Primary School Library

Our lessons learned

Rationale

PEPY began working in Chanleas Dai commune in 2006, following a partnership project to fund the construction of a primary school building. The school was constructed through a partnership with American Assistance for Cambodia (AAfC). At that time AAfC also ran programs providing English and Computer classes at schools it funded. These classes ran outside the normal school day, and were supplementary to the government program. Through AAfC, PEPY began these classes at Chanleas Dai, first working through AAfC and later running the program directly. Through these programs PEPY realized that many children in primary school had very low Khmer literacy levels. Many could barely read and write their own name. To address this, PEPY introduced a focus on Khmer Literacy to complement its English/Computer programming.

In 2007 the PEPY team tested every child attending primary school in Chanleas Dai. Focusing on children in grades 4,5, and 6, the children were then divided into small groups dependent on their level – not on their age or their school grade. These groups (around 15 students per group) were then offered additional literacy classes 3 days per week. If students wanted to attend English and computer classes (which were very popular) then they also had to attend Khmer classes. PEPY hired teachers to teach these classes and scheduled the classes during the day when students had free time. These classes continued for around a year, and made a significant difference to the literacy levels of the students. The program was run with the support of the primary school.

During this time, the PEPY team was also developing the school library (you can read the Lessons Learned report for that project here). This "library" originally consisted of a locked container of donated books kept in an unused classroom. It was a requirement of the library donor that the room be locked when a teacher trained in library maintenance was not in the room. This, unfortunately, was the library "model" that seemed to be apparent throughout schools in Cambodia. When combined with the lack of librarians, and the teachers' lack of knowledge on using books in the classroom, it was clear that this approach was rarely, if ever, successful. Teachers rarely used the books, and they were rarely accessible to students. As part of the team's efforts to address literacy levels, PEPY developed the room into a functioning library and hired librarians to staff it.

The PEPY team worked with the school principal to move the additional Khmer Literacy classes into the library, and incorporate Library classes into the school curriculum. This meant that for one hour per week, each class would visit the library for library classes to give the students the opportunity to use the books and practice their reading. It was from this point that the school library really began to develop, and turn into an active literacy hub for the entire school.

Library methodology

The methodology for the Library in Chanleas Dai definitely evolved over the years due to trial and error and lessons learned. The PEPY team learnt a great deal from trainings with BETT (a project funded by the Belgian Government, partly aimed at improving Khmer Literacy resources), and also Hippo Campus, and Indian NGO with a strong track report in library implementation.

The critical feature of the library in Chanleas Dai Primary School, was that it was an active learning space, not just a place to borrow books. It was essential to involve the librarians in the children's learning so that they took ownership of what happened in the library and saw their role as extending beyond making sure books were returned. Once the emphasis shifted from the library being a resource space to being a learning space, the library began to flourish.

Lending system

The librarians developed many additional extras to the classic library lending system. All books were numbered, and when students borrowed a book, this was recorded. Every student had their own library card, on which was recorded the books they had borrowed. These cards were kept together by grade. When borrowing a book, students would take the card to the librarian who would fill out the details. The cards also contained a section where the students were expected to make comments on the book once they had read it. This card was then a record of all their reading over the year.

Book interviews

As part of the lending system, every time a student returned a book, they had to complete a short interview with the librarian about the book they had borrowed. This could be anything from giving an overview of the story, to talking about their favorite characters, or what they had learned from the book.

Book cards

The interview system was complemented with a book review form in that the librarian placed in the front of the book for the student to fill out. This review form asked students to give the book a star-rating out of five, and to make notes of the characters, the location, the purpose of the story and the ending. There was also an additional section for general comments were students were encouraged to write what they liked about the story, what they learned from it, and what they felt applied to their life.

Group reading

During library class, children had the opportunity for group reading. This was when the librarian would read a book to the children, and also encourage children to take it in turns to read parts of the book to their peers. Emphasis was placed on making the story come alive with voices and gestures. Group enjoyment and understanding of books and stories developed a motivation for reading and learning.

General reading

Children were encouraged to spend some time, on their own or in groups, practicing their reading, and exploring different kinds of literature. When reading a book, all students were encouraged to think about the sequence of events in the story, and also practice their alphabet and spelling through the words used.

There were additional exercises for the students dependent on their grade:

Kindergarten and grade 1	Students read story books with pictures either as a group or on their own
Grade 2 and 3	Students were encouraged to read stories with fewer or no pictures, and then draw what they imagined from the story afterwards. This could be done alone or in groups.
Grade 4 and above	As for grades 2 and 3, but in addition students were given questions to answer about the story, and were encouraged to give their own comments and opinions.

Yes / No statements

Understanding was checked through encouraging students to answer yes / no statements about events or characters in the book.

Achievement recognition

The librarians kept track of how many books students borrowed each week and each month, and constructed a wall hanging that provided a visual way of displaying which students were reading the most books. Each student had a small pouch with their name, and each time they borrowed a book, they would put a small paper flag in their pouch. Students who borrowed over 25 books received a small prize (such as a pen or pencil) and had their picture being displayed on the library wall.

Staff recruitment and training

Staff training played a large part in the success of the library. As mentioned, it was essential to involve the librarians in the children's learning so that they took ownership of what happened in the library and saw their role as extending beyond making sure books were returned. At first, they saw their role as looking after and managing books. However, once they were given the ideas and tools to encourage students to engage with the books, the library changed dramatically. The PEPY library team benefitted from trainings from SIPAR, Room to Read, and BETT, as well as from PEPY's own education consultants and senior management team.

Transition and current status

In 2011 PEPY agreed on a new strategic direction and shifted from working with primary schools to working with high school and university students. As a result, in 2012, PEPY ended their funding of the library program. All resources in the library were transferred to the primary school. Trainings were conducted with the teachers on library activities so that they could conduct the library lessons, and a student council was formed to enable the students themselves to monitor the library and look after books. As the school did not have the funds to pay for a dedicated librarian, the library was only open when classes were scheduled there, and did not remain open at other times during the school day.

For much of 2012, this situation stayed the same, and PEPY evaluations showed that while the teachers did take their students to the library for the scheduled classes, they did not conduct literacy activities. Rather, they just encouraged the students to read and borrow books.

However, in 2013, the school has managed to find a small amount of funds to hire a librarian to open the library for 2 additional hours in the morning and afternoon. The librarian conducts a small number of literacy activities with the students, and they have more opportunities for reading and borrowing books.

Challenges

The main challenges the PEPY team faced in implementing the library project were as follows:

Reading for understanding

In the early stage of the project, although students were reading and borrowing books, it became apparent that while they could read the words, they did not actually understand the meaning of the sentences, or the story as a whole. Through engaging the librarians in literacy teaching, and learning from other organizations, PEPY introduced many of the techniques listed above to support the children's understanding. When these activities had been successfully introduced, the number of books that were borrowed from the library increased even more, as students began to understand the purpose of reading.

Support from the school and teachers

While the school were happy for PEPY to develop the library, at first there was not a strong understanding of the purpose of the library, and why literacy activities were so important. It took a lot of encouragement to persuade the school principal to schedule library classes as part of the students' curriculum. In addition, while teachers would bring their classes to the library, they would often not engage in the library lessons. This engagement improved as the impact of the library became evident on the students' literacy levels, but generating and maintaining engagement from the school staff was a constant challenge.

Integrating with classroom study

Part of the challenge of engaging teachers with the library and the library activities was demonstrating that these activities were most useful when integrated with all lessons, and not conducted in isolation in the library. This challenge led to PEPY creating another literacy project called Classroom Libraries (you can read the Lessons Learned report for that program as well) in order to introduce books into every classroom and train teachers on how to use books in the classroom and the benefits of doing so.

Finding great books

When we started our library and literacy projects, there were very few resources available in Khmer, especially for early literacy. Donated storybooks were often in English, or at too advanced a level for the students. Thankfully, the BETT project created a comprehensive set of Khmer literacy books, and offered training to teachers and organizations on using the books, and literacy techniques for the classroom. The BETT books really made a big difference to PEPY literacy projects.

Coping with demand!

Once the library was working well, one of the challenges for our librarians was processing books returns. In between classes, when students had time to return books, there could be long queues of students waiting to return their books and have their book interview with the librarian. This was a great problem to have, but one that was a challenge in terms of human resource. Hiring additional librarians helped with making these kinds of systems run more smoothly, but then during class times when students were busy with other lessons, sometimes the library staff would have little to do.

Finding great trainings

While PEPY management team and international consultants could provide a degree of literacy training to the PEPY Librarians, the librarians did not speak much English, and so this process was slower that it needed to be. PEPY was really keen to find Khmer language trainings to enable the librarians to learn without a language barrier. Unfortunately, at the time there were few such trainings available (until the BETT initiative) and the PEPY team spent a good deal of time trying to find appropriate trainings, and sending staff on whatever was available!

Sustainability

Linked to the idea of encouraging teachers to understand the benefits of books and literacy activities, was the overall issue of sustainability. The school did not have the funds to pay for a librarian, or replenish books and materials over the years. While PEPY was committed to supporting the development of Chanleas Dai Primary school, the team realized that long-term strategies were needed to make sure activities could continue after PEPY moved on. There were no easy solutions to this challenge as schools in rural Cambodia have minimal funds, resources, and teachers.

Impact

Culture of reading

When the PEPY team first started developing the library in 2007, there were an average of 70 books checked out per month. Three years later, there were on average 1,800 books being checked out per month. Students would visit the library in their free time to read books, rather than hanging around outside. Students would borrow books for their parents or siblings to read. The whole culture around reading change and books became a much bigger part of the students' lives. PEPY Staff who are working with these same students now in the district high school note that many of them still have a love of reading and make time to read for enjoyment.

Library classes

While it took some time to encourage the principal at Chanleas Dai school to incorporate an hour of library time into the school curriculum, in 2010, the school took the independent decision (at no encouragement from PEPY) to increase this to two hours per week for every student. The improvement in the students' literacy levels was so noticeable that the principal realized the positive impact that library classes could have on student learning.

Critical thinking

Many of the literacy activities conducted in the library did not just improve students' literacy, but also their critical thinking capacity. When the students first started reading and analyzing books the process was a struggle for them, and they found it difficult to understand the relevance of the stories and what they were learning. However, in time the librarians noted the students' improvement, and the development of their critical and analytical capacity.

Confidence

Library activities encouraged students to work in groups and to ask questions (both unusual in a Cambodian classroom setting). As a result, of working this way, the confidence of the students developed. It is difficult to attribute this impact entirely to the library activities, as PEPY conducted a range of other activities with Chanleas Dai students and children that would have also supported the development of their confidence. However, the library activities particularly helped their confidence in a classroom setting.

Continuation of project

We were delighted to hear that this year that school had prioritized the library and found funds to hire a librarian to staff the library for 2 hours in the morning and afternoon. While the number of literacy activities has reduced, students are now able to use the library in their spare time and borrow books. This is a demonstration of the value the school now places on the library as a resource.

Lessons learned

More books, more students

Due to the problems sourcing books, when the library first began, the choice was very limited for the students. Students who enjoyed reading became less active in the library as they had already read the books appropriate for their age. PEPY established a suggestion box so students could recommend topics or genres they enjoyed. As PEPY began to source more books from the library, more books were borrowed as the students had a greater range to choose from.

Activities with teachers

It was always a struggle to get the government school teachers to engage with classes in the library. In retrospect, involving the teachers from the beginning of the process and including them in all trainings on the role of the librarians, library management, and literacy activities may have improved their commitment to the library. With the library being a PEPY project, staffed by PEPY funded librarians, often the teachers felt it was something that they did not need to be involved with.

Documentation systems

While PEPY documentation and book management systems for the library were relatively robust, there was still room for improvement. Ideally, there should be a clear system for which books are appropriate for which grade to make it easier to librarians, teachers, and students to choose the appropriate books.

Literacy activities

We quickly realized it wasn't enough to just provide books and expect children to read them and learn. The literacy activities we introduced that accompanied book-borrowing, as well as the library classes, were essentially to helping students understand and enjoy reading and using books. Our librarians were always looking for new activities – and one of their challenges was finding enough new and interesting activities to ensure the classes were as diverse and interesting as possible for the students.

Exit strategy and school ownership

PEPY began the library without a clear exit strategy, and as such the level of ownership from the school at the beginning of the project was very low. While this improved dramatically throughout the project, it would no doubt have been improved by working with the school to establish an exit strategy and problem-shoot challenges from the beginning of the process.