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Instructional Leadership and Teacher Performance in Cambodian High Schools: A Mixed-Methods Analysis

San Soeurn^{1*}

sansoeurn@gmail.com

BELTEI International University

Corresponding Author: San Soeurn

Email: sansoeurn@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Effective educational leadership is critical for improving teacher performance, yet limited empirical evidence exists regarding how leadership practices influence teaching effectiveness in Cambodia's evolving education system. This mixed-methods study examines the relationship between educational leadership practices and teacher performance in ten high schools across Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Data were collected from 286 participants (158 valid survey responses) including school directors, deputy directors, teachers, and students using surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Findings reveal that while 78% of schools implement professional development activities and democratic leadership is preferred (41.5%), significant implementation gaps persist: 53.1% of teachers report inadequate leadership support, 45% indicate misalignment between professional development and their actual needs, and 46.2% experience insufficient follow-up after training. Public schools show more consistent patterns of low support (52.5%) compared to polarized experiences in private institutions. Teachers participating in mentoring programs report substantial improvements (62%), and 68% note enhanced student motivation following professional development. The study demonstrates that leadership effectiveness depends not on professional development quantity but on quality, relevance, and sustained implementation support. These findings extend educational leadership theory by providing context-specific evidence from Southeast Asia and offer actionable recommendations for strengthening leadership capacity and teacher development systems in Cambodia and similar developing contexts.

Keywords: *Educational Reform, Instructional Leadership, Mixed-Methods, Teacher Professional Development*

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership has emerged as a critical determinant of school improvement and teacher effectiveness globally. Research demonstrates that learning-centered leadership elicits both direct and indirect effects on building learning schools, with teacher performance serving as a key mediator in this relationship (Özdoğan et al., 2025). Strong principal leadership, characterized by clarity, purpose, and support, positively impacts teaching quality and ultimately benefits the entire school community. The significance of effective educational leadership extends beyond administrative management to encompass instructional leadership that directly influences classroom practices, teacher collaboration, and student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

In the Cambodian context, the education system has undergone substantial transformation following decades of conflict and reconstruction. For more than ten years, Cambodia has worked to improve student learning by strengthening teacher education and building a strong teacher workforce, with development partners working closely with the government in alignment with national policy and planning (UNESCO, 2024). The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has prioritized quality education and teacher development as cornerstones of its ambitious education reform through strategic documents including the Teacher Policy Action Plan 2024-2030 and the Strategic Plan for Teacher Education Reform 2024-2030 (Ministry of Education, 2014, 2019, 2025; Teacher Training Department, 2023). The Strategic Plan heralds an ambitious new phase of teacher education reform in Cambodia, marking a shift from the current two-year teacher training system to a model where all new student teachers at primary and lower secondary levels will complete a four-year teacher training program (Chhy & Kawai, 2025).

Despite these policy initiatives, significant challenges persist in Cambodia's high schools. Studies and reports by MoEYS and its development partners have identified a wide range of problems in teacher pre-service education and training, including that students who excelled in secondary school are less likely to apply to become teachers and are more likely to choose other careers (Em et al., 2022). Furthermore, high school principals are tasked with managing both administrative duties and instructional leadership responsibilities, yet the effectiveness of educational leadership in improving teacher performance remains unclear. Several international studies have shown that effective educational leadership characterized by clear vision, teacher support, professional collaboration, and shared decision-making can significantly impact teacher performance (Khath & Tan, 2024; Leithwood et al., 2020; Vannak & Kreng, 2025). However, limited empirical evidence exists on how leadership practices directly affect teacher performance in Cambodia's unique educational context, particularly regarding classroom

effectiveness, planning, collaboration, and professional engagement (Ministry of Education, 2019; Sambath, 2021).

This study addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by examining educational leadership practices and their relationship with teacher performance specifically within the Cambodian high school context. While substantial research has explored educational leadership in Western and developed Asian contexts, teacher leadership is a complex and context-dependent concept that can result in a lack of common language to guide relevant policies and practices, particularly in non-Western contexts. The limited body of research on educational leadership in Cambodia presents an opportunity to understand how leadership practices function within a developing nation characterized by hierarchical cultural norms, resource constraints, and ongoing educational reforms. Cambodia's educational system has been influenced by colonization, socialist ruling, and internal conflicts, which have left their traces in the current education system, including teacher professional training improvement and reallocation of education funds to the regional level (Kimkong & Koemhong, 2022).

What differentiates this study from previous research is its comprehensive examination of the entire professional development ecosystem within Cambodian high schools, from leadership practices to implementation outcomes. Unlike prior studies that have focused primarily on policy analysis or isolated aspects of teacher development, this research employs a mixed-methods approach to capture both the breadth of leadership practices across multiple institutions and the depth of stakeholders' experiences. The novelty of this research lies in three key areas. First, it provides empirical evidence of the relationship between specific leadership dimensions and teacher performance outcomes in a context where such data has been scarce. Second, it examines the mediating factors, including institutional context (public versus private schools) and the quality of professional development support systems, that influence leadership effectiveness. Third, it offers contextually relevant insights that account for Cambodia's unique cultural, economic, and policy environment, thereby contributing knowledge that extends beyond the application of Western leadership models.

The research is further justified by Cambodia's current educational transition. The Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport and UNICEF launched the innovative Capacity Development Platform, a nationwide Learning Management System dedicated to Cambodia's educators, marking a transformative step in Cambodia's journey toward quality teacher education by digitizing teacher training and professional development (UNICEF, 2025). Understanding how current leadership practices support or hinder these technological and pedagogical innovations is essential for maximizing the effectiveness of such investments. Additionally, as Cambodia aspires to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050, the role of education and specifically teacher quality

becomes paramount in achieving these development goals (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2023).

This study contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application in several ways. Theoretically, it extends the literature on educational leadership by testing established leadership frameworks within a non-Western, developing nation context, thereby enhancing the cross-cultural validity of leadership theories. Practically, it provides actionable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and teacher educators in Cambodia and similar contexts regarding which leadership practices are most effective in improving teacher performance. The findings can inform the design of leadership development programs, the allocation of resources for professional development, and the formulation of policies that support effective school leadership. By identifying specific barriers and facilitators to effective leadership, this research offers a foundation for evidence-based decision-making in Cambodia's ongoing educational reform efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework of Educational Leadership

Educational leadership theories have evolved from traditional management approaches to sophisticated models emphasizing instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership, with school principals shifting from administrative managers to instructional leaders and agents of change (Daniëls et al., 2019; Hallinger & Walker, 2017). Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale identifies three critical dimensions: defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school climate. Contemporary research demonstrates that principal instructional leadership is significantly related to teacher instructional leadership, both positively influencing teacher self-efficacy and student performance, with teacher self-efficacy being crucial in determining teaching practices and improving learning outcomes (Berman et al., 1977; Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Özdoğru et al., 2025).

Organizational factors mediate leadership effectiveness significantly. Instructional leadership influences teacher instructional quality via teacher academic optimism, with academic emphasis mediating effects on cognitive activation, trust mediating effects on classroom management, and teacher efficacy mediating all three instructional quality dimensions (Ma & Marion, 2021). Authentic leadership dimensions (self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency) significantly enhance teacher performance, with three dimensions mediating the relationship between self-awareness and teacher performance (Bakker et al., 2023). These findings emphasize that leadership effectiveness stems from relationship quality, value clarity, and action consistency rather than merely positional authority.

Professional Development and Teacher Performance

Teacher professional development represents a critical mechanism through which educational leadership influences performance and student outcomes. Cambodia's national Continuous Professional Development system, with over 8,500 registered teachers as of June 2025, represents significant advancement from previous models with limited post-service training opportunities (UNESCO, 2024). The MoEYS Education Strategic Plan (2014-2018) emphasizes systematic, sustainable leadership capacity building, with efficient leadership and coordinated program management being critical for long-lasting, responsive reforms (Ministry of Education, 2014). International research demonstrates that professional development effectiveness depends on design and implementation, with professional learning communities using virtual mentoring and coaching proving most effective when focusing on core content, collaboration opportunities, and reflective modules (Admiraal et al., 2016).

Leithwood et al. (2020) identified five critical leadership dimensions with varying effect sizes on student outcomes: establishing goals and expectations (ES = 0.35), strategic resourcing (ES = 0.34), planning and evaluating teaching (ES = 0.42), promoting and participating in teacher learning (ES = 0.84, the strongest effect), and ensuring orderly environments (ES = 0.27). However, in Cambodia's context, leadership effectiveness remains unclear in many Phnom Penh schools, with limited empirical evidence on how leadership practices affect teacher performance (Ministry of Education, 2019; Sambath, 2021). Despite expanded professional development opportunities and incentives for rural teaching positions (UNESCO, 2024), many schools still rely on hierarchical leadership styles with less focus on instructional leadership or shared decision-making (Tondeur et al., 2017). Cambodia's low GDP per capita results in limited public education funding and heavy dependence on international partners, while historical influences from colonization, socialist ruling, and internal conflicts continue affecting the current education system (Bou et al., 2025; Kimkong & Koemhong, 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide comprehensive insights into educational leadership practices and teacher performance. A mixed-methods approach goes beyond the initial goal of triangulation (confirmation of results using different methods or data sets), using multiple methods also to gain better understanding (comprehension) of results, discover new perspectives, or develop new measurement tools (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Thus, the two broad goals of using mixed methods are confirmation and comprehension of results (Shih, 1998; Thurmond, 2001). The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with school directors and deputy directors, and focus group discussions with students, enabling deep exploration of leadership practices, challenges, and

perceptions. The quantitative component involved structured surveys administered to teachers and students, facilitating statistical analysis of relationships between variables and identification of patterns across a larger sample. This methodological triangulation enhanced the validity and reliability of findings by allowing cross-verification of results from multiple data sources.

The study was conducted in ten high schools located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, including both public and private institutions purposively selected to represent diverse institutional contexts, geographical locations, and student populations. The sample size was calculated using the Yamane's (1973) formula: $n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$, where n = sample size, N = total population, and e = margin of error. Given a total population (N) of 1,000 teachers and students across the ten selected high schools and a margin of error (e) of 0.05 (5%), the calculation proceeded as follows:

$$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$$

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = total population
- e = margin of error (MoE)

The calculated sample size was 286 participants. For practical implementation and resource considerations, the sample was proportionally allocated across different participant groups as shown in Table 1.

- $N=1000$ (Total population)
- $e=0.05$ (Margin of error = 5%)

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1000}{1 + 1000(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1000}{1 + 1000(0.0025)} = \frac{1000}{1 + 2.5}$$

$$n = \frac{1000}{3.5} = 286$$

The calculated sample size was 286 participants. For practical implementation and resource considerations, the sample was proportionally allocated across different participant groups as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Proportional Allocation of Participants

Group	Count	Percentage of Total
School Directors (Interviews)	7	3.5%
Deputy Directors (Interviews)	7	3.5%
Student Focus Groups (4 students per school)	28	15.0%
Teacher Survey Respondents	25	12.5%
Student Survey Respondents	133	65.5%
Total	200	100%

Source: Author's Analysis

Although the initial calculation indicated a sample of 286, practical constraints led to the implementation of data collection from 200 participants, with 158 valid responses ultimately analyzed from the survey components. This reduction maintained proportional representation across participant groups while ensuring feasibility of data collection within available resources and timeframes.

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period during the academic year 2024-2025. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional review boards, and permissions were secured from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and participating schools. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Multiple data collection instruments were employed: semi-structured interview protocols for school directors and deputy directors focusing on leadership practices, professional development strategies, and challenges; focus group discussion guides for student groups exploring perceptions of teaching quality and learning environment; and structured questionnaires for teachers and students based on validated instruments adapted to the Cambodian context. All instruments underwent pilot testing to assess clarity, cultural appropriateness, and reliability before full-scale implementation. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), while quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using SPSS software (Version 28.0). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize participant characteristics and responses. Cross-tabulation analyses and chi-square tests were conducted to examine relationships between categorical variables. Multiple strategies were employed to enhance validity and reliability, including methodological triangulation, member checking, researcher reflexivity, and internal consistency reliability assessment using Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($\alpha > 0.70$).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Participants

The demographic profile of the research sample provides essential context for understanding the study's outcomes. Analysis of 200 participants (with 158 valid survey responses) revealed several noteworthy patterns. Gender distribution showed a predominance of male participants, with 72% male (144 participants) and 28% female (56 participants), reflecting the gender composition of educational professionals in Cambodian high schools. This gender imbalance warrants consideration when interpreting findings and suggests the need for future research to examine potential gender-related differences in leadership practices and teacher performance.

Regarding professional roles, the majority of participants were teachers and students, comprising 45% of the sample (186 individuals). School directors represented 12.5% (7 participants), while deputy directors comprised 42.5% (7 participants), with the discrepancy in percentages likely reflecting the smaller overall denominator of administrative positions. Institutional affiliation revealed that 71% of participants worked in public schools compared to 29% in private schools, reflecting the predominance of public education institutions in Phnom Penh.

Educational backgrounds varied substantially, with high school students representing 66.5% (133 participants) of the sample. Among educators, professional qualifications ranged from bachelor's degrees (4.5%) to master's degrees (29%). Age distribution showed representation across multiple cohorts: 15-21 years (11%), 21-30 years (22.5%), 31-40 years (17%), 41-50 years (18.5%), 51-60 years (14.5%), and over 60 years (16.5%). This age diversity provides insights from educators at various career stages.

Communication preferences favored phone (45%) and Telegram (42.5%), with email being the least preferred (12.5%), reflecting contemporary communication patterns in Cambodia. Regarding professional expertise, half of respondents (50%) specialized in TEFL/TESOL, while 25% specialized in educational administration, with remaining participants distributed across human resource management (5%), general management (5%), finance and business (5%), public administration (5%), and law (5%). Work experience revealed that 70.5% had less than five years of experience, 27.5% had 6-10 years, 1.5% had 11-20 years, and only 0.5% had more than 21 years, highlighting a sample of mostly early-career professionals.

Table 2 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Personal Information	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	144	72%

Personal Information	Description	Frequency	Percentage
	Female	56	28%
Position	School Director	7	12.5%
	Deputy School Director	7	42.5%
	Teacher and Students	186	45%
Institutions	Public	142	71%
	Private	58	29%
Professional qualification	Bachelor's Degree	9	4.5%
	Master's Degree	58	29%
	High school students	133	66.5%
Age	15-21 years old	22	11%
	21-30 years old	45	22.5%
	31- 40 years old	34	17%
	41- 50 years old	37	18.5%
	51- 60 years old	29	14.5%
	More than 60 years old	33	16.5%
Personal Contacts	Email	25	12.5%
	Telegram	86	42.5%
	phone	90	45%
Professional Expert/Area	TEFL / TESOL	100	50%
	Educational Administration	50	25%
	Human Resource	10	5%
	Management	10	5%
	Finance & Business	10	5%
	Public Administration	10	5%
	Law	10	5%
Name of school	Cheasim Chamroeunroth High School	36	18%
	Prek Phnov High School	31	15.5%
	Russey keo High School	29	14.5%
	Prek Leab High School	19	9.5%
	Sovannaphumi High School	39	19.5%
	The Westline School	16	8%
	BELTEI International School	30	15%
Experiences	Below 5 years	141	70.5%
	6-10 years	55	27.5%

Personal Information	Description	Frequency	Percentage
	11-20 years	3	1.5%
	More than 21 years	1	0.5%

Source: Author's Database

Current Educational Leadership Practices

The first research question examined the current educational leadership practices in high schools in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Analysis of leadership structure within the educational institutions revealed important patterns regarding the prevalence of different leadership positions, characteristics of those in leadership roles, and pathways to leadership.

Table 3 Educational Leadership Practices in High Schools

Educational Institution leadership	Approaches	Frequency	Percentage
Effective Management	Direct leading	114	57%
	Indirect leading	25	12.5%
	Appointed leading	44	22%
	All	17	8.5%
Qualified Teachers	Degree and experience	10	5%
	Degree and achievement	39	19.5%
	Degree and morality/ attitude	65	32.5%
	All of the above	86	43%
Staff/Teachers' Degrees	Secondary school certificate	13	6.5%
	High school certificate	8	4%
	Bachelor certificate	117	58.5%
	Master certificate	62	31%
Educational leadership improves in PD	Democratic leadership	83	41.5%
	Participative leadership	46	23%
	Authoritarian leadership	47	23.5%
	Transformational leadership	24	12%
	Unwillingness and ability	70	35%

Educational Institution leadership	Approaches	Frequency	Percentage
Staff/Teachers Effective Evaluation	Willingness and inability	39	19.5%
	Unwillingness and inability	30	15%
	Willingness and ability	61	30.5%

Source: Author's Database

The findings indicated that the predominant leadership style influencing professional development was indirect leadership, preferred by 29.1% of participants, followed closely by direct leadership (25.3%), appointed leadership (24.7%), and those selecting "all of the above" (20.9%). This distribution suggests diversity in leadership approaches across schools, with no single dominant model. However, the prevalence of indirect leadership may reflect traditional hierarchical structures where decision-making occurs at higher administrative levels with limited direct engagement with teachers.

When evaluating qualifications and attributes necessary for becoming a teacher, respondents emphasized the importance of multiple factors. The combination of degree and experience was valued by 27.2% of participants, while degree and achievement received 25.3% support. Additionally, degree and morality/attitude, alongside "all of the above," received considerable importance (20.3% and 27.2%, respectively). This multidimensional view of teacher qualifications suggests recognition that effective teaching requires not only academic credentials and experience but also personal characteristics and professional attitudes. The emphasis on morality/attitude aligns with Cambodian cultural values that prioritize ethical conduct and interpersonal relationships.

Regarding educational leadership styles that improve professional development, democratic leadership emerged as the most preferred approach (41.5%), followed by authoritarian leadership (23.5%), participative leadership (23.0%), and transformational leadership (12.0%). The strong preference for democratic leadership indicates a shift from traditional hierarchical models toward more collaborative approaches. However, the substantial proportion favoring authoritarian leadership (23.5%) suggests that traditional management styles persist in some schools, possibly reflecting cultural norms or institutional inertia.

Professional Development Structure and Implementation

The structure of teacher professional development in high schools across Phnom Penh was examined through survey responses from 158 valid participants. This analysis provided insights into how professional development programs are organized, the extent of teacher involvement, and the level of support received from school leadership.

Table 4 Professional Development Support and Participation

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Support from Leadership for PD	Very low support	44	27.8%	27.8%
	Low support	36	22.8%	50.6%
	High support	36	22.8%	73.4%
	Very high support	42	26.6%	100%
Teacher Participation Rate in PD	Less than 25%	33	20.9%	20.9%
	25%-50%	41	25.9%	46.8%
	51%-75%	46	29.1%	75.9%
	76% and above	38	24.1%	100%
Follow-up Activities After PD	No follow-up activities	37	23.4%	23.4%
	Some follow-up activities	36	22.8%	46.2%
	Regular follow-up activities	46	29.1%	75.3%
	Consistent & comprehensive follow-up	39	24.7%	100%

Source: Author's Analysis

Participants were asked to rate the level of leadership support they received for professional development programs. The responses revealed a concerning pattern: 27.8% reported very low support and 22.8% reported low support, totaling 50.6% of respondents who perceived inadequate leadership support. Conversely, 22.8% rated support as high and 26.6% as very high, totaling 49.4% who perceived adequate support. These results indicate that while many educators reported receiving adequate support, there is substantial room for improvement to promote more consistent and robust leadership engagement in professional development initiatives.

Further analysis by institution type revealed notable differences in perceptions of leadership support between public and private educational settings. In public institutions, 24.6% reported very low support, 27.9% reported low support, 27.0% reported high support, and 20.5% reported very high support. This distribution suggests that teachers in public institutions more frequently report low or very low levels of leadership support (52.5% combined), though a substantial minority also reports high (27.0%) or very high (20.5%) support, suggesting variability in leadership engagement within the public sector.

In contrast, responses from private institutions displayed greater polarization: 27.8% reported very low support, 27.8% reported low support, 11.1% reported high support, and 33.3% reported very high support. While a significant portion indicated very high support (33.3%), equally notable proportions reported very low (27.8%) or low (27.8%) support, and only a small fraction perceived high support (11.1%). This polarization suggests greater variability in leadership practices across

private institutions, possibly reflecting differences in institutional resources, leadership capacity, or organizational culture.

The comparative analysis illustrates distinct patterns in the perception of leadership support for professional development programs between public and private institutions. Public institutions are characterized by a higher prevalence of dissatisfaction with leadership support, indicating the need for more consistent and active engagement by school leaders. Conversely, private institutions display a more divided experience, with both substantial support and substantial lack of support commonly reported. Overall, these findings underscore the critical role of leadership in the effectiveness of professional development programs and highlight the need for targeted efforts to enhance leadership support, particularly within the public sector.

Effective Strategies for Teacher Professional Development

The second research question examined which leadership strategies are most effective in enhancing teacher performance. Analysis focused on collaboration during professional development sessions and evaluation methods used to assess program effectiveness.

Regarding collaboration during professional development sessions, 28.5% of respondents reported low collaboration, 21.5% reported moderate collaboration, 28.0% reported high collaboration, and 22.0% reported very high collaboration. While 28.5% experienced low collaboration, half of the participants (50.0%) indicated experiencing high or very high levels of collaboration during professional development activities. These results highlight the significance of collaborative learning in professional development, as such engagement allows teachers to interact, share insights, and exchange best practices. High levels of collaboration are essential for maximizing the impact of professional development, as they contribute to a supportive and interactive learning environment.

Table 5 Evaluation Methods for Professional Development Effectiveness

Evaluation Method	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Through feedback survey	37	23.4%	23.4%
Through classroom observation	42	26.6%	50%
Through students' performance results	35	22.2%	72.2%
No evaluation method	44	27.8%	100%
Total	158	100%	

Source: Author's Analysis

The evaluation of professional development programs is critical in determining their effectiveness. Survey data revealed that 26.6% of schools used classroom observation as an evaluation method, 23.4% used feedback surveys, and 22.2% used students' performance results. Concerningly, 27.8% reported no evaluation method was employed, indicating that more than one-quarter of professional development programs lacked systematic assessment of their impact. This absence of evaluation mechanisms represents a significant gap, as without assessment, schools cannot determine whether professional development investments are yielding desired improvements in teaching practice or student outcomes.

The implementation of follow-up activities after professional development sessions was another critical area examined. The responses revealed varied practices: 23.4% of participants reported no follow-up activities, 22.8% indicated some follow-up, 29.1% experienced regular follow-up, and 24.7% described follow-up as consistent and comprehensive. While over half of educators reported regular or comprehensive follow-up practices (53.8%), nearly half experienced little to no systematic follow-up (46.2%). This gap highlights an area for improvement, as ongoing support and reinforcement are crucial for effectively translating professional learning into classroom practice.

These findings align with international research emphasizing that effective professional development requires not only initial training but also sustained support, practice opportunities, and feedback mechanisms (Admiraal et al., 2016). The lack of follow-up activities may explain why some teachers report that professional development does not meet their needs, as isolated training sessions without reinforcement are less likely to result in lasting changes to instructional practices.

Impact of Educational Leadership on Teaching Effectiveness

The third research question analyzed how educational leadership contributes to teaching effectiveness and student engagement in high schools in Phnom Penh. Although direct student learning outcomes were not measured, the influence of leadership was assessed through teacher reports and the patterns of professional development offered by schools. The data showed that 78 percent of schools organized at least one form of professional development. Workshops were the most common activity at 52 percent, followed by mentoring at 41 percent, seminars at 38 percent, and peer collaboration at 35 percent. Despite workshops being more frequently offered, interviews indicated that mentoring was considered the most beneficial, with 62 percent of teachers reporting noticeable improvements in their instructional practices. This contrast suggests that professional development offerings may not always reflect what teachers find most helpful.

Teachers reported various improvements following their participation in professional development. These included more effective lesson planning, stronger

instructional strategies, improved classroom management, and greater student involvement. Approximately 68 percent of teachers observed increased student motivation after participating in professional development activities. These self-assessments demonstrate that when professional development is relevant and well supported, it can contribute positively to teaching effectiveness. However, 45 percent of teachers stated that the professional development they received did not correspond to their actual needs. This finding highlights the importance of conducting systematic needs assessments to ensure that training topics and formats match the challenges teachers face in their classrooms.

Another recurring concern was the limited follow-up and support offered by school leaders. Forty percent of teachers reported insufficient leadership backing after attending professional development activities, which reduced the long-term impact of the training. Without structured opportunities for application, reflection, or feedback, the likelihood of teachers sustaining new instructional practices diminishes. This reinforces the central role of leadership in strengthening the effectiveness of professional development. Leaders who provide ongoing encouragement, monitoring, and guidance are more likely to see meaningful and lasting improvements in teaching performance.

The findings reveal a professional development landscape that is active but inconsistent in quality, relevance, and leadership support across Phnom Penh high schools. Although most schools offer professional development, many teachers experience limited benefits because the content does not match their needs or because the implementation is not supported by leadership. The preference for democratic leadership at 41.5 percent indicates an important shift away from traditional authority structures. This tendency aligns with educational leadership research that emphasizes shared decision-making and collaborative school cultures. Recent studies confirm that learning-centered leadership produces significant effects on the creation of learning-focused school environments, supporting the interpretation that Cambodian educators are increasingly open to more participatory models (Özdoğan et al., 2025; Tondeur et al., 2017).

Despite this shift toward more democratic approaches, the finding that 53.1 percent of teachers lack adequate leadership support confirms concerns described in earlier reports about the limited effectiveness of educational leadership in enhancing teacher performance (Ministry of Education, 2019; Sambath, 2021). This is at odds with theoretical literature that consistently identifies leadership support for teacher learning as a key determinant of school improvement. The synthesis by Leithwood et al. (2020) demonstrated that promoting and participating in professional development is one of the strongest leadership influences on student outcomes. The mismatch between theory and practice suggests that many school leaders in Phnom Penh may lack the experience, capacity, or resources needed to provide adequate instructional support. The fact that 70.5 percent of teachers have less than five years of experience further intensifies the need for strong guidance.

The additional result showing that 45 percent of teachers found their training irrelevant strengthens earlier concerns about misalignment in Cambodia's teacher development system (Chhy & Kawai, 2025; Em et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2025).

Evaluation challenges add another layer to these problems. A total of 27.8 percent of teachers reported that their schools did not conduct any evaluation of professional development activities. Without evaluation, it is difficult to improve program quality or ensure that financial resources invested in teacher training are used effectively. Differences between public and private schools were also notable. Public schools reported more consistently low levels of leadership support, likely due to structural constraints, larger class sizes, or limited funding, as suggested by studies on Cambodia's economic context (Bou et al., 2025). Private schools showed a wider range of experiences, indicating that leadership quality varies significantly among private institutions. The findings provide additional empirical evidence from a Southeast Asian context showing that although global principles of effective leadership remain relevant, their success depends heavily on local cultural and institutional conditions. They also demonstrate that expanding the quantity of professional development is not enough. Improvements in quality, relevance, follow-up, and evaluation are required, which is crucial considering Cambodia's recent investments in teacher development initiatives (UNESCO, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study examined educational leadership practices and their relationship with teacher performance in high schools across Phnom Penh, Cambodia, employing a mixed-methods approach involving 286 participants across ten schools. The research addressed three key questions regarding current leadership practices, effective strategies for enhancing teacher performance, and the influence of leadership on teaching effectiveness. Findings reveal that while democratic leadership approaches are preferred (41.5%) and 78% of schools implement professional development activities, significant systemic challenges undermine their effectiveness. Specifically, 53.1% of educators report inadequate leadership support, 45% indicate misalignment between professional development offerings and their actual needs, and 46.2% experience insufficient follow-up after training sessions. These gaps are particularly pronounced in public schools, where resource constraints and bureaucratic structures limit principals' capacity to provide adequate instructional leadership.

The study makes important theoretical and practical contributions by providing empirical evidence from Cambodia's unique educational context, demonstrating that while universal leadership principles apply, their implementation is mediated by cultural norms, resource limitations, and institutional structures. The preference for mentoring over workshops (despite workshops being more common), the strong association between leadership support and perceived professional development effectiveness, and the disparity between

public and private institutions all suggest that improving teacher performance requires not merely increasing professional development quantity but fundamentally transforming its quality, relevance, and implementation support. These findings validate the problem identified in existing literature regarding unclear effectiveness of educational leadership in Cambodia (MoEYS, 2023; The Asia Foundation, 2022) while extending understanding of the specific mechanisms through which leadership influences teacher performance.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study's focus on Phnom Penh high schools limits generalizability to rural areas or other educational levels, reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias, and the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. Future research should employ longitudinal designs examining how leadership practices influence teacher performance over time, include direct measures of teaching quality through systematic classroom observations, extend investigation to rural schools and primary education levels, and examine specific leadership development interventions and their measurable impacts. Despite these limitations, this research provides a foundation for evidence-based policy-making and leadership development in Cambodia's evolving educational landscape, particularly as the nation pursues ambitious reforms including the four-year teacher training programme and digital capacity development platforms aligned with its goal of becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2030.

SUGGESTION

The results of this study highlight the need for stronger leadership preparation and more coherent professional development systems in Cambodian schools. At the policy level, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport should establish mandatory leadership training for school principals, with emphasis on instructional leadership, teacher coaching, and collaborative decision-making consistent with the Strategic Plan for Teacher Education Reform 2024–2030. Public schools require improved resource allocation to ensure sufficient funding, protected time for teacher learning, and structured follow-up support after professional development activities. Clear national standards regulating needs assessments, program design, implementation guidance, and evaluation mechanisms are also needed to ensure accountability and continuous improvement.

At the institutional and practitioner level, school leaders should prioritize needs-based programming, strengthen mentoring and coaching systems, and create professional learning communities that promote sustained collaboration. Regular classroom observations with constructive feedback, structured post-training practice sessions, and ongoing coaching are essential to increase the impact of professional development. Teacher education institutions and development partners should reinforce these efforts by integrating continuous learning and collaborative practices into teacher preparation, supporting school–university partnerships, and

providing technical assistance for evaluation systems. Sustained investment in leadership capacity and professional development quality will be critical for enabling Cambodia to achieve its long-term educational reform goals and national development aspirations.

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