semi-structured questionnaire for students**

#### **1.1. Learning problems:**

1. Could you name the elements (things) available in your school that are satisfactory in the learning process?
2. Could you name the elements (things) that impair the learning or make it complicated?
3. What would you change in your school to feel more comfortable and improve the learning?

4. What are you prepared to do regarding learning and behaviour to facilitate the teaching and learning processes?
5. Do you think you have enough lessons at school to learn what you have to know?
6. Do you think you have too many lessons and too much homework?
7. When you have difficulties in understanding a lesson, do you get the opportunity to have an additional explanation or personal attention from your teacher? If yes, how?
8. If you have difficulties in understanding a topic, do you think many other students are in the same case?
9. In the classroom, have you experienced severe disruption of the lesson by other students?
10. Do you think discipline is important or unimportant in the learning process?
11. In case of difficulties, can you refer to your parents? Do they help you do homework?
12. Do you consider that the teachers listen to you patiently enough when you report a problem?
13. Could you read this paragraph loudly (Khmer)?
14. Could you do this calculation (math)?

### **1.2. Psychosocial issues:**

15. Could you tell me about your daily activities?
16. Could you tell me about your parents/family and your communication with them? Is there any form of conflict you have experienced or witnessed in your family?
17. In case of problem, could you tell me more about it or about your family?
18. What do you feel about yourself? Is there any other unresolved problem regarding your learning at school or your family?
19. What makes you afraid the most in your life? If so, are you still thinking about it?
20. Is there anything that make you sad or worried about? If so, could you explain me about it?

### **1.3. Guided observation, playing and clinical notes:**

21. Interviewer has to observe physical moments and non-verbal expression, attention, visual and auditory functioning during the communication, logical thinking and other emotional-behavioural problems during the interview session.
22. To facilitate the verbal expression of children during the session of IDI, each student from grade 1 to 6 has an equal chance of whether he/she wants to colour the proposed images of family or school. The play session has to be applied during the interview with the help of playing tools. Then, the interviewer has to take note the observable behaviours, emotions and other form of communication during the play in addition to the verbal expression or child's response to the question.

## **2. Semi-structured questionnaire for parents/guardians**

### **2.1. Socio-demographics**

1. Could you present me about yourself and your family? What is your occupation?

2. Would your living conditions impact your children's education? And How?

## **2.2. Perception of child's learning and Parental engagement in child's learning process**

3. What do you think about your child's learning? And how could you know that?

4. How can you help your children in the learning process?

5. In what ways could the improvement of the teaching enhance a better life of your children?

6. What do you think about the roles of the school in the bringing up of your children? Do you think that school is useful for your children's future? And why?

7. Have you ever contacted with your child's teacher or school principal for dealing with a learning problem of your child? If so, what do you think about this experience?

## **2.3. Psychosocial aspects of learning difficulties**

8. Have you ever heard or met with any psychological tension in your family? If so, could you tell me about that?

9. Could you tell me more about your child, from birth to now?

10. Have you ever experienced or witnessed stressful events due to the unexpected or harmful incidents (domestic violence, divorce, loss, other form of conflict...)?

11. Do you think the psychological difficulties can impair the studies at school?

12. From your opinion, is there any link between the psychological problems and your child's learning issues?

13. Do you believe that the relationship between parents and children impact the ways they learn and acquire the skills that are necessary for a brighter future for them?

14. Have you ever heard of any case of mental problems and disabilities?

15. Could you tell me how to identify and help the children with psychological difficulties?

16. Do you have any suggestion for what you have just discussed?

## **3. Semi-structured questionnaire for teachers**

### **3.1. Characteristics of learning difficulties**

1. Could you tell me about characteristics of students having difficulties at school?

2. How could you identify or assess your student's learning ability? What would be the causes of this problem?

3. What are the most common issues or difficulties in your daily teaching? Can you name some challenges related to dealing with the school problem of children, some parents?

4. How do you deal with the difficulties that you encountered in the teaching activities?

5. How can you help your students in the learning process?

### **3.2. Teach-parent communication**

6. What do you think about your communication with parents of your students? How about their engagement in their child's learning process?
7. What should the parents do to help their children deal with the learning problem?
8. From what extend do you know about your students and their parents?

### **3.3. Psychosocial aspects of learning difficulties**

9. Do think that students could have psychological problems during their study age? If so, could you tell me about that?
10. How could you identify a student having psychological problem? What would be the causes of this problem?
11. From your opinion, would there be any relationship between psychological problems and learning difficulties? If so, please explain?
12. What would you do to help the students having psychological problem?
13. What is the current support and assistance provided to primary school students identified with psychosocial problems?

### **3.4. Technical aspect of teaching quality and school environment**

14. Could you identify the different needs concerning knowledge and practice? How do you intend to improve the ways you teach especially regarding slow learning students?
15. Technically speaking, what do you think about your school (teaching materials, pedagogy, quality, number of students, supporting resources, capacity building...)?
16. What kind of actual need you might have to help you optimise teaching quality?
17. Do you have any suggestion for what you have just discussed?

## **4. Semi-structured questionnaire for school principals**

### **4.1. Characteristics of learning difficulties and psychological issues**

1. Could you tell me about the rate of students with learning difficulties and psychological problems in your school?
2. What is the current level of understanding of learning difficulties and psychological issues among your teaching staff?
3. Is there any student referred to benefit the intervention from outside? If any, could you talk about this a bit more (which case or problem)?

### **4.2. Technical aspect of teaching quality and school environment**

4. How do you evaluate your school? And how do you assess the competence and the dedication of your teaching staff?
5. What are you prepared to do to facilitate the improvement of your school?

6. How do you assess the condition of daily teaching in your school? What, according to you, are the causes/consequences of the problems?
7. Is there any helping mechanism in your school for dealing with this learning issues and psychological problems?
8. Is there any technical and financial support from the relevant organizations (government, NGOs or private institution)? Could you tell me more about that?
9. What kind of responses do you get from them every time you solicit them for advice/intervention/support?
10. What are the channels through which you communicate with your superiors and the decision makers at the educational department/district/office....?
11. What do you think about the additional and professional training offered to teaching staff so far? If no or yes, what do you think about that?
12. Do you have any suggestion for what you have just discussed?

#### **5. Semi-structured questionnaire for education authorities (office of education)**

1. Could you tell me about the general aspect of children's learning difficulties?
2. Could you share with me about the information of slow learning students?
3. Is there any existing policy of helping this population?
4. What would be the factors of learning difficulties in primary school?
5. What is the communication between you and your subordinates (primary schools) in terms of the children's learning difficulties and psychological problems?
6. Assisting mechanism and available or possible supports or intervention to the problems?
7. Are there any difficulties encountered so far? And how do you deal with?
8. Do you have any suggestion for what you have just discussed?

### **3. Appendix C: Informed consent for children and parents/guardians**

#### **Informed consent for Student and Parents/Guardians**

##### **A qualitative study on "Cambodian children's learning difficulties."**

You are asked to participate in the face-to-face interview or focus group discussion regarding the issue of children's learning difficulties in Cambodia. Two professors conduct this qualitative study from the Royal University of Phnom Penh under the co-sponsorship of Louvain Cooperation and VVOB.

#### **The objective of the study**

The study aims at exploring the causes of learning difficulties among the Cambodian children at primary school. The findings of this qualitative study are expected to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of learning among the Cambodian children studying at the primary school level by paying more attention to the child's psychosocial factors.

#### **Study procedure**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we are asking you to spend about 50 minutes at long to answer some questions relating children's learning problems as well as your opinion or experiences of come psychosocial problems for this issue as mentioned above.

#### **Advantages and Risks of the study**

Given that this study's findings will contribute to solving the learning problem of primary students in your community, your participation is crucial. Notably, some psychosocial questions that the interviewer asks during the interview might remind you of your stressful or traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, our interviewers (for face-to-face interview) or facilitators (for the focus group discussion) are clinical psychologists. Thus, they are skilful and will be capable of providing you with the psychological first aid in case of need.

#### **Confidentiality**

The interviewer will not ask the name of all participants of face-to-face interviews or focus group discussions. You have rights to accept or refuse to participate in the study. Although you are volunteering to participate in our research, you still have rights to resist not to answer any questions that you might not want to. Any information or concern about this study, please kindly contact Mr. RET Thearom, a Psychology lecturer at Royal University of Phnom Penh, via 092 523 489.

#### **Signature and name of the interviewer**

Date: .....

#### **Signature of the participant (or Parents/Guardians of the student)**

Date: .....

## 4. Appendix D: Photos

### 4.1. Photos of the data collection activities

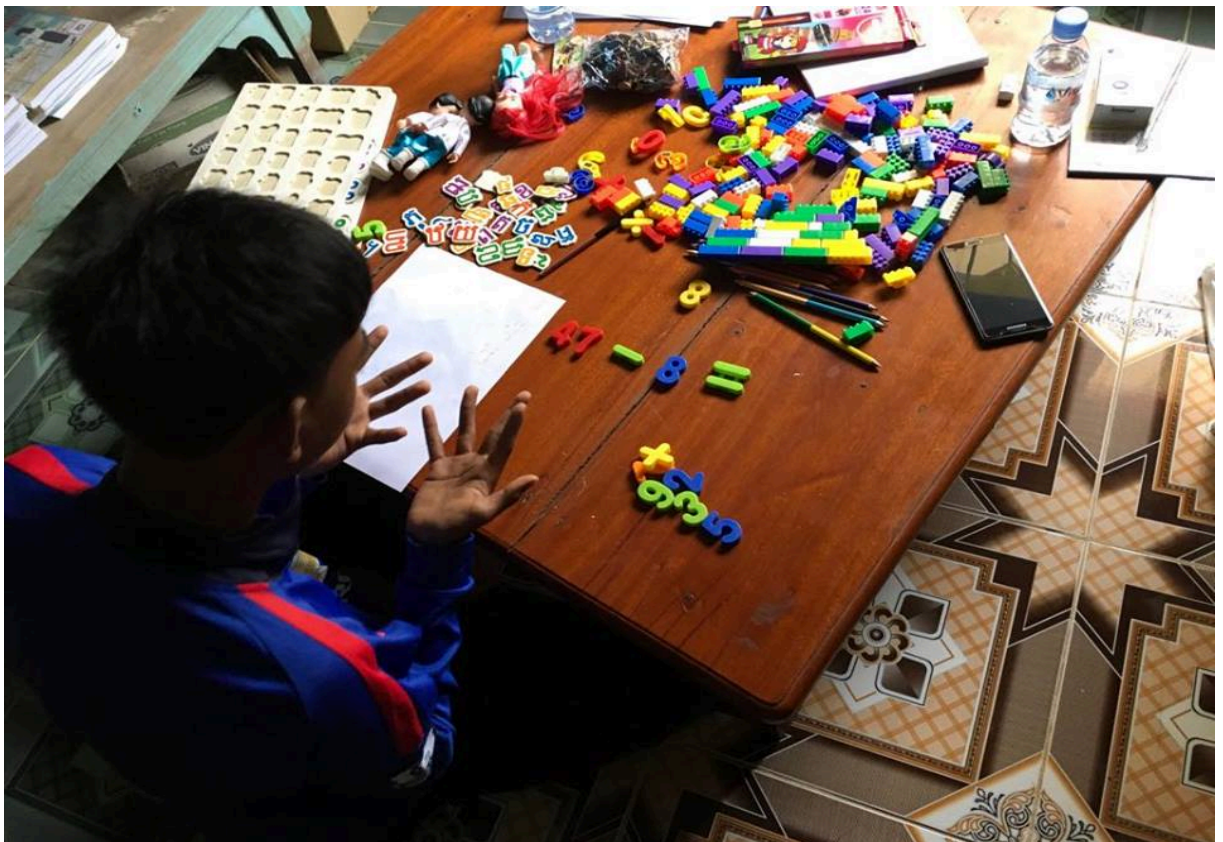


**Photo 1:** Playing session with student for the interview animated by RET Thearom





**Photo 2:** Playing session with student for the interview animated by RET Thearom



**Photo 3:** The student was trying to solve the simple calculation during the interview session animated by RET Thearom





**Photo 4:** Playing session with student for the interview animated by OP Vanna



**Photo 5:** Focus group discussion with teachers facilitated by OP Vanna





**Photo 6:** Session of Focus group discussion with parents facilitated by OP Vanna



Family image for colouring as an option during the interview session



4.2. Photos of the student follow-up book

គ. លទ្ធផលនៃការប្រឡងធនាគារ

មុខវិជ្ជា	ធនាគារទី ១		ធនាគារទី ២	
	ពិន្ទុ	ចំណាត់ថ្នាក់	ពិន្ទុ	ចំណាត់ថ្នាក់
រឿងអាស	5.00	20	6.00	16
សរសេរតាមអាស	5.00	19	5.00	15
តែងសេចក្តី	3.00	23	4.00	20
គណិតវិទ្យា	4.00	19	4.00	21
វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រអនុវត្ត	2.00	11	4.00	19
សិល្បៈ - ពលរដ្ឋវិទ្យា	5.00	18	4.00	15
ភូមិវិទ្យា - ប្រវត្តិវិទ្យា	4.00	21	3.00	23
គេហវិជ្ជា - អប់រំសិល្បៈ	5.00	19	5.00	18
អប់រំកាយ - សុខភាព	3.00	13	4.00	16
អប់រំបំណិនជីវិត	6.00	17	4.00	19
ភាសាបរទេស	2.00	23	5.00	21
សរុបពិន្ទុ	53.00		43.00	
មធ្យមភាព	4.81		3.90	
មធ្យមភាពប្រចាំខែ	4.00		5.00	
មធ្យមភាពប្រចាំធនាគារ	4.40		4.45	

លទ្ធផលចំណាត់ថ្នាក់ (មធ្យមភាព - ចំណាត់ថ្នាក់)

ធនាគារទី ១		ធនាគារទី ២		សរុប
មានច្បាប់	គ្មានច្បាប់	មានច្បាប់	គ្មានច្បាប់	
7	1	4	0	12

ឈ្មោះ: ..... ឆ្នាំសិក្សា: 2017-18

ធនាគារទី ១	ធនាគារទី ២	ប្រចាំឆ្នាំ
១១/២	១១/២	១១/២

យ. លទ្ធផលប្រចាំឆ្នាំ  
 ត្រូវបានរៀបចំឡើងដោយ: គ្រូបង្រៀន/គ្រូបង្រៀន  
 ត្រូវបានរៀបចំឡើងដោយ: មុខវិជ្ជា/មុខវិជ្ជា  
 ត្រូវបានរៀបចំឡើងដោយ: ត្រូវបានរៀបចំឡើងដោយ

ការសរសេរ: កំណែលម្អ  
 ហេង វិបុល ឌីណាមិក  
 ១២ កញ្ញា ២០១៧  
 គ្រូបង្រៀន/គ្រូបង្រៀន  
 ១១/២/១៧

តម្រូវឱ្យប្រើប្រាស់តាមកម្រិត  
 មធ្យមភាពប្រចាំខែ: ៤.៨១ ចំណាត់ថ្នាក់: ១២  
 មធ្យមភាពប្រចាំឆ្នាំ: ៤.៤០ ចំណាត់ថ្នាក់: ១២  
 ថ្ងៃទី ១៥ ខែ កញ្ញា ឆ្នាំ ២០១៧

លទ្ធផលនៃការប្រឡងធនាគារ

មធ្យមភាព: 4.43 ចំណាត់ថ្នាក់: 11

មុខវិជ្ជា	លទ្ធផល				
	ល្អណាស់	ល្អ	ល្អបង្អស់	មធ្យម	ខ្សោយ
ភាសាខ្មែរ					✓
គណិតវិទ្យា					✓
សិក្សាសង្គម					✓
វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រ					✓
វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រ					✓
វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រ					✓
ពលកម្ម					✓
សុខភាព-អនាម័យ					✓

ការបកប្រែ: ១១/២ ខែ កញ្ញា ឆ្នាំ ២០១៧  
 អង្គការ: មានច្បាប់ ០ គ្មានច្បាប់ ០  
 មូលបត្រប្រចាំខែ: ៤.៨១ ចំណាត់ថ្នាក់: ១២  
 មូលបត្រប្រចាំឆ្នាំ: ៤.៤០ ចំណាត់ថ្នាក់: ១២  
 ថ្ងៃទី ១៥ ខែ កញ្ញា ឆ្នាំ ២០១៧

មន្ត្រីបម្រើការងារ: ហេង វិបុល ឌីណាមិក  
 ថ្ងៃទី ១៥ ខែ កញ្ញា ឆ្នាំ ២០១៧

មន្ត្រីបម្រើការងារ: ហេង វិបុល ឌីណាមិក  
 ថ្ងៃទី ១៥ ខែ កញ្ញា ឆ្នាំ ២០១៧

4.3. Table of the data of slow learning students used by the teacher

២.៧ តេស្តឡើងថ្នាក់សម្រាប់សិស្សប្រាក់មធ្យមភាគ៖ - ចំនួនសិស្សធ្វើតេស្ត

ថ្នាក់ទី	ប្រាក់មធ្យមភាគត្រូវធ្វើតេស្ត		ចំនួនសិស្សធ្វើតេស្ត		គណិតវិទ្យា	
	ភាសាខ្មែរ	គណិតវិទ្យា	ជាប់	ធ្លាក់	ជាប់	ធ្លាក់
១	5	5	0	5	0	5
២	6	6	0	6	0	6
៣	6	6	0	6	0	6
៤	0	0	0	0	0	0
៥	3	3	0	3	0	3
៦	3	3	0	3	0	3
សរុប	23	23	0	23	0	23

ប្រភព : ឯកសារលទ្ធផលតេស្ត

សម្គាល់ : សិស្សដែលត្រូវធ្វើតេស្តឡើងថ្នាក់គឺជាសិស្សដែលមានលទ្ធផលធ្លាក់មធ្យមភាគប្រចាំឆ្នាំ ។ ការធ្វើតេស្តនេះផ្តោតទៅលើមុខវិជ្ជាភាសាខ្មែរនិងគណិតវិទ្យាដែលធ្លាក់មធ្យមភាគ ។

ណែនាំ : នាយកសាលាត្រូវបំពេញចំនួនសិស្សត្រូវធ្វើតេស្តក្នុងតារាងនេះនៅពេលប្រជុំបូកសរុបដំណាច់ឆ្នាំ ។ បញ្ចូលលទ្ធផលតេស្តចុងក្រោយក្នុងតារាងនេះដើម្បីធ្វើការត្រួតពិនិត្យ។

២.៨ ការជួបជាមួយមាតាបិតាសិស្ស និងសិស្សប្រចាំត្រីមាស

ថ្នាក់ទី	ចំនួនសិស្សរៀនយឹតនៅដើមឆ្នាំសិក្សា	ត្រីមាសទី១: ខែ ១២ និង ១		ត្រីមាសទី២: ខែ ២ ៣ និង ៤-៥		ត្រីមាសទី៣: ខែ ៦ ៧ និង ៨		របាយការណ៍
		ចំនួនដងជួបជាមួយមាតាបិតា	ចំនួនសិស្សរៀនយឹតជួប	ចំនួនដងជួបជាមួយមាតាបិតា	ចំនួនសិស្សរៀនយឹតជួប	ចំនួនដងជួបជាមួយមាតាបិតា	ចំនួនសិស្សរៀនយឹតជួប	
១	17	14	7x2=	18	6x3=	12	4x3=	សុំធានាឈនាន
២	13	16	8	9	3	9	3	ត្រូវតែ:
៣	10	10	5	9	3	9	3	
៤	5	6	3	3	1	3	1	
៥	5	6	3	3	1	3	1	
៦	16	8	4	3	1	3	1	
សរុប	56	60	30	51	17	39	13	

សម្គាល់ : ចំនួនដងដែលត្រូវជួបជាមួយមាតាបិតានិងសិស្សរៀនយឹតម្នាក់ៗ គឺជាចំនួនដែលបានជួបប្រាកដជាមួយនិងមាតាបិតានិងសិស្ស ហើយចំនួននេះគឺសម្រាប់ត្រីមាស ទី១ស្មើនឹងចំនួនសិស្សរៀនយឹតគុណនឹង២ដងសម្រាប់ត្រីមាសទី២ និងទី៣ស្មើនឹងចំនួនសិស្សរៀនយឹត គុណនឹង៣ ។ ការជួបគឺត្រូវជួបរាល់ខែសម្រាប់តែសិស្សរៀនយឹត ពុំចាំបាច់សម្រាប់សិស្សមធ្យមនិងពូកែ ។

ណែនាំ : ចំនួនសិស្សរៀនយឹត = គ្រូបង្រៀនត្រូវរៀបចំបញ្ជីឈ្មោះសិស្សរៀនយឹតនៅក្នុងខែដំបូងនៃឆ្នាំសិក្សាផ្អែកតាមលទ្ធផលសិក្សាឆ្នាំចាស់ឬលទ្ធផលតេស្តរបស់សិស្ស ហើយបំពេញចំនួនក្នុងតារាងនេះ ដើម្បីត្រួតពិនិត្យជួបជាមួយមាតាបិតានិងសិស្សទាំងនោះ ។