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From the killing fields to a field of hope: the portrait of a teacher's dream

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FROM THE KILLING FIELDS TO A FIELD OF HOPE:
THE PORTRAIT OF A TEACHER’S DREAM

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Educational Theory, Policy and Practice

by
Kathy Ellen Smith
B.S., Northern Michigan University, 1976
M.Ed., Tufts University, 1979
May, 2010
DEDICATION

I can’t imagine undertaking this kind of journey without the support of loved ones. My husband has been my chief cheerleader and counselor. He offered much intellectual support, and he was always there to listen and encourage. His work along the Mekong River and love of Cambodia gave me the impetus to undertake this research. As someone who had been a quantitative researcher all his life, I learned much from his new belief in the power of the story. I thank him for this key lesson. I knew I could always depend on Greg when I needed a new direction, a recommendation, or a shoulder to cry on. He made me believe that it is possible, a mantra that he models every day in many, many ways. I dedicate this work to my husband and best friend, Greg Smith.
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In any endeavor, such as the research and production of a doctoral dissertation, there is always one person who is there to provide counsel, to mentor, to console, to coach, to advise, to listen, and most importantly to inspire. For me this person is Dr. Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell. She is so much more than an advisor. On my journey of discovery she was there to keep me on course and illuminate the destination. I can’t imagine this journey without her, and I will be forever grateful for her professionalism and friendship.

I sincerely appreciate the time and talent the other members of my committee gave to me. I owe much to Dr. James Wandersee who taught the first doctoral class in which I was enrolled. His adeptly chosen reading list and projects helped me to not only grow as a researcher and teacher, but his encouragement gave me the drive to complete the program. I did not want to let him down. I will strive to pass on Dr. Wandersee’s model of what it means to be a supportive teacher as I work with my own students. Dr. S. Kim MacGregor believed in me. Her kind words and encouragement mean more to me than she will ever know. She is the model of a good teacher, one who knows that “the positive” will invoke students to “reach for the stars.” I thank her for introducing me to Portraiture and for guiding me through my research. I always looked forward to Dr. MacGregor’s engaging and thought-provoking classes. Dr. Meredith Veldman welcomed me into her history research class and guided me through unfamiliar concepts with patience and understanding. Always positive, she helped to expand my thinking and sense of what it means to be an academic researcher. Thank you to Dr. John J. Beggs who agreed to serve as the Dean’s Representative on my committee. His questions inspired me to deeply consider the model of Paulo Freire and what it means to use a feminist lens.

I deeply thank my educational partner, Mason Bryant Howard, for her friendship and encouragement. We have worked together and laughed together for over ten years, learning
much along the way as to what it means to share and care. Mason has been my teacher in so many ways. I can’t thank you enough Mason for all you do, for me and for teachers and children around the world. It’s “your turn” now!

I am fortunate to count as a friend and supporter, Magalen (Maggie) O. Bryant. She takes great pleasure from connecting people and watching the seeds of these connections grow and flourish. Maggie is one of those special people who truly takes pride in the successes of those around her. It was because of her support that I began to develop a worldview. Thank you doesn’t seem to say enough for all Maggie has done for me.

During much of this work, I was privileged to serve as an instructor at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette. My students in the 2 + 2 program on the Eunice campus were such models for me. It is because of them that I had the “audacity” to go back to school when in my 50s. Many of these students were mothers, retired workers, and in Joseph’s case, a school custodian. They believed in themselves enough to balance work, family, and school to achieve their dream of becoming a teacher. Thank you to all of them for living this dream and for showing me what it means to trust yourself.

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ABSTRACT

Few qualitative studies have been done in Cambodia, a country held hostage by the murderous Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Still struggling to recover from these atrocities, Cambodia looks to education to aid in its redevelopment.

This ethnographically-informed case study describes the professional literacy life of a female Cambodian primary school teacher in the post Pol Pot era. This study describes this woman’s professional and personal life as she strives to build literacy in a small village. Her work is considered in the context of her colleagues and village. Additionally, the research portrays forces that impact literacy development, ways in which literacy is exhibited in this village, juxtaposing one Cambodian teacher’s literacy practice with the community literacies that surround her.

Using both Paulo Freire’s work and a feminist lens as suggested by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, field work was conducted in Cambodia using a variety of data sources: observations, interviews, a focus group, casual conversations, and document analysis. Analyzing this data using the Portraiture Approach resulted in a complex picture of this teacher’s professional life within the village and school and of ways literacy is shared in rural areas of the developing country.

Findings from this case study reveal a rich foundation on which to build literacy within Cambodian while also addressing the needs voiced by this participant teacher and her fellow rural teachers. Based on this research, specific recommendations are suggested to Cambodian officials seeking to develop a literate nation and other recommendations are made for those United States agencies and nongovernmental organizations interested in assisting Cambodian teachers and schools.
CHAPTER 1: THE PICTURES OF RESEARCHER AND STUDY

The researcher brings her own history – familial, cultural, ideological, and educational – to the inquiry. Her perspective, her questions, and her insights are inevitably shaped by these profound developmental and autobiographical experiences. She must use the knowledge and wisdom drawn from these life experiences as resources for understanding, and as sources of connection and identification with the actors in the setting, but she must not let her autobiography obscure or overwhelm the inquiry. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 95)

This study is a Portraiture, a picture of one teacher in Cambodia, a country far from my own. I travel to this distant place, to meet her, to observe her, and to talk with her. But as Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis describe in The Art and Science of Portraiture (1997), the one who paints such a research-based portrait must first examine herself. And so, here at the beginning of this portrait, I look first into the mirror to see what is reflected. I journey inward so that I can journey out and away to the Kingdom of Cambodia.

The Pictures of My Life

One never really knows exactly where these interests begin; they are an accumulation of all that has come before, but perhaps by digging deeply and sweeping away the usual I can identify a few starting points for why: Why this dissertation topic? Why my interest in Cambodia? Why not choose the usual, the convenient, like considering issues faced by my student teachers in south Louisiana? It would be so much easier to collect the data and move on, bind the thing, and enjoy the title of Dr. Smith. So, before turning to my pre-determined research purposes and questions, I must first situate myself (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007) and state the reflexivity I bring to this study for as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) along with other feminist researchers such as Gesa Kirsch (1999) discuss, the researcher must engage in looking at self, both at life experiences and biases before embarking on such a study.
How My Interest Was Shaped

When I brush away the cobwebs in my mind, I see photographs of the last ten years. They are photos that began when my friend and philanthropist, Maggie Bryant, asked me to travel the world so I could write about my journeys and bring these pictures to classrooms from Maine to Chile, from Dublin to Bangkok. Some of these memories are actual photos, sitting in frames or on my coffee table; others are merely etched in my mind. They are an album of smiles and understanding. They contain Thai children sitting along the rough-hewn tables in a sauna-like classroom, bending over papers, using stubby pencils to draw the letters of the Thai alphabet. It is the picture of the little Tibetan boy sitting on the front bench in the stench-filled, crowded classroom in the shadow of Mount Everest as he tried to copy my every move as I sang “Where is Thumbkin?” I see another boy trudging though the snows of a Russian village to pump well water for his classroom so his teacher can make her tea in the traditional Russian way with the samovar. I feel the hands of the little Islamic girl in Morocco grabbing my blonde hair, pulling me close and planting a kiss on my face. I recall sitting with the emotionless girl, neck circled with gold rings, in a Hilltribe village in Thailand, a place always seeming more like a human zoo than a cultural center.

In this particular village in Thailand, European and U.S. tourists stroll by Hilltribe huts, snapping pictures of these refugee women as they endlessly weave silken threads through the tired wooden hand looms. Children hide just behind doorways of huts, watching and waiting for the time when they, too, will be on display. I recall approaching one girl and taking out my cache of multi-colored pens. They were all I had, but if my experience with U.S. children was any indication, I remember thinking these might be enough. We sat together and somehow despite the language barrier, I managed to coax a smile and then a laugh from her. I presented her with the pens and moved on. When I returned to the entrance of the village, about six children were
sitting in a circle watching this rainbow of ink dance along the scrap of paper I had left behind.

This Hilltribe village is particularly vivid: I realize I am drawn to Southeast Asia and the stories there. It is a story from this place I am compelled to tell.

These are the snapshots of my mind. Like a movie reel that plays and replays these snapshots they help to answer the question: “Why go all the way to Cambodia to conduct research?” But there are other pictures, too. They play over and over again, much like Coldplay’s, *Viva La Vida*, (2008) that I have set to repeat over and over again as I type these words. One of these is the scene I have come to call “the girl in the white hat.”

It was 2004 in the mountains of Tibet that I began to shed the skin of my Western lens and see the world as a global village. As I shuddered on a cold morning, I felt enveloped by the words of Paulo Freire (2000), and his ideas filled by head. I did not own the terms cultural synthesis or dialogical theory, but I felt them because of a girl of about twelve who taught me and started me on this journey. She is the “girl in the white hat.” This girl is captured forever, for all time, in a photograph that sits on my desk to remind me of this great lesson, the lesson that has led me to this place, a study of Cambodian education.

The day had been spent attempting to hike up the nearly straight fall line of the Ganden Ridge outside of Lhasa, Tibet. Exhausted by the demands of the hike and the thin air, my husband, thirteen year-old son, and I were grateful when the guide took it upon himself to set up the tents. As I gasped to breathe in that oxygen-deprived atmosphere, a group of local yak herders gathered around to see the strange group that had invaded their world. In that wonderful way children have of spanning culture and language, my son immediately began playing a “stick and rock” game with the children. Perhaps because of this friendly interaction, the group stayed near us as tents began to dot the landscape. We prepared to settle in for the night. Soon, the teacher in me took over. I began singing with four of the children. The “girl in the white hat” as I
have come to call her perfectly mimicked my every move and word. Our native Tibetan guide
told me that this girl had never met a Westerner before and had never heard English. Given this,
her nearly perfect elocution surprised me. But, even more surprising was her strong desire to
learn the English words I spoke. She intently repeated each one and looked quizzically at me to
ensure her pronunciation was exactly right. She would not let me stop speaking or singing. She
kept motioning for more. I ran through my repertoire of primary-age songs several times. Finally
night fell, and we said our good-byes. As I returned to our tent, I was filled with plans. I would
contact my boss. We would arrange for this “girl in the white hat” to come to the United States. I
would enroll her in the school where I taught. She had so much potential and drive. I wanted to
give her all the opportunities of a strong education. Perhaps I even secretly applauded myself for
my humanitarianism.

But at dawn, through the Tibetan mist, I saw something very different. As my family and
I struggled to make that vertical climb to the top, the “girl in the white hat” raced by us, yak whip
in hand. She guided her train of beasts up that nearly straight fall line. In the thin air, I struggled
for breath to yell “hello.” She gave me a wide smile, waved wildly, and returned the greeting as
she continued her run up the mountain. I watched as she joyously journeyed into the Tibetan
mist.

Why had I thought that bringing her to the United States would give her a better way of
life? What in me had made the value judgment that learning the laws of physics, the timeline of
Western civilization, or the correct use of homophones was a proper education? Freire (2000)
calls this “cultural invasion” (p. 180). I was thinking only of the “banking theory” which
supposes that merely filling one’s head with facts is the path to true learning.

As I watched her blissfully become one with the mountain, I realized I had been viewing
her life through my United States/Western lens. My lens needed changing in order for me to see
the value in a broader understanding of education, to see the value in what she knew, in what Freire describes as “cultural synthesis” (p. 180). I needed to learn about this child and her world. She knew things and experienced things I did not yet, or may never, understand. I could not impose my vision of what is progress or education on her, nor should I consider my Western understanding of a “good” education as the dominant view. I had perceived this girl’s situation as being “unfortunate.” That morning in Tibet I experienced an epiphany. My outlook shifted forever.

As I began the documentary that was to be my Ph.D. journey, I knew it had to be something new, something that built on this epiphany. I wanted to learn about the world’s education. My trips to the villages of Thailand, Nepal, and China had resulted in a love affair with Asia. I had long forsaken the Coliseum and Big Ben for the handmade bridges that spanned flowing rivers in the mountains of this continent. When my husband returned from his own environmental project along the Mekong River in Asia, he was consumed with stories about the horrors of the genocide during the Pol Pot years and the determination of the Cambodian people to rebuild an educational infrastructure. He was profoundly touched and excited about the hope of the people. He had even taken time away from his environmental projects to visit a school. His pictures and stories of the determination in this society to rebuild what had been taken from them, gripped me. I began to read and to study. As I did so, I began to ponder, how does a teacher in such a society deal with the many issues that confront her? As an elementary teacher of over 20 years, I knew the multitude of demands that confront teachers of young children. What must this be like in a society where education is rising from the ashes of genocide? I wanted to know. Reading John Wood’s book, Leaving Microsoft to Change the World (2006) further inspired me. In it, Wood writes of his mission to provide children in developing nations with books. As the title suggests, he left a lucrative position at Microsoft to deliver as many
books as possible to libraries and schools in countries such as Nepal, Cambodia, and Ethiopia. I wondered, what are the other literacies that impact learning in such places? What are the other ways in which communication happens in these places? Books are heavy, expensive, and hard to come by in the developing world. They are impractical. How, then, do teachers define literacy and then use these local ways of knowing to build an educated population? And most especially, I thought about how does all this happen in a place where just thirty years ago a war had resulted in the slaughter of an entire generation of educated people?

This is Cambodia. So little has been written about this country and the struggles of its people. I knew I wanted to understand the teachers and literacies of this forgotten country, a place where the educated population was hunted down and slaughtered. I knew this would become part of my story.

Herstory

Cambodia – Vietnam? The 1970s were the years of my schooling: high school, college, and then a Master’s Degree at Tufts University. As I look back now on the documentary that is my life, I seem to have little remembrance of an existence outside the library where I sat, determined to excel. I can’t recall even a few internal movies or even snapshots of events other than those that pertained to me. I was aware of protests and controversies, but the Vietnam War affected me because of the lottery for draft numbers. Which of the boys that I knew had low numbers? If I had heard about Cambodia or Pol Pot, I don’t remember it. Kent State seemed to be about the Vietnam War; it was only years later I discovered it was really about Cambodia and the Cambodian king had once visited this Ohio university. So, like many people, the people I talk to now: the assistant in my dentist’s office, the barista at Starbucks, my sister, and classmates at Louisiana State University, the events of the Pol Pot years were far from my consciousness.
As I graduated and moved from one educational institution to another, I was the main actor in my personal 1970s movie. As the years passed, I raised my two children, taught elementary school, even served as a minister, but now I needed to return to the missed understandings of my adolescence. I needed to reveal that faraway place called Cambodia.

The final picture that moves through my mind is literally a moving picture, a movie. It is a movie based on historical events. And while I viewed it nearly two years after this topic found me, wrapping around my heart, I remember standing up in the movie theater, clapping at the end, excitedly whispering to all within range, “This is the idea underlying my research.” Part of me rues the use of the “F” word in the final frame of Charlie Wilson’s War (Hanks & Nichols, 2007), and the other part of me embraces it. Its use adds power. Hesitantly, I use the clip as an illustration of the theme underlying my thoughts: We can use education as a means of diplomacy, as a way to bridge understanding.

This movie depicts how the U.S. spends millions of dollars to covertly supply weapons to Afghanistan in their fight against the Soviet Union but then after the Soviet defeat, refuses to spend one million dollars for war-torn Afghani infrastructure, including schools. Charlie Wilson, a Congressman, struggles to understand why the U.S., after spending over 50 million dollars for weaponry, refuses to spend this relatively little amount for education in a country where half of the remaining population was under fourteen years of age. The final frames of this film leave the audience wondering: Did this omission set the stage for September 11, 2001? While the movie is a Hollywood creation, albeit based on actual events, the message is startling and clear. Funding for international education can lead to goodwill. Had the U.S. worked in concert with Afghani nationals would the global geopolitical landscape look different today? The movie implies that answers to these types of questions may well begin at the local level.
Philosophical/Theoretical Underpinnings: The Microsystem of Self

Freire is one scholar who embraces the power of local participation and dialogue. His concepts and theories view literacy campaigns as participatory, embracing the notion that such campaigns encompass the local population. I celebrate his problem-posing stance, his firmly held belief that reflection and action can change the world. Change, however, according to Freire (2000), begins at the local level. This study is framed by Freire’s words and ideas about literacy and liberation. As both a literacy activist and prolific author, Freire’s work in South America is often the framework for researchers in developing countries along with those involved in praxis. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) describes his work, ideas, and theories such as those I felt on Tibet’s Ganden Ridge: cultural invasion, cultural synthesis, and banking theory. He details his success with literacy programs that are designed to begin with the language of the local participants he called “peasants.” Freire is the quintessential researcher and practitioner for those doing research regarding literacy in developing countries.

But as a White woman researching Asian women in a developing country, my personal views along with my participant’s personal needs should be understood. As the opening quote illustrates, it is necessary to explore myself along with my beliefs and interpretations and combine these within a framework that suits me, my participants, and my research.

The inclusive ideas of feminist researchers who celebrate the everyday life experiences of women, especially the words of Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Deborah Piatelli (2007) capture the essence of this study: “Tapping into lived experience is the key to feminist inquiry and requires innovative practices in developing relationships and building knowledge” (p. 147). This feminist approach of starting where life is lived also frames this study. A feminist perspective allows me to collaborate, use reflexive techniques and work with participants to allow the “knowers” to name themselves, and the structures that influence them (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli,
Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) write of this as they describe the need to move “beyond the academy’s inner circle” and to reach a broader audience so that women and people of color can be heard.

But how does Freire fit into this research stance? Feminist writer bell hooks (2000) contends that despite Freire’s sexist language, his concepts are relevant and important to feminist thinkers. She describes a conversation she had with him regarding this language and tells of his encouragement to both criticize this outdated language and to build upon his ideas. Feminist researchers, M. Brinton Lykes and Erzulie Coquillon (2007), point out that feminism and Freirian perspectives are often situated together given Freire’s participatory and action-based perspectives (p. 303). Maria Mies’ (2007) words give further support for intertwining Freire with feminist research as she looks at the local being international:

Feminist researchers were not mainly interested in careerism and academic fame. Apart from their local commitment, they understood themselves as part of an international movement. Hence, the slogan *the personal is political* could have been accompanied by the slogan *the personal is international* (italics in the original). (2007, p. 663 & 664)

Freire (2000) was involved with community action, with dialogue, and with using the personal of the “peasants” to understand and to build programs. Feminist researchers such as Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) celebrate situating research in the everyday; they use the normality of this context to understand and to tell herstory. And the story of a female Cambodian primary teacher is one that has not been told.

It is the story of the personal, the struggle to bring hope to a place where there has been so much despair. One of the hallmarks of why women conduct such research is that many women strive to hear the voice of not just “the other” but their own voices within research as well (Gilligan, 1993). Feminist researchers use and embrace that which is at the intersection of
researcher and participant. I situate myself at this place, using a feminist framework interfaced with Freire’s legacy of problem-posing, participatory praxis to inform my research. It is the poly-vocality of self, woman, teacher, and research that I intend to explore and examine.

Viewing Research with a Feminist and Freirian Lens

Kirsch (1999) cites several feminist researchers who list unique characteristics, including the need for the researcher to be reflexive, reflective, introspective, and attentive to the affective components of research. Using this lens, researchers make use of methodology and rhetoric that captures the daily life of females in its richness and normalcy. Kirsch even suggests asking participants to be involved in writing research questions in order to make the study more responsive to the needs of the community much like Freire’s (2000) view that participants need to be included and part of the process. Moreover, feminist researchers pay attention to the situation-at-hand, in other words, the nuances of everyday life including the participants in the study process (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). They give voice to the present, to the previously unvoiced (Gilligan, 1993). This stance and perspective makes a feminist framework a helpful lens for this study as I consider the everyday life of a female primary schoolteacher in a place faraway, a place that has seemingly been forgotten. In this study I look at how she shapes literacy against the background of both everyday needs and societal and historical challenges. I look at how she negotiates her life in that space Between Hope and Despair (Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000).

Reflections of My Reflexivity

In Cambodia, as the history section will illustrate, the U.S. military bombed the villages of the Cambodian countryside and helped to set the stage for the Khmer Rouge to turn the country into a massive concentration camp. My country turned its back, allowing nearly 2 million people to be killed. We even accepted representatives of this murderous regime to be
seated as official representatives of Cambodia at the United Nations. Our actions triggered cascading consequences for these people, particularly the educated members of the society who were the targets of the Khmer Rouge. And now, I feel I need to help rebuild.

As I listened to the voices of female teachers in Cambodia in 2008, I experienced an overwhelming desire to help, to change, to meet the needs of the children who look up at them daily. How can governmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and foundations really help? As a teacher of over twenty years, I have lived the stresses of daily classroom life in the United States. I have seen what policies such as No Child Left Behind have done to teachers and students “in the trenches.” Sometimes I want to scream, “Is anyone paying attention?” But still I and others like me have persevered to wipe noses, dry tears, listen to the high-pitched voices as they struggle to say the words in the basal reader. We do this day in and day out. I know how difficult it can be to walk into that classroom every day. What is it like to continue striving to bring this hope in Cambodia, a world where the U.S. helped to create a tragic situation?

This is researcher bias. I am stating my reflexivity. I feel a need to show, to uncover, albeit in a small way, the issue of education in Cambodia as seen through the eyes of a female primary teacher. And I do it because of our bombs, the remnants of which serve as school bells today. With that segue, I turn now to the requisite components of my study.

The Mesosystem of Scholarly Writing

Statement of Purpose

As discussed above and as the second chapter will present, Cambodia has experienced a turbulent recent history, both as a country and with education. As the country struggles to rebuild its educational infrastructure, those in Cambodia’s government along with a limited number of international aid agencies claim to be ready to help with this process. What are the issues? What
are the needs? How does a teacher, in a culture with a tumultuous past, a culture with a poverty-stricken present, draw students into a hope-filled future? In this ethnographic informed case study, I describe the professional literacy life of a female Cambodian primary school teacher in the post Pol Pot era juxtaposed with the community literacies which surround her. I consider her work in the context of her colleagues and village along with describing the forces that impact literacy development in her world.

Significance of Study

Cambodia’s Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has issued a guiding document, *Education For All National Plan 2003-2015* (MoEYS, EFA, n.d.). As a note to readers I will hereafter refer to this document as EFA (n.d.). Additionally, while the document is available on the website of MoEYS in a pdf format, the pages are not numbered. *The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2001) offers several solutions to writers in dealing with this issue, and because of its length, I have chosen to refer to pages as they appear on-line. While this may not be entirely accurate given the differences in computer systems, it will help the reader locate the general area where information is located.

The EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) outlines and describes problems facing teachers, ranging from poverty alleviation to health concerns. These are considered as is the issue of gender equity within the teaching force and administrative ranks. But how do these national issues translate into local struggles and solutions? In this study I will describe the realities of one teacher as she negotiates the terrain that is rural Cambodia.

In one sense, this study will show the “nitty gritty.” After all, as teachers, we roll up our sleeves, getting our hands dirty in the classroom, in the village, and on the playground. Teachers tend to compare our situations to teachers elsewhere. Thus, I wonder, “How do the words from national documents translate to the realities of classroom life when one stands on that small
wooden platform and faces 50 young faces day in and day out? What aspects of her training and these policies does a teacher consider important? What problems does she face as she prepares to walk into her classroom each morning? What responsibilities and policies might impact her effectiveness? Given the paucity of materials and books, what alternate forms of teaching does this teacher use to develop literacy? The answers to these questions may help inform future planners as they consider the realities of school life in developing countries. These realities may also help international aid agencies as decisions are made regarding educational funding. The website of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) states:

Education is vital in strengthening Cambodia’s most important resource—its people. Basic education represents the foundation on which all else is built. Without improvements here, it will be difficult to encourage community involvement, promote democracy, improve social indicators and provide the skills that Cambodia needs to compete regionally and within the global economy.

USAID http://www.usaid.gov/kh/good_education.htm

Additionally, this site tells us that donors and the Cambodian government are sources of funding for new school buildings. It is my experience that many schools are built, courtesy of nongovernmental international agencies and religious organizations from a variety of countries. Thus, one of my intentions is to bring more attention to the educational needs of this country and how teachers develop literacy in this forgotten part of the world. While this study is the story of one teacher, in one place, she is one of millions in places near and far. Perhaps her story, her place, her literacies will reveal the similarities we share and the differences we celebrate.

Research Questions

Those who write of qualitative research methods, John Creswell (2007), Robert Stake (1995), and Robert Yin (2009) share the need for those doing the type of fieldwork proposed in this study to be flexible. Thus, I knew that my pre-determined questions could change and that others could emerge as the study progressed. Perhaps questions will be discarded. Life happens.
And in fact, that’s what this study is about: a slice of one teacher’s life. Two major questions frame this investigation:

1) What is the professional literacy life of a female Cambodian primary school teacher in the post Pol Pot era?

2) What are the various forces that shape this woman’s life as she strives to build literacy in a small village?

As I consider how she builds literacy, I also ask the “what and how” of it: How is literacy defined? How is it exhibited? How do Cambodian teachers develop literacy? Are alternate forms of literacy apparent? Are community forms of literacy apparent? If so, does this teacher use this to encourage her students to participate in community-literacy building? What values does this teacher place on various forms of literacy?

Definition of Terms

How do we refer to groups of people in an ever-increasing “flat world” (Friedman, 2005)? What is a developed country? When does a developing country change categories and wear the developed label? What is the Western world? These are all questions I grapple with, and while the discussion regarding this type of issue is well beyond this study, I feel I must acknowledge my discomfort with even trying to arrive at definitions for such terms. There are no easy or politically-correct answers. But for the sake of clarity and consistency, I will attempt to offer some definitions with the understanding that the moment I do put these definitions on paper, I am giving a sense of paternalism to the concepts. Therefore, with apologies to readers for any unintended offense my White American self brings to these understandings, I turn now to the terms I use throughout this study.
Western World

The website of the World Bank provides some context, but because its definitions are based on economics and use gross national income (GNI) per capita as a way to classify its member nations, I hesitate to use this metric as this seems contradictory to the Freirian and feminist stance that informs my research. In searching for an alternative, Adam West, Desk Officer for Cambodia, U.S. State Department, Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs, was consulted (personal communication, February 25, 2009). Mr. West admitted there is no consistency in the highest levels of the U.S. government as to which words and phrases should be used when referring to countries such as Cambodia and the United States.

I turned to Wikipedia for help (Developing countries, 2009). Despite its limitations, this website may present the most current reflections on ideas such as this. According to those who upload to and editorialize on Wikipedia, the term Western world refers to those countries that share a similar culture and set of ideals, although differences such as religion are noted. Countries of Western Europe along with the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, Israel, and Japan are among those nations identified as being in the Western world. In searching for definitions of developing countries and developed countries, Wikipedia cites and uses the definitions of the World Bank.

This leaves me in a quandary: Do I use what I view to be capitalistic definitions based on wealth? With no good, agreed upon alternative, I therefore, capitulate to this way of defining nations to achieve consistency for this study. Therefore, I define developing countries to be those who are classified as being low-income countries, those with a GNI less than $975. Countries with a GNI of over $11,906 (high-income) are referred to as developed countries (Developing countries, 2009). I use the term Western world to refer to developed countries in any part of the world such as Israel, Singapore, the United States, New Zealand, Great Britain, etc.
Cambodia

I use the short name, Cambodia to refer to the country officially called the Kingdom of Cambodia. During the Khmer Rouge period, those in power called the country Democratic Kampuchea, but I avoid that term except for its use in the history chapter of the study. I use three terms when discussing the Khmer Rouge period. When situating myself within the contemporary lives of those during the Pol Pot era, I use the term, Pol Pots, which is the folk term given this period and leaders by local people with a memory of that time period. Many published memories and histories speak of Angkar, a term used during the Khmer Rouge era which referred to the feeling by victims that the Khmer Rouge had many eyes like a pineapple. As such, one felt as though he or she was always being watched. I also use the term Khmer Rouge which is the name the English-speaking world uses to refer to those who came to power in 1975 and brutally ruled Cambodia until 1979. Because the word Khmer refers to a person of Cambodia and rouge is the French word for red, Khmer Rouge refers to those Khmer with communist leanings.

Khmer

For stylistic reasons, I interchangeably use the words Khmer (pronounced Kĭ - My) and Cambodians to refer to the people of Cambodia. I use both of these terms to avoid repetition of terms or even confusion on the part of the reader with the Khmer Rouge.

Limitations

This is the study of one teacher. Her experiences and beliefs are likely not representative of the totality of Khmer teachers. I cannot generalize; I can only use her story as part of the portrait gallery that is the primary teachers of the world. Her ways of “doing” literacy may not be typical of the ways of other teachers. Her life may not be representative of female primary teachers throughout Cambodia. It is merely a textured portrait of one person in one specific time period. And, I can only compare her teacher world to my teacher view.
As in all research, the researcher interacts with and influences participants. I realize that I can never fully appreciate how my presence in this village and its school affected the interviews and observations.

Additionally, I bring a certain bias. I bring a specific background. This affected my interpretations. But do these limitations mean the study should not have been conducted? Feminist researchers would say, “no.” For feminist researchers, the textured portraits of women at work by women at work are a necessary and an important vehicle to understanding the challenges women face and the successes they celebrate.

But this description must be done within context, and the context of any work done in Cambodia must consider the turbulent years, 1970 through 1989 for this deeply affects the present time. To develop an understanding of contemporary Cambodia, one must first understand the killing of the educated. We travel now to “the killing fields.” In Chapter 2, I discuss the turbulent recent history of Cambodia, its sociopolitical history and educational history which collide to impact schools and teachers today.
CHAPTER 2: THE PICTURES OF DESPAIR: CAMBODIA’S RECENT HISTORY

She spoke to me quietly. “Son, if you ever get away from the Communists, go to school. They can take away your possessions, but they can’t take away your education. They can’t take what you know.” Soon after that, my mother died. I wanted to die, too. (Chan, 1997, p.23)

Youkimny Chan (1997) was a child when the Khmer Rouge ravaged Cambodia. Like many other children of the “killing fields,” he lost most members of his family. As he grew, Chan treasured these words of his mother. He valued education and proudly reports that he now holds a Bachelor of Science degree from a university in the United States. He was one of the fortunate.

A Country-Wide Concentration Camp

The Pol Pot Regime. This time period has many names ranging from the dreaded Angkar (meaning organization) to that which is familiar in the Western mind, the Khmer Rouge. Whatever the name, the horrible events of this time period have left a lasting impression on the citizens of Cambodia. Members of the educated class were systematically hunted down and killed between 1975 and 1979. Children witnessed the execution of fellow villagers. Wearing glasses was a death sentence as this meant the person might be educated (Chan, 1997). An estimated 1.7 million people disappeared (Mydans, 2007). The terror of this regime only dissipated in 1998 with the death of its leader, Pol Pot. Questions still linger as to why this country was turned into a virtual concentration camp by their own people. Alexander Hinton’s book title poses this question: Why Did They Kill? (2005).

In this chapter I discuss the history of Cambodia and its educational institutions from the Khmer Republic period in 1970 through the end of the Vietnamese direct involvement in 1989. These dates are provided for historical understanding and perspective, and I note the extensive overlap in time periods. For example, the Khmer Rouge were building their support during the
time of the Khmer Republic. Additionally, historian Craig Etcheson (1984) notes the difficulty in separating events in Southeast Asia between 1954 through 1975 as the “fates of the Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese were and are closely intertwined” (p. 75). Although, the interference and almost subterfuge of China and the Soviet Union also played a role in Cambodia’s history, in this chapter, I discuss only the role of the United States, and acknowledge my underlying belief that there is a moral responsibility on the part of Americans to assist Cambodians in rebuilding their educational system. However, my main focus is on Cambodia as this history provides the context for my educational research. This turbulent and chaotic historical timeframe is a part of the memories of parents and grandparents of present day primary students. Do negative connotations of schooling remain? If so, how does a teacher deal with the terrible views of education that have been written on the mystic slates of the mind, as Derrida calls it (Rambo, 2005)?

This chapter is divided into three sections. Each section begins with a Cambodian poem, song, or proverb that represents the time period, followed by a brief overview of historical events. Within each historical time period, I also include information from listening to three female survivors of the Khmer Rouge era, a conversation arranged by my gatekeeper. Finally, I include a survey of the educational situation during these years. See Table 1 for the approximate years of these periods.

In the Khmer Republic section, along with the overview of that time period and the events leading to it, I present evidence to support Ben Kiernan’s (2002) contention that the single most important factor in Pol Pot’s rise was “the carpet bombing of Cambodia’s countryside by American B-52s” (p. 16). In the middle section on the Khmer Rouge period, I use the “I Poem” methodology suggested in the Listening Guide Approach (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003) to enhance my synopsis. In the final section, I include a look at the refugee camps
along the Thai border, with particular focus on the memories of Cambodian young people who called these camps home.

Table 1
Overview of Recent Cambodian Time Periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Approximate Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khmer Republic</td>
<td>1970 – 1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khmer Rouge</td>
<td>1975 – 1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese Occupation</td>
<td>1979 - 1989</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Putting It Into Context

Where is Cambodia? What do you mean genocide happened there? These are questions I am often asked, even by my extended family. To help in picturing the place and horrors, I present tables and maps to help the reader better understand a place that seems to be so far away from Western minds. The map shown in Figure 1 shows present-day Cambodia, a country located in Southeast Asia that is about the size of the U.S. state of Oklahoma.

Pictures of Numbers

As a further aid to the reader, I do something I dislike: I offer a comparative chart to show numbers of dead in other genocidal regimes. I hesitate to do this as it seems to reduce human life to a number on a chart. Daniel Mendelsohn (2006) in *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* shows the power examining individual human lives brings to these massive genocidal numbers. And in what is perhaps the one of the best educational projects that strives to help
children understand these big numbers, the movie *Paper Clips* (Fab, Johnson, Pinchot, 2003) traces the quest of schoolchildren in rural Tennessee as they collected enough paperclips to represent each of the six million lives lost in the Holocaust. With these words of hesitation, I show comparative numbers in Table 2 to help readers understand the Khmer Rouge in relationship with other genocidal regimes.

Figure 1: Map of Cambodia

Table 2
Approximate Number Murdered by Genocidal Regimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country or area</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Number Murdered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>1975-79</td>
<td>1.7 million fellow citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazi Germany</td>
<td>1938-45</td>
<td>6 million Jews/5 million others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>1992-95</td>
<td>200,000 Bosnian Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>800,000 Rwandan Tutsis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>2003-present</td>
<td>400,000 Darfurians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


If you hear thunder, don’t be in a hurry
To throw out the rain water you have stored.

Cambodian Proverb (Fisher-Nguyen, p. 101)

The Gathering Storm: Historical Overview, 1970 - 1975

The above proverb illustrates the propensity during this time to throw out all that had
been Cambodia, despite the gathering storm. The “thunder” of greed and corruption plagued the
Cambodian leader, Lon Nol’s ruling regime. The “thunder” of American bombs reined down on
Cambodia. The “thunder” of the Khmer Rouge was organizing and fighting for power. David
Chandler (1991) titles a chapter about these years, “Sliding toward Chaos” (p. 192). Thus, in this
section I will look at these thunderous events and consider how they collided to create the
eventual storm of chaos and terror. This begins with the French.

Since 1864 the French had ruled Cambodia, calling it a protectorate. In reality, the French
officials paid more attention to their other Southeast Asian colony, Vietnam. But, the term
protectorate may be an apt description as the French did keep Thailand and Vietnam from
encroaching on Cambodia’s territory. Except for a brief Cambodian protest in 1884 when the Cambodian king was forced to sign an agreement with the French, which officially made Cambodia a colony, many Cambodians seemed to regard the French as providers of certain benefits including preserving the great Temples of Angkor (Becker, 1998).

It was during World War II that the man who was seemingly everywhere, wearing different masks of power, position, and alliance came to power. He is Norodom Sihanouk, king, prince, prime minister, president, prisoner, film director, and politician. The French crowned the carefree, eighteen-year old Sihanouk king in 1941 and in doing so, passed over a more favored royal. Sihanouk became a master at playing the political game (Becker, 1998). He abdicated the throne, ascended it, and aligned himself with various factions, all to stay in power. He strove to be all things to all Cambodians. Many believed he was Cambodia and put their faith in him. To many, he was nearly divine. Chandler (1991) calls him a “gifted and popular politician” but also notes his narcissism and ability to eliminate rivals (p. 5).

During these postwar years, with a young and ambitious king and a French government that was embroiled in a war with Vietnam, a growing movement for independence emerged in Cambodia. Finally French control ended in 1954 but this did not ease tensions with Cambodia’s traditional enemy, Vietnam. Vietnamese forces used the Cambodian countryside to transport and hide weapons and troops. This laid the foundation for Cambodia’s status as the Sideshow (Shawcross, 1981) for what Americans call the Vietnam War and the eventual “secret” U.S. bombing of Cambodia, planned by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. The two first planned these bombings at a breakfast meeting that further escalated in scope while the two dined together at other times, thus earning these bombing missions titles such as Operations Breakfast, Lunch, Dessert, Snack, and Supper (Power, 2002, pp.91 & 92). To add to the disarray and likely the Nixon administration’s distrust was that Sihanouk had broken his alliance with the U.S. and
entered into secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese (Chandler, 1991). Nothing was straightforward when it came to Sihanouk’s politics.

Finally, in 1970, Sihanouk, then known as prince, was traveling in France with plans to visit both the Soviet Union and China. He planned to assure the leaders of these countries that he had no intention of altering Cambodia’s commitment to neutrality in the Second Indochina War (Becker, 1998, p. 115). But Sihanouk was not the real power in Cambodia anymore, and his policies seemed to change according to his desire to stay in power. Disagreements as to how to deal with the activities of many of the Vietnamese in Cambodia would become a primary reason for Sihanouk’s downfall (Etcheson, 1984, p. 76). The prime minister, Lon Nol, and his cabinet, particularly Sirik Matak, a cousin of Prince Sihanouk, were committed to ridding their country of the Vietnamese (Chandler, 1991). These men were in the process of reversing the Prince’s policies and becoming more centrist, possibly with the hope of realigning with the United States against their traditional enemy, Vietnam. But not all of the population saw or even understood this. Prince Sihanouk had the support of the Cambodian peasantry who thought of him as a god-king (Kiernan, 1982a). This confusion laid the groundwork for what was to come. A rumor exemplified the people’s concerns. It was said a white crocodile had been sighted (Becker, 1998). To the Cambodian people this meant the country was at a crossroads. This proved to be a powerful omen.

The coup d’etat that followed was a cacophony of opposing and constantly changing “sides” that set the stage for the chaos that was to come. A circle of tanks surrounded government buildings, and soon the absent Prince was ousted (Becker, 1998). Lon Nol, along with Cheng Heng and Sirik Matak, were now in charge of the new Khmer Republic. This new government pledged to get rid of the Vietnamese communists in Cambodia. Likely expecting support from the United States, Lon Nol proceeded with his pledge. He sent poorly armed forces
into battle against the Vietnamese, even against civilians who had lived in Cambodia for years (Chandler, 1991). But the Nixon administration was embroiled in its own anti-war crisis at home. When U.S. money did come, it contributed to the “thunder” of corruption. Payrolls were padded, dead soldiers were paid, gas, medicine, and arms were sold to the Vietnamese (Chandler, 1991).

But Lon Nol and his government were determined. They even drafted children in an attempt to increase the size of the army (Becker, 1998). Soon the educated population began to understand what was happening to their country. Many saw that the proclamations of Lon Nol and his actions did not always seem to be in harmony. He may have espoused Theravada Buddhism, but his militaristic actions spoke louder than his commitment to its tenets (Harris, 2005). Parts of the population began to raise questions about his intent and about the future direction of the country. This provided fertile ground for the Khmer Rouge, already garnering support in the countryside.

International events added to the gathering storm. Since 1969, “secret” United States bombing raids had been targeting North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia (Shawcross, 1981). Once Lon Nol came to power, the United States increased its raids. These built to a crescendo in 1973. U.S. B-52 bombers raided these supposed sanctuaries, often using poor maps and killing innocent Cambodian civilians in their villages (Becker, 1998, p. 156) rather than the targeted North Vietnamese. Chanrithy Him tells her family’s story of villagers being killed by direct hits or by the intense heat produced by the bombs (2000, p. 42). Kiernan (2002) reports how a Green Beret team accidentally blew up a busload of Cambodian civilians (p. 18). He tells how “…families were trapped in the trenches they had dug as protection underneath their homes” (p. 20). Bruce Sharp (n.d.) describes how a funeral procession of villagers was bombed. Chandler (1991) concludes, “The campaign killed thousands of people not at war with the United States” (p. 225). He explains that the U.S. “…dropped over half a million tons of bombs on Cambodia. The tonnage was more than three times the amount dropped on Japan in the closing stages of
It was in the decay of these bombs blasts that the germ of the Khmer Rouge movement began to grow. Many Cambodians were justifiably angry about these bombings. They blamed not only the United States, but also the Lon Nol government. The “thunder” of the Khmer Rouge seized the opportunity. Its leaders, Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), Ieng Sary, Son Sen and others used this anger to build their support. While Lon Nol fought the North Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge was amassing its own army and supplies in the villages. The party recognized the support Prince Sihanouk enjoyed among the peasants. To them he was Cambodia and in a “wise” political move, they convinced the prince to endorse their cause. From his exile in China, he saw this endorsement as a way to return to power. The Prince’s pleas to the Cambodian people to resist Lon Nol’s government and army added to the growing unrest (Etcheson, 1984). Village by village, communist support grew. Areas were said to be “liberated” (Ayres, 2000), which meant they were governed by FUNK (National United Front of Kampuchea), a collaboration between the Khmer Rouge Communists and Prince Sihanouk. Gradually, Cambodians turned from their fight with outsiders to their fight with each other.

In 1974, the Khmer Rouge marched toward Phnom Penh. By now, many believed the Khmer Rouge was invincible. Its members had kept on fighting, despite the showers of U.S. bombs (Becker, 1998, p. 157). They portrayed themselves as ousters of all who dared to invade Cambodia. Surrounding the capital, their plan was to cut off the food supply for the population, shell the city, and launch rocket attacks until their final assault (Chandler, 1991, p. 231). Finally, on April 12, 1975, the Khmer Rouge succeeded. Its members entered the city. The population was told to fly white flags from windows (Him, 2000, p. 56). Some cheered. They believed the fighting and suffering was over (Ung, 2000). But they were wrong. The real storm was
gathering. Part of the forecast?: Car owners were forced to throw away their keys. Cars were pushed to a dump at the city’s edge (Pilger & Barnett, 1982, p. 67).

Not Clearly to Remember: Life in the Village

My gatekeeper asked villagers if there were Khmer Rouge survivors who might be willing to share their experiences. Three women told her they would like to tell their story. Along with my translator, I went to the home of one of these women. With no prompting from me, other than the niceties of the Cambodian social graces, they began to share their remembrances. I was the listener as the translator relayed the narrative from Khmer to English.

The woman who owned the house had a shaven head and wore garb indicating she is now a Buddhist nun. She seemed to be the leader and did most of the talking. Occasionally, the other two women shared their thoughts. The three women often supported one another with frequent patting of arms, something I noticed my young gatekeeper frequently did. I was surprised to see this touching in members of the “older” generation.

The women do not offer many details about the time of the “Lon Nols” as they term this period. One woman’s husband was a soldier in the Lon Nol army, a fact that would become important as the Khmer Rouge infiltrated the small villages. They indicate that they “not clearly to remember.” In the few sentences that were offered about this period, the words happy and friendly were used frequently. One of the women made a point to say the people could talk to each other and help each other. Of the limited remarks that were made about this period, it is striking that the concepts of happiness and helpfulness are described. These feelings stand in contrast to what was to come. The partial word picture that is painted is one of friendly cooperation. It is as if all that happened in the ensuing years erased the specific memories of the happier times.

The educational situation during this time period can be described as a tug-of-war: a tug for the hearts and minds of the students. But, first we must understand the “playing field.” In the years leading up to this struggle, Cambodian education was embroiled in defining itself. Years of colonial rule by the French had resulted in city schools with a Western ideology and a focus on the French language (Eilenberg, 1961). In many villages, however, boys were still being taught by the monks at local pagoda schools while rural girls stayed home (Harris, 2005). As the 1960s progressed, Sihanouk became almost obsessed with expanding the country’s educational system. No consensus existed as to what this system should look like. Some policymakers thought the new emphasis on education should stress vocational and agricultural concerns, while others wanted a return to the past, to Buddhist roots. The National Assembly, in contrast, wanted to build upon the classical and liberal education model of the French (Ayres, 2000, p. 53). Sihanouk declared the need to create a modern Cambodia through education. He appeared determined to move his country away from the old colonial system and relied to a greater degree on human capital theory, so widely espoused in the West (Clayton, 1998). But Sihanouk’s policies were never firm. Many believed he had made vast changes with little substance such as transforming a junior high school into a high school merely to gain the support of the population (Ayres, 2000). The hopes for true change never materialized despite the amount of money poured into education. By the time he was ousted, Sihanouk had devoted 25 percent of the country’s budget to schools (Becker, 1998). There were 5275 primary and 146 secondary schools (Clayton, 1998), and over eleven thousand Cambodians were attending universities in their own country (Chandler, 1991, p. 123). Yet teachers in rural villages were still using a curriculum that “…was more European than Asian” (Becker, 1998, p. 6).
Many educators and intellectuals were relieved at the ouster of Sihanouk. They were concerned that peasants had been given an unrealistic expectation of schooling. Because many could not afford to pay the cost of high school tuition, dreams for their children would never be realized. These thwarted dreams along with disappointment in the quality of education became fertile ground for the struggle of the early 1970s.

Because of the destruction of many educational documents during the Khmer Rouge period, it is difficult to know fully the educational situation leading up to the Pol Pot years, but the general overview is clear. The Lon Nol regime began by supporting the idea of using education to help Cambodia grow into a modern nation, respected by the global community. However, the educational goal of reshaping Cambodia so that all had equal access to education and opportunities for growth turned out to be mere words in the propaganda battle for the loyalty of the population (Ayres, 2000).

The Khmer Republic never succeeded in changing education. The government clung to the old system of educating students to become clerical workers in the old French businesses and government of Cambodia (Ayres, 2000). The new needs of an independent Cambodia were never addressed. Money was not made available for school materials, teacher salaries were low, and the children in the rural schools were concerned more about their hungry stomachs than about learning. Teachers protested and some left their teaching positions. As U.S. bombs dropped and discontent grew, the Lon Nol government tried to encourage students to stay in their villages. But in the 1970/71 academic year, 40 percent of primary school children in Phnom Penh were from the rural areas. These students went to school in shifts and kindergarten classes were not held (Ayres, 2000, p. 80).

Moreover, university students began to understand the growing dichotomy that was Cambodia. In the early days of the regime they were sent home to explain to their families the
coup d’etat, despite not having a full understanding of it themselves. They were expected to participate in student protests without truly knowing what the banners they were given to carry meant (Ayres, 2000, p. 72). Many grew to see the inconsistencies of the Lon Nol Republic. Despite the leader’s words that extolled the virtues of democracy, they were not allowed to question his educational policies. They were expected to do the government’s bidding. Some students left the country. Others stayed and, in an effort to embrace something that was different than the corrupt and contradictory Lon Nol regime, joined what they believed was a liberation movement (Ayres, 2000, p. 91). When the Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh in April 1975, many of the educated thought this was the beginning of a new period for Cambodian education. They were right.

The Storm: The Khmer Rouge Period, 1975 – 1979

Glittering red blood blankets the earth –
Blood given up to liberate the people:
Blood of workers, peasants, and intellectuals;
Blood of young men, Buddhist monks, and girls.
The blood swirls away, and flows upward, gently, into the sky,
Turning into a red revolutionary flag.

Red flag! Red flag! Flying now! Flying now!
O beloved friends, pursue, strike and hit the enemy.
Red flag! Red flag! Flying now! Flying now!
Don’t leave a single reactionary imperialist (alive)
Seething with anger, let us wipe out all enemies of Kampuchea.
Let us strike and take victory! Victory! Victory!

Khmer Rouge propaganda song (Hinton, 2005, p. 84, translated by D. Chandler)

Red Blood: Historical Overview, 1975 – 1979

Red blood. This is the Khmer Rouge period. And blood did flow. The country became like a “…giant prison camp in which basic rights and freedoms were severely curtailed in the name of revolution” (Hinton, 2005, p. 1). Kiernan (2002) describes a kidnapped nation (p. 8). That which was called the Democratic Kampuchea was cut off from the rest of the world. The
Khmer Rouge proclaimed it was now Year Zero. All that Cambodia knew would end. Life would begin again. We may never know the exact number of people who were executed or died from starvation or disease during these four years (Chandler, 1998). Some say the number dead is 2,746,105 people while other research puts the number at 1.7 million (Mydans, 2007). Even this number is astounding. For those who survived, the psychological and emotional wounds are just below the surface. The children of the Khmer Rouge are now grown, but the terror is still very much alive. Survivor, Molyda Szymusiak (1999) tells of the constant Khmer Rouge threat of ending up “…in a plastic bag in the water” (p. 98). Loung Ung (2006), who also lived through this time, remembers the horror of being told children must follow orders and may have “…to shoot and kill even their traitor parents” (p. 36). Him (2000) writes of being caught by a Khmer Rouge when she was just a small child. He tied her to a tree and told her he would return at sunset to kill her. Fortunately she was released, but that day of terror remains with her.

What happened when Pol Pot and his brand of Communists turned this country into a concentration camp? The story begins in April 1975 when the Khmer Rouge forced the citizens of Phnom Penh to evacuate the city. Out of fear, people followed the orders of those wearing the trademark black pajamas. The Khmer Rouge soldiers ordered them to hurry and take nothing, claiming the Americans were planning to bomb the city. Given the recent U.S. raids, people believed this reasoning. Few took many possessions. People believed they would return within three days. Thousands never did.

On the roads to the rural villages the first purges began. Soldiers questioned everyone and those who had held positions of power in the Lon Nol government were taken away. This was all done surreptitiously; trucks took men, who were unaware of their journey to death, with the explanation that they were needed elsewhere in the country. Some people, the lucky ones, had been warned or suspected the motivations of the Communists. They knew to hide their past
professions and education. The three days stretched into four years as the citizenry was told to go
to the villages and rural areas. Other cities were also cleared of people; soon most of Cambodia
was living in rural areas. There they built lean-tos and slept on bamboo mats (Becker, 1998, p. 233). Those who had always lived in the villages were known as the “base people,” or “old”
people while the displaced city population were the “new people” (Kiernan, 2002). This
distinction was important in the first years as the Khmer Rouge seemed to target the “new
people” for execution. Later, when Pol Pot and his followers seemed to trust no one, the entire
population was in danger of being taken away and killed.

But why? This question has been debated in scholarly circles since the time of the Khmer
Rouge. The answers are varied, and as Hinton points out in the conclusion of his book, Why Did
They Kill?, this question may never be completely understood (2005, p. 298). Did they want a
true Communist revolution that celebrated the worker? Did they want real equality? Was this a
desire to rid the country of Western imperialists and the threat of the Vietnamese? Was it a large
scale representation of Yale University’s Stanley Milgram’s infamous “Milgram experiment”
where study participants blindly followed directives that contradicted their belief system? Were
the Khmer Rouge leaders so concerned about preserving their power that they ignored their own
brutality? Or were they just pure evil? Perhaps, as Hinton suggests, all of these components
played a role (2005).

What is clear are the tactics the Khmer Rouge used. People were assigned to endless
work brigades. Men, women, and children labored in the rice fields from sun up to sun down. As
the months passed, the Khmer Rouge separated families. Children as young as six were routinely
taken away from parents and forced to work in children’s brigades clearing land or planting rice
seedlings (Becker, 1998). This separation of the family was contrary to the kinship that
epitomized the family fabric of Cambodian culture and contributed to the growing despair in the
Kiernan tells the story of a father, Sum, whose four children, ages eight through fifteen were sent to the work brigades. Sum only saw his children every few months (2002, p. 182). This was the Communists’ plan: destroy the familial, social fabric of the country so that all were dependent on the Party. “Family life had to be eliminated” (Becker, 1998, p. 211).

In early 1976, communal meals were instituted. This was a defining dictum as mealtime was revered in Cambodian families. This requirement, along with the Communists insistence that everyone wear black pajamas and cut their hair short, contributed to feelings of fear, loathing, and depression in the population. Him (2000) explains how long hair is valued in the Khmer culture. When her locks fell to the ground she felt a sense of loss (pgs. 99 & 100). These feelings of loss, distrust, and deep sadness added to the power of Angkar, the term the Khmer Rouge used for themselves. This word, which the lost population was now forced to use, had an important psychological effect. In the Khmer language, Angkar means organization, but as Hinton (2005) explains, the word has a powerful connotation in Cambodia. It refers to a kind of carefully ordered organization that powerfully orders society so that prosperity will occur (p. 127).

Thus, Angkar was to be given respect. It was said that Angkar had the eyes of a pineapple. The organization was everywhere, seeing everything (Hinton, 2005, pgs. 128 & 129). To add to this metaphor, citizens were encouraged and expected to spy on each other. Those who hid their former professions or education from the soldiers lived in fear that a neighbor would recognize them or that a family member would tell; and they, too, would be taken away. Savuth Penn (1997) writes of how his father was tied up, taken from the family’s cabin, and shot because a relative had told the soldiers about him. Children knew their family members and friends had been “seen” by these all-knowing “eyes.” Him (2000) tells how she ran to wash her legs and when she returned to the house, her father and uncle had been taken away in oxcarts.
She never saw them again (p. 89). Moly Ly (1997) remembers that high school teachers were taken away by the Khmer Rouge. He never saw them again (p. 61). Death was everywhere.

Today, more than 8000 skulls can be seen at the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek on the outskirts of Phnom Pehn. Fragments of human bones and shreds of clothing testify to the thousands who were blindfolded and often beaten to death here. The Khmer Rouge did beat its citizens. This savagery was often used in an attempt to save money on bullets. Even babies were not spared. The Khmer Rouge would slam even the youngest into a tree (Hinton, 2005). Soldiers would slash open victims, cut out the still warm livers, fry them, and eat these human organs in the belief these gave strength and power (Ung, 2006, p. 198). When one family member was condemned, often the Khmer Rouge killed everyone in the family. But these outrageous and murderous acts were not the only cause of death during the Pol Pot years.

Starvation and sickness claimed many victims, and this, too, can be blamed on the conditions the Khmer Rouge imposed upon the country. The dawn to dusk non-stop agricultural work requirements meant many citizens labored to their deaths, often with only a few spoonfuls of mushy rice for daily nourishment. Sometimes children fought over this sustenance (Kiernan, 2002, p. 176). Survivors tell stories about the joy of finding food in the strangest of places. Him (2000) describes how she trapped mice at night. She would skin them, gut them, and even tie them to a stick so that every bit of meat would stay on the bones when she roasted the rodents over a fire (p. 187). Szymusiak (1999), too, tells of finding a nest of mice and describes the delicate roasting procedure (p. 172). Ouk Villa (1997) describes searching for crickets and grasshoppers to eat (p. 117). Ung (2006) writes of families who ate earthworms (p. 87). People thought constantly about food and because of the ever-present hunger and poor nutrition, disease was rampant. Diarrhea and dysentery were common (Ok, 1997, p. 53). People suffered from malaria, but modern medicine and trained medical help were nonexistent. Children served as
nurses and even doctors in the filthy hospitals where people went to die (Kiernan, 2002). Bodies were thrown into the fields, sometimes even before death had occurred (Prak, 1997).

This was life under the Khmer Rouge. The stories are horrible and seemingly endless. As readers, we can only imagine the terrors of wondering whether you would be next on the Khmer Rouge execution list. We read of the starvation and disease and wonder how could anyone have survived? Today, you can walk the dusty dirt of the killing fields and see the black ring on the tree where babies were pounded to death. Look down at your feet. Teeth are scattered as are the rags that served as the clothes of the dead. As I wandered Choeung Ek outside of Phnom Penh, I wondered, “Where are the fences to keep the thousands of feet from stepping on the remnants of these souls? Why was I allowed to walk in a place that is a cemetery without graves, a place where the dead were left to decay, where their remains are a testament to the realities of the horrors? Is it so we can see and ponder that this kind of genocide did happen in our world?” The artifacts cry out from the killing fields and the survivors’ words are powerful and heart wrenching. They are the narratives of people who stood between two worlds: a walking death and hope for a resurrection.

*I Poetry* from the *Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields*

To help illustrate the shared experiences of survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, I have used the *Listening Guide* method (Gilligan, et al., 2003) to analyze three short memoirs in the book, *Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields: Memoirs of Survivors* (Pran, 1997). I randomly chose these three narratives and highlighted the *I* statements as described by Gilligan and her colleagues (2003). Thus, I identified each phrase that began with *I* and included the following verb and any necessary nouns or other words that help to convey the meaning of the phrase. Some of these phrases are reworded to provide the intended meaning of the sentence (personal communication, Dr. S. Kim MacGregor, March 10, 2008). According to *I Poem* methodology, I
then wrote the phrases in the order in which they appeared in the text. This helped identify the plot structure and visualize what was significant in the remembrance. Below are the three I Poems derived from the memoirs. They powerfully illustrate the history of this time period.

From: “Worms From Our Skin”

I was fifteen
I can still remember
I was joyful the war had ended
I wanted peace at any price
I was afraid of who I was
I was educated
I could read, write, and think
I was proud of my family
I was proud of my roots
I was scared they could hear my thoughts
I was always hungry
I woke up hungry
I continued working
I went to sleep dirty and hungry
I was sad
I was fearful
I wanted to commit suicide
I feared the suffering of death
I tried to appear timid
I was called to join a meeting
I cried
I was crying
I was crying
I stood on Cambodian soil feeling I no longer belonged
I wanted freedom
I decided to escape
I traveled
I joined a group of corpse-like bodies dancing freely
I felt my spirit and soul return to my body
I was human
(Mam, 1997)

From “One Spoon of Rice”

I was a little boy
I loved my sister
I loved those happy times
I would splash
I would yell
I would run
I would start a game of soccer
I would play hopscotch
I would play volleyball
I knew Cambodia was a beautiful place
I close my eyes and still see blue skies and flowers
I can still see the laughing faces of my friends and family
I was three years old when my father died
I thought of my grandfather as my father
I respected him
I was fourteen years old when the army came into Phnom Penh
I couldn’t believe what was happening
I saw men with hands tied behind their backs
I saw soldiers cut off the men’s heads
I could do nothing
I saw my grandfather lose faith
I followed
I watched as my brothers were forced to dig a hole
I watched as soldiers held guns to their heads
I remember one soldier saying we will save our bullets
I saw my brothers beat to death
I was my mother’s favorite child
I was afraid she was dying
I wanted to die, too
I had depended on her
I and my sister remained [only]
I think this was the hardest time
I could do nothing
I got up and brought my sister the last cup of water
I said, “I have no rice to give you”
I didn’t know why I didn’t die, too
I didn’t want to live
I was tired
I was hungry
I wandered around
I begged
I never went back to our hut
I slept outside
I crawled into the hut of another
I wasn’t afraid to go
I could walk and drop dead
I built a hut
I was seventeen years old
I remember trying to sleep
I left the camp with my friend
I was eighteen
I felt I had to return to Phnom Penh
I didn’t know the way
I started walking
I got on an old train
I arrived in Phnom Penh
I entered my old neighborhood
I knew my life was changed forever
Chan (1997)

From “The Unplanned Journey”

I was born in a small village
I have happy memories of my childhood
I was the youngest
I got away with a lot
I remember the smell of rice cooking
I remember the rice fields
I remember the beautiful trees
I had a favorite water buffalo
I took it to the fields
I knew nothing about politics
I knew nothing about war
I knew nothing about material richness
I was a happy village boy
I was six
I noticed my mother looking sad
I had to go away “to school”
I remember the day the soldiers came for me
I was angry
I was depressed
I was thinking to myself that I never wanted to be a soldier
I didn’t see my family for twenty years
I didn’t see my village for twenty years
I spent many hours working in the rice fields
I was selected to go to leadership school
I was proud of this
I was amazed by the city
I never been far from my village
I was disciplined a lot of the time
I learned to say, “I admit it”
I did this even when the statements were not true
I broke some rules
I remember feeling bad
I knew nothing about what the Khmer Rouge were teaching
I just wanted to be smart and do well
I became very sick
I had no food
I had no place to go
I didn’t know where Thailand was
I walked and walked
I had no shoes
I traveled at night
I was a small kid
I was asked to carry grenades
I was carrying bombs
I went back and got more bombs
I recognized one of my older brothers
I wanted to stay with him
I was afraid
I was lonely
I cried when he left
I snuck across the border
I brought food
I stayed with some Buddhist monks
I shaved my head
I lived with a Thai family
I had a bad accident
I returned to the camp
I was asked by the relief agencies if I wanted to go to France or America
I chose America
I took a trip to Cambodia
I saw my parents
I learned two brothers and one sister are still alive
I was reminded
I was lucky
I was spared pain
I saw the pain of others that suffered
I saw bodies
I saw blood
I saw death
I saw mothers without children
I saw kids who like me were alone
I heard chilling stories
I lost my childhood
I will never be able to feel peace
I will never be able to see my dead brothers and sisters
(Chork, 1997)

Gilligan and colleagues discuss the use of a musical metaphor to help interpret *I Poems* (2003). Using this imagery, I note the appearance of three stanzas of the “song” that is the experience of these survivors. This cadence, along with the categories of meaning, is shown in Appendices A, B, and C. Three overarching themes emerge to describe these stanzas: the relative
happiness of life before the Khmer Rouge, the utter despair experienced during the time of Pol Pot, and finally the way freedom was experienced.

To analyze these stanzas, I divided the I Poetry into various categories or measures. I believe we can give a human meaning to the facts of history by reading this poetry. In looking at the “measures” of the “before Khmer Rouge” time, five ideas can be seen: description of self, of family, of a happy, normal childhood, remembrances of Cambodia, and hope for the future. The categories that depict life under the Khmer Rouge are markedly different. They include: fear, want/need, abuse, and sorrow/helplessness. Finally, the way freedom was experienced was different. The identified categories are: escape, renewal, confusion, and memory. For some, such as Teeda Butt Mam (1997), this freedom was a rise from the ashes. She became human again. Other survivors such as Hong A. Chork (1997) tell of never being able to find peace. He speaks of the shadow of death that is always with him.

The Coconut Leaf House: Life in the Village

Birth and death are recurring elements in the village women’s remembrances of the “Pol Pots” as they call this time period as is the feeling of helplessness. The women describe the Pol Pots appearance in their homes and their demand for motorbikes and other household property. They talk about the inability to refuse these demands and in a whisper, they note that one can “Never say no.”

The woman whose husband was a Lon Nol soldier tells of the struggle to find help in delivering her baby. Her husband searched for a doctor or nurse to assist her during this birth, but no medical personnel were available as “everybody is gone out.” It is not clear who does finally assist during the birth, but the woman notes that when she was in the hospital, the Pol Pots come to question her. She makes a point to tell me about their black uniforms and caps. They question her and demand to know more information about her husband. But she was aware that admitting
her husband’s role in the army of Lon Nol is dangerous, so she maintains he is “just a common farmer.” During the telling of this part of her story, the woman appears almost apologetic for this lie that was told so long ago, a lie told in an attempt to save her husband. She seems to want to justify her lack of truthfulness to me. I have seen this desire to explain actions or even make amends from other survivors of the Khmer Rouge time. I heard the story of one man who felt a deep need to return food to a family from whom he had stolen a chicken during the Khmer Rouge time. Thirty years later, loaded down with food, he took his own family on the search for the rural family’s hut. He presented the bundle of provisions to make amends for his understandable thievery of so long ago.

Thus, almost contritely, this woman describes a situation where the people are questioned about their connections with the Lon Nol government. She tells how her husband was afraid that the Khmer Rouge knew about his past. He feared that his family would be killed if his lie was discovered. So, her husband “raised his hand” and admitted to his service in the Lon Nol army. The Pol Pots responded by telling him that he would be sent to school for training. But she and her husband knew this “does not mean training.” They knew he would be killed and a few days later, she did receive the news that he was dead. In the telling of the story, the three women tear and look knowingly at one another. They have shared this; they have a collective emotional history.

As her story continues, the woman returns, with her small baby, to the village where she now resides. She tells how all the houses had been burned and that she must fashion a home for herself and the baby by using a large leaf from a coconut tree. She explains that she sleeps on the ground with another leaf to keep her baby safe from the cold and rain.

When she lives “with the coconut leaf,” again the Pol Pots come to her. They ask if she wants to go to school with her husband, but she nods knowingly at me and says that she
understands what this means. She asks the Pol Pots for permission to stay in her village. When the men return a few days later, it is with the news that she will be allowed to stay. But they tell her that she will not be able to remain in the coconut leaf house during the day. She must begin taking the small baby with her to the rice fields.

When working in the fields, she tells me that she needs to ask permission to feed her baby. She talks of the warnings of the Pol Pots to “not do too much” with children. She knows she must work or face certain death. This woman sadly talks of her child growing without the help of family and friends, an important communal responsibility in Cambodian culture. Her words, tone, and body language suggests this weighs heavily on her as it is so different from her previous life. The other two women shake their heads and wipe away tears. This is obviously distressing as it is contrary to the familial mores of the village community.

Fortunately, her baby is lucky. It survives. But, other babies are not so fortunate. This woman tearfully describes the story of another mother who also plants in the rice fields. Her baby cries and cries. Finally, the Pol Pot takes the baby and kills it. The child is buried underground, and the mother is warned that she will follow the baby if she does not continue working.

This story is conveyed to me in a prayerful tone. As it is told, the three women speak softly to one another and weep. They “look beyond” as they remember and speak, as if seeing the horrific act in the distance.

The women go on to describe other murderous acts. One woman tells of seeing a man tied to a bicycle. A Pol Pot soldier rides the bike and the tied man is forced to “run behind and run and run and run and run and run until cannot run anymore…” The man is then killed.

The women talk of the hunger and constant need for food. They tell of the scant amount of rice that must be shared by all during the communal meals. Some victims try to pocket rice
grains during the harvest. But, as the women relate, the “Pol Pot” has a punishment for everything. They describe uncooked rice being put on a stick and forced down the throats of those who try to steal what they harvest. The women are clear: No one can cook or do anything for themselves. All is provided or not provided by the Khmer Rouge. This discussion brings out the most sharing between the women. They are animated and the translator has difficulty keeping up as the women talk over one another. At this point they are noticeably angry, rather than sad.

As if the discussion was a nudge to remember, the one woman who had been somewhat quiet, spoke up. She shared the story of the birth of her baby and the death of her husband. In a hushed tone, she described lying next to her husband. As her baby came out, her husband died. She makes a point to emphasize this happened “at the same time.” This was repeated over and over to me; each time the phrase seemed to take on a deeper meaning. The women nod along with the translator; and all look into the distance. For a moment the “telling” part of the interview ceased to be and the little room took on the aura of a spiritual center. The woman brought her hand to her heart, smiled, and all was silent for a moment.

As these women are anxious to make known, they have firsthand knowledge of these horrid events. One woman clearly stated through the translator, “She knows what she saw.” Perhaps this is one reason visitors to the killing fields are allowed such access, including stepping over teeth and clothing: We know what we see.

These women share an explanation for their ability to understand the real intentions of the “Pol Pots” and their lies regarding being taken “for training” or “going to school.” They knew the reality of these phrases, not because they read or heard of these realities, but because they could see these realities in the hearts of the victimizers. Speaking through the translator, one woman confidently declared, “We saw by the eyes, the real action that was in their heart.”
Death also describes the educational system during the time of Angkar. Teachers were killed. The educated were targets for the axes of the Khmer Rouge. Even the problems of education under the Khmer Republic pale in the face of what happened to schools under Pol Pot. Education became a tool in the brainwashing arsenal of the Khmer Rouge. This is a key aspect of the way Angkar tried to control the population. In this section, I will look at this redefinition of education along with the killing of the educated and how schools changed under Angkar.

Given the stories of the three women of the village found in the previous section, one has to wonder about the psychological toll even the words school and training have on those who are survivors of the Khmer Rouge period. It is obvious from even this limited example, that the Pol Pot soldiers used these words as code for killing. The people appeared to know this. Just how this use of code affects people today is unclear. But the problems with education under the Khmer Rouge do not stop with this psychological consideration.

Most of the elite died during Angkar’s control (Peang-Meth, 1991, p. 452). By ridding the country of the educated population, the Communists likely believed that a blank slate would then exist on which to write a new history. We can see the seed for this idea in China’s Cultural Revolution, which Pol Pot seemed to emulate. Its leaders wanted “to destroy the old society” so that a new, self-sufficient country that was not dependent on the West could arise (Ayres, p. 97). Thomas Clayton (1998) tells us, “According to the Ministry of Education of the State of Cambodia, ‘75% of the teaching force’…died in Democratic Kampuchea” (pp. 7 & 8). Ninety percent of schools were destroyed (p. 6). Education, as it had been known, just stopped. Those caught with the old vestiges of education were in danger. A woman suspected of possessing a notebook was taken away “with her wrists tied behind her back.” She was never seen again (Becker, p. 235). As a young girl, Ung (2006) recalls she was worried she would be “taken
away” because she had gone to school under the old regime. If they were not murdered, they were sent away. Kiernan (2002) reports that seven hundred highly educated people labored in work camps (p. 156). The old ways were outlawed, including books and music. But a new, more dangerous kind of education stood ready to take the place of the old.

This new brand of education, like the rest of Angkar, espoused one message and lived another reality. Pol Pot did have a plan for education. Documents from a meeting held in 1976 show that he believed children should learn numbers and letters, but that education must be directed toward the ideology of the Khmer Rouge. Subjects to be studied included science, reading, and writing. But no details were given as to how this would be accomplished (Ayres, 2000, pp. 106 & 107). Pol Pot insisted to members of the international community that children were receiving medical care and being educated. He even gave a speech in 1978 proclaiming his commitment to beginning a new kind of educational system. This grand proclamation translated into one “basic trade school” (Becker, p. 320). What, then, did the regime consider to be education?

Children who attended school often did so “on their lunch hour.” This phrase is put in quotation marks, as most children were not adequately fed as has been discussed. They met in fields or even in barns where “teachers,” who were usually uneducated “old” or “base” people, taught (Ayres, 2000). The Khmer Rouge would not trust anyone else to have such a position of power. When these experiences were offered to children, there were no materials or books. Some had to make writing instruments. Others were sent out to collect dung as part of their schooling (Ayres 2000, p. 111). One has to wonder if, given the children’s physical condition, any real literacy learning took place. But, these “schools” were not the only component of Angkar’s “educational” offerings.
Children were required to attend indoctrination sessions. They would see the punishment of those who had not adequately met the requirements of the new regime. Roeun Sam (1997) tells of being forced to watch as a man was tortured in an attempt to force a confession that he had wronged Angkar. The children were warned that if they showed empathy for the man, they too, would be punished. She remembers how the man was hit with a shovel until he had a seizure. Then his tormentors took a knife and cut out his liver and bowels. These organs were tied to a bicycle and dragged away, the bloody trail serving as a warning.

The shock of this horrific public treatment was coupled with propaganda. Revolutionary songs and skits were performed. Below is one of the songs which children were required to learn. It illustrates the idea that they must not be dependent on their parents. They now owed their lives to Angkar.

We the children have the good fortune
to live the rest of our time in precious harmony
under the affectionate care
of the Kampuchean revolution, immense, most clear
and shining.

Children were required to yell and scream their support for Angkar. Ung (2006) describes how she and other children would have to raise their fists and scream, “Angkar! Angkar! Angkar!” (p. 125) But, as she recounts, what was shouted and what she thought were often two different things. “Every night I sit there and imitate their movements while hatred incubates inside me, growing larger and larger” (p. 126).

Infused into this propaganda curriculum were statements about the atrocities the Vietnamese would inflict upon the population if they were to invade. This reflects the Party’s fear of losing control to the hated enemy next door. Etcheson (1984) points out that the leaders may have convinced themselves that the Vietnamese aimed to take over Cambodia but that their
soldiers were capable of defeating this enemy (p. 188). Stories were told about the power of the Khmer Rouge soldiers over the Vietnamese (Ung, 2006, p. 169). Girls were warned about killings and rape. This anti-Vietnamese indoctrination likely created some of the conflicted feelings about the Vietnamese “liberation” toward the end of the Pol Pot era. And liberation was on its way.

The Aftermath: The Vietnamese Period, 1979 – 1989

On Sunday night I dreamed that I was
Flying to a moon. On the moon I saw the birds.
While I looked the birds were in a tree.
The birds climbed on one tree and one.
The birds were flying, playing on a moon.
“The birds were very happy on a tree at the moon.”
When I saw the birds on the tree at the moon
I wanted to live on the moon.
On a moon is more pleasant than on the world.
On a moon there are many more beautiful trees
than on the world.
While I was sleeping I dreamed easy.
My life was rather successful on a moon.

Yinh Sophean (in Thompson, 1993, p. 539)

Liberated Yet Confused: Historical Overview, 1979 – 1989

Liberation yet confusion. These words describe the situation in Cambodia during the ten-year period between the end of the Khmer Rouge regime and the beginning of formalized United Nations peacekeeping missions. But how did we get to this ten-year period of Vietnamese occupation? While much led up to the liberation, let us begin the story on December 25, 1978. This was the day Vietnamese forces took full action. It is sadly amazing that while the rest of the world ignored the genocide, it was Vietnam, whatever its true intentions, that finally acted. As word spread that the Vietnamese were heading toward the capital city, the Khmer Rouge fled to the Thai border. Kiernan (2002) describes how Khmer Rouge officials crammed into railway cars and that Pol Pot disappeared in a helicopter (p. 451). He tells us that it is likely the last
official to abandon the city was the administrator of the infamous Tuol Sleng prison, Kang Keck Ieu (alias Duch). Duch did not have the opportunity to destroy the records of the terror over which he presided, thus providing a grisly corpse of documents for researchers to paint a picture of this prison (Kiernan, 2002, p. 452). The people, the non-leaders, who remained behind, greeted the Vietnamese as liberators (Chandler, 1999, p. 1). The rest of the world, however, saw Vietnam as an aggressor.

In a little over two weeks, the Vietnamese set up a new government. The People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was formed on January 10, 1979. While Cambodian faces led the new government, Vietnam was the real power behind these newly installed officials. Heng Samrin was president and Hun Sen was named foreign minister. In 1984, Sen, a former Khmer Rouge who had defected to Vietnam, was named prime minister (Ayres, 2000, p. 141), a position he holds to this day (C.I.A., 2008). But, despite the new government, the Khmer Rouge was not really gone. They were merely hiding. And the countryside was in chaos. As the Khmer Rouge ran to the jungles and mountains, they had taken with them many civilians. Thousands were murdered near Battambang (about 112 miles from Siem Reap) while others were forced to dig trenches that would become their graves. In a particularly grisly massacre near Siem Reap in 1979, the Khmer Rouge buried peasants up to their necks and set fire to them. Their “crime?” They had gone to communal kitchens to retrieve what had been their eating utensils (Kiernan, 1982b, p. 376 & 377). The Khmer Rouge did not abandon power easily.

As is frequently the case with modern Cambodian history, chaos is an accurate word. If a citizen could stay away from the Khmer Rouge hide-outs, they now were free to travel. This meant millions of people crisscrossed the country looking for the loved ones from whom they had been forcibly separated (Kiernan, 2002, p. 455). In the ensuing confusion, very little rice was planted and this resulted in terrible famine. These conditions set up mass movement of
Cambodian citizens to the Thai border, in hopes of gaining entry to a refugee camp. Almost half of what was left of the Cambodian people were now living on this border, fearful of the return of the Khmer Rouge. While many Cambodians sought food and safety, others believed they might be reunited with relatives who had also sought refuge here. Some saw economic opportunity: the chance to make their fortune in the illegal cross-border trade. Still many others hoped for a new life in a new country (Ayres, 2000, p. 125). Gail Sheehy (1986) writes that her adopted daughter, Mohm, had such a strong desire to escape the refugee camps and settle in a new country that she lied about her age. These camps became the entry point for many to escape to countries such as the United States and Australia, as explained in Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors (Pran & De Paul, 1997) which contains twenty-nine memoirs of Cambodians of the Diaspora.

As this refugee crisis was occurring, military maneuvers were happening elsewhere in the country. Approximately 200,000 Vietnamese troops occupied the country between 1979 and 1989. Some former representatives and soldiers of the Lon Nol period who had survived the Pol Pot era, now formed an anti-Communist group, the Khmer People’s National Liberation Armed Forces (KPNLAF). Another group formed by Son Sann, the Khmer People’s Liberation Front (KPNLF) proclaimed a commitment to independence. Adding to the cacophony of politicized and perhaps self-promoting groups was Prince Sihanouk. As usual, he seemed to want to throw his support with everyone, somehow hoping that he would emerge as the winner. His organization, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) was cooperating with Khmer Rouge forces. While it is certainly difficult to sort out these various groups and accurately identify the undulating allegiances, it is important to understand there were many “voices” as this variance forms the basis for future issues.
Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many policymakers and politicians in the United States did not seem to want to recognize what had and was really happening in Cambodia. Becker (1998) sums up this seemingly blind attitude with this observation: “Immediately after the war the American establishment wanted nothing more than to forget the phrase Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia” (p. 364). Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos were considered VLCs (very lost causes) by the U.S. political world and by the press corps (Power, 2002, p. 110). Even academe seemed to forget Southeast Asia as Indochinese studies disappeared from most university offerings (Becker, 1998, p. 365). A few politicians, such as Senator Robert Dole, were touched by the troubles of Cambodian refugees and tried to help. Representative Stephen Solarz held Congressional hearings on the problems in Cambodia (Becker, 1998). But, for many, this area was a reminder of failed policies. The fact that the U. S. continued to vote for the seating of Pol Pot’s representatives at the United Nations is indicative of the blind eye it had turned to the Khmer Rouge genocide. During this period the superpowers continued to use the region as a pawn in their power chess game. American policymakers saw the Vietnamese invasion as an expansion of the influence of the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia but even after the Soviet Union fell, the U. S., within the structure of the United Nations, continued to draw the Pol Pot regime into negotiations rather than insisting upon a trial for war crimes (MacLeod, 2006).

In 1979, the world community simply ignored the Cambodian genocide. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) questioned the legitimacy of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. China, according to Ayres, wanted to “‘bleed’ Vietnamese resources by promoting a continuation of the Cambodian conflict…” (2000, p. 136). The United Nations, with the support of the United States, condemned Vietnam for invading Cambodia (Becker 1998). Again, with the support of the United States, in an unbelievable move, the United Nations voted to give Cambodia’s seat to the Khmer Rouge (Becker, 1998, p. 444). Although much of the
foreign aid to Vietnam was cut off which had the direct result of hurting the rebuilding of Cambodia, Vietnam continued its fight with the Khmer Rouge.

In the years between 1980 and 1986, the Vietnamese army clashed with the hiding Khmer Rouge in a number of their jungle or mountain bases. This warfare contributed to the refugee problem on the Thai border, but it also had an impact on the Cambodian countryside that remains: The Khmer Rouge planted thousands of landmines, which continue to terrorize the population today (Mortland, 2002; Ray, 2005; personal communication, Dr. Gregory J. Smith, March 16, 2008). Vietnam responded with its own landmines. In an attempt to stop the Khmer Rouge guerrillas, the Vietnamese, aided by Cambodian civilians, laid the world’s longest minefield along the Thai/Laos border (Ray, 2005, p. 36). Cambodian civilians were forced to aid their Vietnamese “liberators” in their guerrilla warfare tactics. Workers built fences and dug trenches to protect the Vietnamese. There are no easy answers for assessing the role of Vietnam. As can be seen, these “liberators” were not necessarily the “saviors.”

Regardless of their intentions and these were and likely will continue to be debated, a multitude of difficulties faced the Vietnamese as they strove to rebuild Cambodia. The country had no currency, no transportation, and little electricity or clean water (Mysliwiec, 1988, p. 11). Work animals had been killed or died. People who had not fled to the Thai border often wandered around, looking for lost relatives. In another break from cultural norms, the Khmer family structure had been changed. Because a greater proportion of males had been killed under the Khmer Rouge regime, many families were now headed by a female (de Walque, 2006). Moreover, the distrust spawned by Angkar did not easily disappear. Eve Mysliwiec (1988) tells how a man explained to an aid worker that he is still afraid to confide to his wife (p. 11). The family spying, which the Khmer Rouge enforced so brutally, was not easily forgotten.
In 1986, Vietnam, isolated internationally because of its “aggression,” began withdrawing its forces from Cambodia. As the Vietnamese did this, they continued to build up the power of their now chosen political Cambodian party, the PRK. International pressure forced the final withdrawal of the Vietnamese military in September 1989. In this same year, the PRK held a National Assembly. A number of measures passed that were designed to revive Cambodia as a nation. Buddhism was again the national religion. A new flag and national anthem were adopted. The death penalty was abolished. Perhaps most popular were the economic measures that pointed the country, with a new name, toward capitalism. People could now own and inherit land, and provisions were made for private enterprise. Cambodia was independent (Ayres, 2000).

The New Sunrise: Life in the Village

The women’s faces change when their story about the Pol Pots is finished. They smile and even laugh as we joke about retirement; they ask me when I will retire. They are interested in the future.

There is conversation about being with their friends, being able to go to the ceremonies for new building projects, and the opportunities of education. These are the “doing” parts of life: the freedoms of life they now enjoy, the freedoms that had been ripped from these women under the Khmer Rouge.

One woman talks of being a teacher despite her simple education. She explains she wanted to share, even her small amount of knowledge with her people. She became a teacher in 1979 and later became the principal of the former village school. In a joyous voice she tells me that her grandchildren now attend the new school. There is no residue of equating school with death. In this conversation school means hope.

The women describe this present time as being able to “see the new sunrise.” Renewal is in their voices as we stand together for the photograph that captures the moment, another one of
those sunrise moments; they have been able to share, to cry, and now they smile. They thank me for coming and listening to their stories. As the “lead” woman says, “You will tell others so they will understand.”

Renewal and Hope: Educational Situation, 1979 – 1989

William Shawcross reports that one misty morning in post-Pol Pot Cambodia, he saw lines of children walking toward school (1981, pp. 407 & 408). To him this was a touching and hopeful sight in a country that had suffered so much. But the foundation on which to rebuild the schools needed by these children and others like them was a shaky one. Schools that had not been destroyed had been put to other uses. The Tuol Sleng Prey High School had been turned into the infamous Tuol Sleng Prison where over 14,000 men, women, and children had been tortured to death (Chandler, 1999). The Royal University of Agriculture was a Khmer Rouge ammunitions factory. Pages from books had been burned as firewood, used as toilet paper, or rolled for cigarette paper by soldiers (Ayres, 2000, p. 127). There were few qualified teachers and administrators left in Cambodia.

Chan Ven took the post as Minister of Education under the new Vietnamese-controlled government. He had very little training or experience for this position. Before the Khmer Rouge devastation, Ven had been a high school teacher, one of the few who had survived, so he and a team of Vietnamese advisors began the task of putting the country’s educational system back together.

Despite the lack of buildings, materials, personnel, and a migratory population, children were going to school, as the line of children that Shawcross observed tells us. Despite her lack of pedagogical training, Suon Serey, a university student before the Khmer Rouge, set up a school in an old building and taught children (Ayres, 2000, p. 129). Other primary schools sprang up in patchwork quilt-like fashion around the country. Some children sat, squashed seven or eight to a
desk, listening to untrained adults. Others sat under a tree or near a minefield (Ayres, 2000). It is amazing, given all that happened that so many children were enrolled in these makeshift schools. In 1979, there was one teacher for every 53 children who were officially enrolled in primary schools (Ayres, 2000, p. 132).

Abraham Maslow (1970) tells us that children’s basic needs must be met before real learning can take place. One can only imagine the problems these surviving children brought to school. Many had lost parents and other family members. They had been worked as slaves, starved, and many had disease-racked bodies. Life as these children had known it had been destroyed. Yet, they came to school. The system that tried to educate them was still a chaotic and confused one. The Vietnamese struggled to rebuild this system, but their reasons may not have been totally humanitarian. Their policies often mirrored their Communist agenda. This was expressly stated in many of Vietnam’s official statements and reflected in curricular changes such as the addition of manual work and practical knowledge to the list of subjects to be taught (Ayres, 2000). As the decade continued, Vietnamese influence waned. The National Assembly may have passed measures designed to revive Cambodia as an independent country in 1989, but confusion still reigned in the classrooms. Students reported that the old flag still flew while they faced it singing the new anthem (Ayres, 2000, p. 146).

While education in the countryside was striving to rise from the ashes, another kind of educational crisis was taking place at the border. Since 1979, thousands of refugees had streamed to the Thai border. Thailand termed these people “illegal immigrants” (Thompson, 1993, p. 521). Others in the international community turned a blind eye to what was happening on this border. In many ways, a camp was a microcosm of all that was Cambodia: violence, starvation, and disease. Therefore, it is helpful to take a brief look at education in these camps, as it may provide a window into the lives of children after the Khmer Rouge devastation.
A commitment to education is seen in the memoir of Szymusiak (1999). She writes of sitting with a child as he peeked through gaps in the bamboo boards into a classroom. He repeated the words of the teacher to several other children who had a strong desire to learn. These children could not attend school because they had no money. Sheehy’s (1986) daughter, Mohm remembers that education in the camp had to start “from a tabula rasa” (p. 158) as the children’s minds had been “suspended in ignorance” (p. 158). She tells that children attended school despite their poor nutrition and lack of clothing. Some even came to class naked.

Teachers varied in these camps, from missionaries to aid agency workers. One teacher, Ashley Thompson (1993), collected a variety of refugee-produced art. Common themes in these stories, poems, and pictures include dreams of flying away and going to another place, a place that is more peaceful. Thompson shares a picture story, painted by a thirteen year-old child, showing a horse taking off in flight. She notes that in her experience, the theme of “soaring and looking down” is a common one (p. 539). Memories of the Cambodia they had known are reflected in the works: “…I dreamed of going to the ricefield” (p. 542). Reading the work of these refugees illuminates their desire for the world to find out. Sokphana Kann wrote, “I can pass out of danger. I yell and tell to the world” (Thompson, 1993, p. 540).

Yes, they were telling the world…but was it listening? During the 1980s, children in the United States collected boxes of school supplies for Cambodian children. President Reagan’s government banned them from being sent (Mysliwiec, 1988, p. 82).

While this decade was a troubled one for Cambodian schoolchildren, it was a beginning, the beginning of a climb out of the living death for those who survived the Pol Pot years. And many children seemed to view education as their lifeline. They were committed to attending school, wherever it was held and no matter who was teaching. Perhaps, like Him (2000), many during their years as slaves of Pol Pot had dreamt of school. Him recalls her yearning “…to go
back to school…even reading about dead kings sounds appealing” (p. 98). And so, as the decade continued, they crowded into schools, sat together under trees, and struggled to learn. But what was the world doing?

Diplomats were greeting Pol Pot’s Foreign Minister and brother-in-law at the United Nations in New York City (Pilger & Barnett, 1982, pgs. 130 & 131).

There Is No Conclusion

In the next few years, the United Nations peacekeeping forces would finally come to Cambodia, but discussion still focused on Vietnam’s illegal intervention into the country; and the Carter and Reagan administrations continued to allow representatives of the Khmer Rouge to represent Cambodia at the United Nations (MacLeod, 2006, p. 52). No U. S. president insisted that Pol Pot be brought to justice. No trial was ever held. He spent his last years in a hide-out in the jungles of Cambodia. On April, 15, 1998 he died in a small hut just 275 yards from the Thai border. A few Western journalists were allowed to photograph the body before it was cremated. None of his victims ever saw the dead Pol Pot.

Many in Cambodia still wait for the world to respond. They wait for help in rebuilding what was so viciously grabbed from them. They wait to take their place in the global heartbeat. Yet, in the reality of no response, there is hope. As they wait, the spirit that compelled a knowledge-hungry child to peek through boards or the longing that drove a naked child to attend school is alive each morning in Cambodia. Exploded bomb shells, with the mark of the United States, now hang as schoolyard bells. As the sun rises on a new day, a child strikes that bomb with a rock. The clang of the simple rock against the peeled layers of the metal announces, “The day is here. Come to class.”
CHAPTER 3: EXAMINING THE PICTURES OF OTHERS

Remembrance is, then, a means for an ethical learning that impels us into a confrontation and “reckoning” not only with the stories of the past but also with “ourselves” as we “are” (historically, existentially, ethically) in the present. Remembrance thus is a reckoning that beckons us to the possibilities of the future, showing the possibilities of our own learning. (Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000, p. 8)

The description of Cambodia’s horrific recent history may seem reason enough to answer the question, “Why do we need to care about what happens in Cambodia?” Yes, the horror of what happened answers this “big” question. Any study which seeks to understand the current situation in Cambodia, educational or otherwise, needs to be mindful of the recent past, especially a past that casts such a large shadow. In the United States, we offer help to first generation college students. Programs such as Student Support Services offer tutors and counselors. But, in Cambodia, an entire generation of the educated was murdered. Being educated meant death. What kind of impact might this have on attitudes today? Because many males were killed during the Khmer Rouge era, families grew up headed by single mothers; and these single mothers had seen the unspeakable. Some had witnessed the murder of babies. Others had to search for toddlers in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. My guide in Phnom Penh shared his story of spending the Pol Pot years in a children’s camp. When his mother finally located him, he did not recognize her and questioned his family connection.

In this section I discuss Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) circular metaphors which describe the many types of influences on a person. Cambodia’s unique and troubled history affects people in different ways. My young, usually vivacious and outspoken gatekeeper, had tears in her eyes when she whispered the story of her father’s attempt to repay a chicken he stole during the Khmer Rouge era. My translator related with a quiet choke how his mother cannot stand to eat beef, even now. Every sense of her being recalls the dead and decaying cattle in the craters
caused by U.S. bombs. These horrible memories are alive today. As Bronfenbrenner’s metaphors will show us, these memories are likely to influence the socio-cultural world of both the teacher and the child in today’s Cambodia. In this chapter I look at how other researchers have considered the importance of this context to their research.

Additionally I discuss views of literacy that take into account the ideas of Freire (2000) along with various views regarding the definition of literacy. This wide-angle picture helps to set the stage for understanding the varied ways Khmer teachers develop literacy. Finally, I look at the current picture of Cambodia including the current political situation and key information from Cambodia’s national education policies. As any teacher in the U.S. knows, these national policies directly impact teachers and their daily classroom lives.

The Circles of Life

Bronfenbrenner’s Metaphor

Bronfenbrenner (1976) pictured the entirety of a life beginning with the microsystem (e.g. a child’s immediate family) and continuing on to the mesosystem (the interrelated microsystems such as how any incidents that happen during the walk home from school may affect the family); the exosystem (e.g. the indirect influences such as the rice field where a child’s mother may labor); and the macrosystem (influences such as society, e.g., a Cambodian child grows in a culture where most of the educated population had been murdered by the Pol Pot regime). Thus, a researcher needs to be aware of the routines in the local village, the tradition of local literacies, and the attitudes regarding recent history. Appendix D shows this depiction and Figures 3 through 6 illustrate a limited number of influences I discerned from conversations with a male Cambodian teacher in June 2008.

Bronfenbrenner’s metaphor is particularly important for a study set in Cambodia given Max Weber’s statement, as noted in Beyond the Cultural Turn (Bonnell & Hunt, 1999, p. 3).
Weber writes “…that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun…” helps us to understand culture as a web that needs to be interpreted. Thus, it is necessary for us to look closely at the threads of that web to better understand the cultural components that affect literacy development in rural Cambodia.

Gordon Wells (2000) tells us, “Human development is thus not simply a matter of biological maturation; it is immeasurably enriched and extended through the individual’s appropriation and mastery of the cultural inheritance as this is encountered in activity and interaction with others” (p. 54). This is a crucial research consideration as those who lived through the Khmer Rouge era are still alive. One must look at, not only the attitudes of these people who are now grandparents of primary school children, but the perception regarding schooling that may have been transferred to the two generations beyond their own must also be considered. A key question is: Do these negative images of school, developed during the Khmer Rouge time, have any residual impacts in contemporary Cambodia? Given this country’s tragic history regarding education, Derrida’s powerful image that everything we encounter has impact on our lives (Rambo, 2005) is useful. His use of the mystic writing pad as a metaphor for the ways in which life always leaves its impressions on a human, however subtly that may be, is a powerful image that will be useful to paint the picture of a Cambodian teacher set in Bronfenbrenner’s circles of life.

Additionally, it is necessary to understand how problems in Cambodia affect attitudes toward literacy and education. The countryside is filled with landmines as a result of the Khmer Rouge era. It is advised to stay on marked pathways to avoid the many mines (Ray, 2005). Recently a dengue fever epidemic ravaged the countryside and child trafficking continues to be a problem (personal conversation, Dr. Gregory Smith, November 22, 2008). Illicit drugs and corruption continue to be problematic throughout the country (Central Intelligence Agency,
2008). What impact this has on teachers and students is an issue lacking in the current research. Because human development occurs within sociocultural activities (Rogoff, Radziszewska, & Masiello, 1995), this research considered not just the direct instructional activities the teacher provides for the child, but also how the teacher deals with all that takes place in the village, ranging from health care, or lack thereof, to attention paid to child safety. In essence, how does an elementary school teacher deal with these considerations? This is particularly important given Maslow’s theory of human motivation (1970). His general hierarchy shows that basic needs have to be met before the higher levels of motivation along with problem solving and learning can be reached.

The Mesosystem of the Community’s Role in Primary Education

Looking closely at the role of the mesosystem of the community is a necessary component of any research in Cambodia. The importance of the local village is well documented in the research on schools in developing nations. Yang Rui’s (1995) qualitative study reports on the success of schools in the Pearl River Delta area of China. He attributes this success to local control and notes, “After 14 years of opening and reforming, people in the Pearl River Delta realize that education is a kind of investment” (p.25). He calls for local control of Chinese schools to address the unique needs of various regions.

In an overview of East Timor’s preschool program it was concluded that schools in developing nations are successful when the local community is involved (Palmer and Pires 2005). By working collaboratively, community leaders and members built and maintained preschools. In particular, the study authors noted the importance of flexibility and concern for local needs when designing and implementing the curriculum.

The intense involvement of a local community in central rural India helped to ensure the success of the preschool (Gokale, 2005). In this descriptive study, replete with results based on
researcher observations and interviews with participants, it was reported that a 15-member committee, elected by the community, oversaw the school and met with teachers and parents. The community was intimately involved in the curriculum and participated in celebrations and festivals. The study concludes that the strong cultural aspects of the school such as storytelling and singing likely had a positive impact on developing literacy.

In a reform movement in Thailand designed to include Thai communities in a whole-school change that focused on becoming less teacher-centered and more learner-centered, an important component was to involve parents and the community in a variety of ways including requesting help from local villagers to teach and/or demonstrate aspects of traditional culture (Khemmani, 2006). Community members were included in the curricular planning process and encouraged to attend school events.

The United Nations document, “Highland Children’s Education Project, Good Lessons Learned in Basic Education” (Middleborg, 2005) reports on a rural school project set in Cambodia. This project does not involve the ethnic Khmer but looks at the Tampuen and Kreung ethnic minority groups. This report, which is basically a broad description with few specifics, discusses the success of schools that involve the local community and the use of native language to educate children. This population is different from the participants in this study and was conducted in a different region of Cambodia.

An underlying question for rural teachers, particularly in the Koh Kong province in Cambodia, where those without an education survived the murderous Pol Pot regime because of the lack of such, is will rural Cambodians, who still have a memory of these events, support the efforts of teachers who seek to establish and maintain schools? The apparent lack of such research is an omission in the literature that needs to be addressed, in part, by this study.
Any researcher always needs to be attuned to Cambodia’s problems with child safety. The case study presented in “Crossing Borders and Blurring Boundaries: Early Childhood Practice in a Non-Western Setting” describes the experiences of a university student (Amy) as she completes a practicum in a Cambodian reception center (Lewis, Macfarlane, Nobel, and Stephenson, 2006). She details the needs of displaced Thai, Khmer, and Vietnamese children as they deal with illness, snakes, mosquitoes, and even child traffickers. The first-person account and rich description lend both credibility to and empathy for the issues raised. While these children were not students in a rural school, some of these issues, given the current conditions in Cambodia along with Maslow’s (1970) contention that humans need to feel safe before learning can occur, must be considered as I look at the totality of a village teacher’s life. Do teachers use the language of a better life to encourage students?

Ethiopian female child prostitutes talk of “their hopes for a better life through education” (Tadesse and Hoot, 2006-07, p. 75). This dream of a better life is one which Freire (1998) also addresses. He writes of the importance of learning to learn as well as the necessity of awakening children’s curiosity and the thought that children must be active not passive learners. He implores us to ask children to share their dreams as this helps us to discern what may be missing from their school and encourages the following “Why not emphasize their right to imagine, to dream, and to fight for that dream?” (p. 51).

The lack of knowledge regarding how Cambodian teachers deal with the system of the community, safety issues, and how they might feel, encourage, and develop this sense of hope is one that needs to be better understood. Thus, this research helps to fill this gap.

The Exosystem of the Rice Field

One of the key concerns of Cambodian school officials is that school attendance is negatively affected by the need for children to work in the rice paddies. The International Rice
Research Institute (IRRI) is working with local farmers to develop strains of rice that will grow more effectively when seeded directly. This will greatly reduce the amount of person hours needed to transplant seedlings. It is hoped this will have a positive effect on school attendance rates. But as I will show, seedlings are not the only impact the exosystem of the rice field has on education.

There are many aspects of rice production to consider in thinking about Cambodia. One of the tasks of the IRRI includes helping parts of Asia to achieve food security (Fredenburg & Hill, 2006). Based in the Philippines, the researchers at the IRRI develop various varieties of rice, which they hope will satisfy the taste of local peoples, as well as thrive in the varied habitats of the region. This serves a vital function as it helps to alleviate poverty and hunger in some of Asia’s most desperate areas. It is necessary to understand the power of rice production in Asia as almost half of the world’s rice harvest is eaten on the farm where the crop was raised. This amazing statistic speaks to the power of rice in serving as the major food supply for people of this region and of the emphasis the rural population must place on rice farming. This need is key when looking at rural schools as many families depend on their children as farm workers and value this more than the long-term benefits of an education.

Additionally, the IRRI helps in disseminating information so that the male-out migration patterns (men leaving rural farmland for economic opportunities elsewhere while women and children are left behind to run the family farm) can be stopped. Women who are left behind report feelings of despair and say they often cry about this situation. As Bronfennbrenner (1976) has described, this sphere of concern can have impacts that affect the classroom.

In the fall of 2008, I received an email from my gatekeeper informing me about the concern she had regarding rats in local communities. This problem is more than just an issue over control of rodents in the rice fields. Women and children often set traps, catch rats, and later
sell them at market. This has become an important health care concern. Contact with rats can cause leptospirosis, which can quickly reach epidemic proportions in parts of Asia. Thus, the IRRI is also working with local farmers to alleviate the rat problem as they call this disease a “sleeping giant” (Fredenburg & Hill, 2006, p. 137). Do teachers deal with these types of agricultural and pest concerns? Is it addressed? The literature is silent.

Looking at Literacy with a Wide-Angle

The Big Picture

There can be little doubt, given the recent history of Cambodia, that the development of literacy attitudes and support for schooling among rural communities in this country needs attention (Duggan, 1996; Middleborg, 2005). Articles in the popular press point to charitable giving in developing nations by foundations such as The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (Blankinship, 2006). Few peer-reviewed studies, however, speak to the development of literacy and schools in rural Cambodia. In the summer of 2007 as I began this work, a search of several databases, including Academic Search Premier, ERIC, PsycINFO, and SocINDEX using a variety of key words, yielded one article relating to education and teacher training in Cambodia (Duggan, 1996). A library search produced one article that discussed the experiences of a university student as she worked with victims of child trafficking and young beggars in Cambodia (Lewis, et al., 2006). In my visit to a primary school in June 2008, I was ushered into the school’s library, a small cement room where the few books were kept in a locked cabinet. But still I was told, this was the favorite room of most children. It was clear that books were in short supply. Given this information, how do Cambodian teachers develop literacy? How is literacy defined? Are alternate forms of literacy apparent? How are communal aspects of literacy defined and exhibited?
Picturing Freire’s Literacy of Hope

Many of Paulo Freire’s ideas guided my time in Cambodia. A prolific writer of many books, today these texts are not the only ways to learn about Freire’s ideas. One can simply log onto YouTube and view several videos of Freire discussing his thoughts. This is a relatively new form of literacy and an information-sharing tool that would likely be applauded by Freire if he were alive today. It fits nicely with the concept that literacy forms must be viewed as wide-ranging and appropriate for the communities in which they occur.

These videos along with the writings of Freire offer an aura of hope, a belief in the underlying goodness of humanity where literacy offers the vehicle for this transmission. He writes of the need for people to understand themselves and their place in the world. In 2009, the words hope and change have taken on a renewed vigor for many in the United States. I read with new eyes Freire’s belief that literacy can be used to bring empowerment to any marginalized population.

As an advocate for reflective dialogue, participatory learning, and using literacy to transform society, Freire calls for all involved in learning to dialogue and to jointly engage in reflection. As such, he describes a specific example of active peasant participation in an adult education plan (2000, p. 110). I was guided by his description of actively engaging those in the community as partners in the investigation. My gatekeeper was in frequent email contact with me, and I held many discussions with Cambodian teachers as I began to learn how to engage appropriately in this culture. As I walked through the village, women working over cooking pots outside of their homes, began to wave at me. I established a familiarity and trust.

Freire (2000) reminds us of the necessity of including village participants and teachers in the process of understanding; thus as a researcher it is important for me to walk on the sandy trail as it winds through the village, to shop in the local market, and to eat meals in homes. Moreover,
according to Freire it is essential to present only “pictures of reality” that are familiar to the participants. A researcher, such as myself, who uses Freire’s principles works in concert with the local community and brings interpretations, questions, and problems to those who live these circumstances day in and day out. This is something Lykes and Coquillon (2007) encourage feminist researchers to do as well.

Therefore, following this model, I needed to not only “be” in the midst of the village, but I also included many members of the community as my “co-investigators” and constantly look to them to identify themes and meaning (Freire, 2007). In June 2008, during this pilot study, I observed everything, from daily interactions in the village to instructional time in the village classrooms. Freire describes the need for investigators to observe these “moments of life” (p. 111) as they are important and meaningful. He reminds those of us who work in developing areas to look at the totality of life and not just the target of our research.

These observations and the sense of “being” gave me wonderful access during my pilot study. Much of critical literacy is based on the ideas of Freire and his possibility of radical social reform. He maintains that literacy education is not a set of skills to be developed but was a vehicle for promoting social change. His program is based on the lived experiences of learners. When I returned to Cambodia, I was more cognizant of what Freire (2000) describes as the local themes and literacies along with the lived experiences of the participants. I have a photograph of child-created drawings hung on the wall of a floating school on Lake Tonle Sap. These drawings reflect a key literacy: using pictures to communicate important local concerns. These specifically reflect the need for AIDS education. They are a component of what Freire describes as the need for the researcher to understand the nature of daily life and the social structures of this life.

Additionally, Freire encourages those who intend to establish literacy programs in developing nations to remember several principles. For the purposes of this study, I identified
three guiding ideas from Freire (1998; 2000; 2007): 1) the words used must be based on lived experiences, 2) the first words a person learns to read or write must be the words they first learned to say, and 3) participants and teachers need to dialogue for critical understanding resulting in change, not merely a “banking” of facts. Freire (2000) reminds us that this “banking” idea, is merely the “making of deposits” of information into passive students. This presupposes use of typical literacy sources, such as books, along with the idea that the teacher possesses the important and only knowledge. While I am not setting up a literacy program, the ideas of Freire regarding literacy are important for me as a researcher in the developing world to understand literacy in this context. This is an issue I asked questions about and dialogued with participants as I discussed the day’s events with my gatekeeper, teacher, and translator.

For Freire, these participatory ideas regarding critical literacy will result in an effort to build the local society, not just have the outcome of digesting meaningless words in a textbook. Like the AIDS drawings, daily, purposeful meaning results from such a practice. I needed to observe and ask questions to ascertain whether these principles are at work in the village school.

Not the Usual Picture: Using Alternate Literacies

Brian Street (1995) is one researcher who explores the narrow definition of literacy in the developed world as opposed to the multiple understandings of literacy in developing countries such as love poems written on bamboo leaves in Southeast Asia. He maintains that organizations tend to ignore any literacy that is not European/United States based. As such, Street argues for a broad definition of literacy and suggests we look for literacy uses in a number of cultural practices. He rejects the idea that literacy is neutral but is always embedded in culture. But like Freire, he discusses the need to help children depend less on the technical forms of literacy and become aware of the social nature of literacy.
The International Literacy Year resulted in a rejection of the “great divide” theory which posited that ‘illiterates’ are fundamentally different than ‘literates.’ Street (1995) believes that we must consider new ways of looking at illiteracy, which will not, in essence, perpetuate the “banking theory” of development. He states that current theory rejects the idea that literacy promotes cognitive advance or social mobility. Instead literacy is connected to the political and ideological contexts in which they appear. He is critical of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) definition of literacy, which upholds the “essay” text understanding. There is a tendency to view literacy in developing nations through a Western, colonial lens.

Furthermore, Leslie J. Limage (1993) points out that we must be careful about UNESCOs literacy data as these are based on self-reported figures from individual countries. This is an important point to remember along with three critical factors for determining literacy success in developing nations: “1) high-level of national commitment, 2) mobilization of human and financial resources, and 3) popular participation” (p.34).

Street (1995) maintains that aid workers must be cognizant of the local literacies already at work in a community and must adhere to a “…more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another” (2001, p. 7). In observing these practices, those from outside a target community must be aware of the social context in which literacies occur.

Yetta Goodman (1997) identifies several types of roads to literacy which are relevant for looking broadly at literacy. Aside from immersion in children’s books, she discusses family literacy traditions such as writing notes or grocery lists. While neither of these roads may be applicable to this Cambodian village, other approaches described by Goodman are likely candidates for developing countries. These include survival literacy which ranges from a
warning on a cleaning fluid to reading a sign about available childhood vaccinations. Sometimes children are required to act as “culture brokers” (p. 57) and read these warnings or documents to parents or grandparents. Other unique forms of literacy development described by Goodman which may be applicable to Cambodia include: environmental print which refers to all the language found on signs, advertising, etc. or playing-at-literacy which takes place when children pretend to be a teacher, store clerk, etc.

A wider definition of literacy gives the opportunity to see local uses of what Freire (2000) often calls “reading the word and the world.” Let me turn to a rather surprising example. To the Western-reader it may seem strange that such a developing, remote area would be filled with cell phone use. But it is! Goodman (1997) calls computers and television the technological road to literacy (p. 59). Since her writing of this article, cell phone use has multiplied. I have seen cell phones in use in the most remote areas of Tibet and in the northern mountain villages of Thailand where women of the Long-Neck Tribe weave scarves to sell in Chiang Mai’s Night Bazaar, all the while talking continuously on their cell phones. What kinds of literacies might these phones provide teachers and their students in this Cambodian village school? As Freire (2000) discusses, critical literacy must take into account the needs of local people and result in a new awareness and in change. Might cell phone technology be a place for such a literacy? This is just one alternative form of literacy that must be considered. I need to be aware of any literacy, ranging from the wall calendars described by Regie Stites (2001) to understanding how today’s rapidly expanding technology might serve as a new form of critical literacy.

There are many examples of local literacies in the literature. In an alphabet book children wrote traditional alphabet books using the cultural words around them such as shopping malls and street names (Cherland & Harper 2007). This correlates well with the concept of local literacies and situated literacies offered by these authors. In essence, situated literacies are the
“tacit local norms for doing literacy” (p. 119). One case study of a Cambodian teenager living in Philadelphia resulted in the understanding that while this girl struggled with school literacy, she was a prolific writer in the privacy of her home (p. 167). This resulted in the conclusion that students need to be encouraged to use their own resources to build school literacies.

In support of these many alternative forms of literacy, Peter Freebody and Anthony R. Welch (1993) maintain that literacy “builds and reflects socio-economic and political contexts” (p. 7). Additionally, they point out the problems that can occur in third world [sic] nations when the human capital theory is promoted. They point to their belief that children in India leave school due to the “endless rote learning of the sounds and shapes of letters” (p. 18). I will need to consider what practices are used and how these practices are accepted within the cultural norms of the community.

Through Street’s (1995) work in Iran, we learn the importance of understanding the strands of early literacy along with the relationship between the community and the school. It is also helpful for researchers to identify uses of literacy in individual homes and ways the community uses literacy. Moreover, attention to power relationships is key as gender-related beliefs and community “elder” support may play key roles in literacy understandings and development.

Street (2001) is critical of non-profit and United Nations’ literacy programs that require “non-literate” peoples to attend classes and learn the content the West views as valuable. He maintains that aid workers must be cognizant of the local literacies already at work in a community and must adhere to a “more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another” (p. 7). In observing these practices, those from outside a target community must be aware of the social context in which literacies occur. Moreover,
consideration must be given to research design as often it is only through observation and fieldwork that these literacies will be uncovered.

Also included in the search for alternate forms of literacy in Cambodia was the awareness of environmental issues. A fascinating local literacy issue deals with the IRRI campaign to encourage local rice producers to use less pesticides, particularly during the early part of the growing season as this can create environment resistance that helps destructive insects to survive later in the growing season (Fredenburg & Hill, 2006). This campaign appears to be successful and at the writing of the book was still on-going. How this organization uses local literacies to disseminate information and if and how teachers use these types of literacies are important questions.

How Do We Put This Album Together?: Literacy and Research Methodology

In order to better understand local literacies, consideration must be given to research design as often it is only through observation and fieldwork that these literacies will be uncovered. Stites (2001) reflects on this in his case study research conducted with an ethnographic lens as he described various literacies of rural China. He visited homes and interviewed families as he looked at the success of China’s literacy program, which he acknowledges has a paternalistic approach. In examining rural literacy, Stites took note of various aspects of home literacy ranging from calendars to displays of children’s school accomplishments for his wide-ranging definition of literacy. These may not have been uncovered using data collection methods such as surveys. The personal approach was necessary.

In a study that has characteristics of an auto-ethnography, a valuable portrait of the researcher’s struggles to explain and carry out qualitative research within the structure of an aid agency’s quantitative operating structure is explored (Robinson-Pant, 2001) The desire of the agency to conduct this type of research despite their inaccurate understanding of what it entails is
explained. There was an insistence on the part of the aid agency for an experimental rather than
descriptive model, along with the expressed desire for quantifiable results. Anna Robinson-Pant
shares her frustrations over the constantly changing research parameters and offers advice for
others who may become involved in similar situations. While the research methodology struggle
is interesting, it is her observations regarding literacy that add power to her study. She shares the
basic understanding that improving literacy in the developing world will result in an
improvement in personal health care. Her in-country fieldwork shows this belief is not always
based on what previous quantitative studies may have defined as literacy programs. In her study,
reproductive classes were often filled with primary age children. This was to satisfy the
attendance requirements of the aid agency rather than to impart any real information. Higher
attendance meant the funding would continue. In this situation, the agency needed to be aware of
who was attending classes. Additionally, Robinson-Pant (2001) notes the tendency of the
facilitator to follow the guidebook as required by the agency. This negated meaningful
interactions between the participants and the instructor. She also discusses the agency’s belief
that it had the power to give women better health. Her on-the-ground experiences in the Nepalese
villages shows that this belief does not always translate to practice. This study speaks to the need
to observe, describe, and analyze what is actually happening in the field.

Looking at the Pictures of Current Cambodia

What is your vision of Cambodia today? When I ask people this question, I usually get
either a shrug and blank stare or a synopsis of the movie, *Lara Croft, Tomb Raider* (Gordon,
Wilson, & West, 2001) along with a few statements about Angelina Jolie’s adopted Cambodian
son, Maddox. There is a limited amount of knowledge about Cambodia, especially current
research. An anthropological researcher who did write of this nation is Fabienne Luco, a
UNESCO researcher who described current problem-solving practices in Khmer villages (2002).
This United Nations report includes large sections of verbatim interviews with rural Cambodians of various generations. The participants describe the Cambodia of old when all lived in relative peace and harmony. People tended to keep to themselves, even older people preferred their independence rather than relying on family. Conflicts seemed to be few given the scattered villages, fear of supernatural beings, and of the government (p. 29). Luco does point out that it is difficult to find much data about the time before the “Pol Pots” given the destruction of the Khmer Rouge and the idealization of people to recall the pre-Khmer Rouge time as harmonious.

So, what does the Cambodia of today look like? What is the current political situation? What is the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) doing to help bolster educational opportunities in this country? While the answers to these questions could comprise several volumes of material, in this chapter, I focus on information that helps to add to set the stage for an understanding of the life of a primary school teacher.

Does Fear Still Exist?: The Current Political Situation

While a tourist in Phnom Penh, my husband and I were fortunate to have an experienced tour guide, a man who was a child during the Khmer Rouge period. He freely described the emptying of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975 and told us he survived the Pol Pot years. But few personal details were forthcoming. During our morning at the Tuol Sleng Prison, he almost antiseptically described the horrors. I don’t know why this was. Perhaps he had retold this far too many times to Westerners who had so little understanding that this went on in recent times or perhaps telling the story with so much automaticity was his personal coping mechanism.

Knowing that tour guides in developing countries usually do not frequent the eating establishments where they take the tourists, we usually ask our guides to be our guest during the lunch or dinner times. This means we get to know our guides as people, rather than merely listening to what is often the “script” they are trained to share with visitors.
As we slurped soup and picked at the fish and vegetable dish we shared, the guide talked about his life, his desire to save money so he could pay for his mother’s healthcare needs, and about his wish to marry. He also began to share more about his life in the Khmer Rouge time. My husband asked if he could tape his recollections and the guide agreed. Talk of personal experiences was freely shared. But many wonder: Does fear still exist? In Luco’s UNESCO report (2002), evidence is given that those who survived the Khmer Rouge still harbor fear: “Behind this façade of openness and freedom of expression, fear and distrust still inhabit the hearts of the people who live through the dark years and did not receive any education” (p. 158). The interviews included in this report show a residual doubt in survivors’ attitudes. Pol Pot remained free until 1998; some former Khmer Rouge officials are in places of power in the villages. But Luco’s report was published in 2002; as I write today, the first trials of the Khmer Rouge are taking place in Phnom Penh. The notorious director of Tuol Sleng Prison, Duch, sits in a Khmer courtroom. These proceedings are broadcast throughout the land. U.S. news organizations such as National Public Radio interview survivors, including those who still call Cambodia home (Sullivan, 2009). Names are used. Other survivors of this holocaust want their stories to be told. Many websites offer surviving victims the opportunity to share their stories, much like Stephen Spielberg’s project that allowed survivor’s of Nazi Germany to tell their accounts. Yale University has a Cambodian Genocide Center where thousands of documents detailing these years are housed.

But this is not just about the past. Today, former Khmer Rouge cadres remain in villages, even in places of power. How do the local people deal with people of such backgrounds? It is well known that many were coerced into “joining” the ranks of the organization but did not directly torture or kill. It is common knowledge that children were taken and forced to be a “Pol Pot.” It seems that citizens have developed an unspoken question: How much did a particular
person participate in the killings? The answer appears to make the difference between acceptance and hatred. One man I came into contact with was described as a former “soldier.” I knew from the description, the whispered tone, and the eye movements, what this meant. My informant was very quick to tell me that he was a kind, gentle male teacher and that she was proud he was a faculty member at this school. I came to know him during a several day period and agreed with her assessment that he was a caring teacher. The Cambodians seem to have arrived at some semblance of emotional compromise with the everyday people who followed orders of the Khmer Rouge (Luco, 2002).

But this is not meant to say that all is calm and agreeable today. As a frequent traveler to developing countries, I go in and out of customs and passport control with little concern. Cambodia was the exception. I stood in line before an imposing polished wood counter where several unsmiling men harshly called to one another and to the foreigners who had just disembarked from the prop plane. I waited and waited while the names of the other travelers were called. Was it my imagination that I was the recipient of scowls? Perhaps, but that is my interpretation; it stands in contrast to the warm reception my husband had described. This is one of the enigmas that characterize current Cambodia.

The July 2008 election is a national example of one of these enigmas. Elections were held, political signs were everywhere, but questions remained about the candidates and the results.

The Pictures of Election 2008

As we drove through the city in June 2008, the political signs were hung in the openings of the three-sided buildings in Phnom Penh’s crowded streets. Men gathered to play pool and watch the small televisions and likely discussed these candidates. In the curved, bumpy roads that wound through the countryside, children stirred pots that hung over open fires, chickens
pecked and dogs copulated, the campaign signs adorned the dilapidated stilted huts: “Sam Rainsy Party,” “CPP,” or “FUNCINPEC.” Even motoring beside the villages of Lake Tonle Sap, we could easily read the views of those who lived on the floating homes. Just the hanging of the signs could be interpreted that a free and fair election cycle was in progress, but the aftermath suggests distrust in the system. European Union observers said Cambodia had made improvements in its voting procedures but that these still fell short of international standards (BBC, 2008). The results of the main political parties are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Number of Votes</th>
<th>Number of Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodian People’s Party (CPP)</td>
<td>3,492,374</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam Rainsy Party</td>
<td>1,316,714</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights Party</td>
<td>397,816</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norodom Ranariddh Party</td>
<td>337,943</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUNIINPEC</td>
<td>303,764</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Again, Hun Sen, as the representative of the CPP Party, captured the leadership of Cambodia. He remains in power, a place he has managed to stay for two decades by making and breaking alliances.

Looking at the Details

But, Remembering Each Number Represents a Person

At this point, a brief journey into the Cambodian world of demographics will help set the stage for a better understanding of the macro-picture of Cambodia and its 24 provinces and
municipalities. Let’s begin with Bronfenbrenner’s macrosystem (1976): the country. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Population**

*Source: (MoEYS, EFA, n.d., p. 4)*

Looking at the village level, which could be termed the exosystem, the percentage of people living in a rural area is shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Rural Population**

*(MoEYS, EFA, n.d., p. 4)*
Clearly, Cambodia has a large rural population, but perhaps even more surprising is the percentage of people under age 14. In 1998, 42.8 percent of people were under the age of 14 (MoEYS, EFA, n.d., p. 4). Cambodia has a young population to educate.

Two Key Documents

Two key educational documents illustrate the current challenges for educating this young population. Various high-level committee members, most of whom are Ministers of various departments, including the Minister of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) or under-ministers (much like cabinet positions in the United States) are among those listed as supporting the framework document EFA (MoEYS, n.d.), the 80 page policy paper which delineates various demographics and resulting educational concerns. The *Education Strategic Plan, 2006-2010* (MoEYS, ESP, 2004), is “a synthesis of a wide-range of strategy papers prepared by the Ministry’s senior technical staff and international consultants of the ESWG” [Educational Sector Working Group] (p. i). These documents will be used to help understand the current national thinking in Cambodia regarding education.

By the Numbers: The Goals and the Questions

The EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) states that all should have access to education by 2015. This is Goal 5 (p. 56) of the Millennium Development Goals. The key word here seems to be access as there are several problems in Cambodia which will be discussed in the following sections. But again, a return to numbers will help us see the problems in even understanding the many issues of rural education. In a chart on page 4 of the EFA document, the number of villages is listed as 13,406, but a few pages later, the document discusses the 5000 villages in the country. It is not clear how a village is defined or counted. The report does state that, “Most of the 5,000 villages in the country have a primary school, although almost half do not offer full primary schooling.
from grades 1 – 6” (p. 8). Thus, what is a primary school? At what grade does the access cease to exist? These questions are not addressed.

A look at other numbers will help to illustrate the problems in Cambodia. In the ESP (2005), a chart shows that 92.4% of the rural primary population was enrolled in school (p. 3) but a look at Figure 2 on page 4 shows that the promotion rate from Grade 1 to Grade 2 during the 2003-04 school year is 64.8%. This, coupled with personal conversations I have had with Cambodian teachers, makes me wonder, “How many children attend school for a short time and then are not seen again?” As I walked through the village during school hours, I saw many school-age children in the fields or stirring cooking pots. Even when stepping out of the car at tourist spots such as Angkor Wat will cause a cadre of young boys selling books or a bevy of girls trying to barter with you for that “color scarf.” Attendance is a problem. This will be further discussed in the Poverty and Gender sections of this chapter.

Money for building schools is another problem in Cambodia. Both the EFA (MoEYS, n.d., p. 3) and ESP (MoEYS, 2005, p. 21) plans infer that looking to NGOs is a necessary ingredient for school construction. This can be seen when riding through the countryside and or even when boating on Lake Tonle Sap. Many schools that I have seen display signs thanking the donor for constructing the building. I have seen lists of benefactors from various countries and U.S. states, including private individuals, organizations, and religious groups. But my gatekeeper tells me that supplies, books, and other materials are desperately needed.

This need for greater school financing is addressed in some detail in both the EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) and ESP (MoEYS, 2005). The ESP sets a goal for increased per pupil expenditure from 251,000 Riels (approximately $61.00 U.S. dollars) per student to 335,000 Riels by 2010 (approximately $81.00 U.S. dollars). However, the Western reader needs to be aware that there
are parental costs, even with “public” education in Cambodia. These concerns will be addressed in the Poverty section.

The last number-related issue necessary to frame the issues is teacher/student ratio. The ESP (MoEYS, 2005) cites a ratio of 53.5 students to one teacher for the 2004-05 school year (p. 5) and later projects a 50 to 1 ratio by 2010 (p. 32). Related to this is the goal of gradually increasing the school day to a full day, beginning in 2007. Many children do attend school half-days, particularly because of crowded conditions. For example, I learned that a teacher may teach fifty or more first graders in the morning and may instruct a similar size group of fourth graders in the afternoon.

Given these kinds of numbers, how does the MoEYS plan which addresses the many needs of the young translate to “real” life? I turn to the issues that are discussed over and over, not only in these documents but they were also concerns I heard Cambodian teachers talk about in June 2008.

Cambodia Describes Its Issues

In looking at these documents, along with the Policy for Curriculum Development, 2005 – 2009 (PCD) which does not list authors or a committee but includes a signing statement from the Senior Minister and Minister of MoEYS, H. E. Kol Pheng, we can see several key issues repeat: a concern for poverty, the desire to provide more educational opportunities for females, and the need to respond to local concerns. While other concerns related to early childhood care and to secondary school are also discussed, I concentrate here only on those issues which directly impact primary schools. I acknowledge that these other considerations may indirectly impact the life of an elementary school teacher, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this study.

Before delving in to the issues of poverty, gender, and curriculum, it seems reasonable to begin with the mission statement presented in the ESP (MoEYS, 2005):
The Ministry’s long-term mission is to ensure that all Cambodian children and youth have equal access to quality education consistent with the Constitution and the Royal Government’s commitment to the U.N. convention on the Rights of the Child, regardless of social status, geography, ethnicity, religion, language, gender and physical form. The Ministry envisages a time when graduates from all its institutions will meet international and regional standards and will be competitive in the job markets worldwide and act as engines for social and economic development in Cambodia. (p. 1)

Poverty

Turning first to a chief concern, poverty, the EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) report is direct and does not shy from the comparison of Cambodia to other Asian nations: “Cambodia compares unfavourably with other Asian countries on broader human poverty indices” (p. 6). The Ministry is clear in that it seeks to reduce poverty through implementing various educational policies and strategies (p. 2).

One of these poverty alleviation strategies deals with access to education, specifically the fair financing of schooling. In a section titled, “Addressing the Education/Poverty Trap” the EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) states:

The overall financing of the education system is still heavily reliant on households’ private contributions to both direct and indirect costs. Although various surveys vary widely in their estimation of these costs, even conservative socio-economic surveys report that on average, unofficial monthly school fees at primary level are riels 3500 [85 U.S. cents] per pupil, riels 8000 [$1.94 U.S. dollars] at lower secondary and riels 10,200 [$2.47 U.S. dollars] at upper secondary level. These do not include costs for other incidentals for other incidentals [sic] such as uniforms, stationery, etc. (p.9)

The EFA helps us to put these dollar amounts in context by stating that the rural annual income is about $197 U.S. dollars per year (p. 6).

Although none of the reports clearly explains what is meant by parental payments, EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) lists the following as an Operational Strategy: “Establishing regulations for the transparent collection and accounting of parental contributions to education and training costs, alongside waivers and other measures that ensure no student will be excluded due to inability to pay” (p. 30). The ESP lists abolition of parental payments as one of the action items for 2008.
(MoEYS, 2005, p. 39). Clearly, these payments are a burden on rural families and add to the direct costs of school attendance. One of the solutions is to increase teacher pay through a system based on performance, although the way in which this is to be accomplished is never described.

Duggan (1996) is more direct in his observation regarding some parental payments. He states, “Students wishing to progress from one year level to the next were required to pay a bribe” (p.368). While I am not concluding that the parental payments discussed in the EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) and ESP (MoEYS, 2005) refer to bribes, Duggan’s remarks cannot be ignored. A more complete description of what is meant by parental payments needs to be given by the MoEYS.

Payments to teachers whether they legal or illegal payments, along with uniform and supply costs, are in addition to a family’s indirect costs of sending children to school. When sons and daughters are students they can no longer act as fulltime agricultural and household laborers. The EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) reports that in a 1999 survey of the 1.6 million school-age children not attending school, 25% cited household income/work responsibilities as the primary factor for their non-attendance (p.10).

In a society where many struggle for food, this loss cannot be borne by the family. Cambodia does have some in-school food programs where children are fed meals during the school day. MoEYS figures show that such food programs have a positive impact on school attendance, particularly for older children (MoEYS, EFA, n.d., p. 6), but to my knowledge there is no direct food for attendance program to encourage student participation. Such an incentive program in Bangladesh addressed the problem of student attendance along with increasing the time students spent studying (Arends-Kuenning & Sajeda, 2004). Researchers investigated the success of providing families with food in exchange for their children attending school. Conclusions showed that not only was this type of program successful in meeting attendance
goals but students spent more time studying (p.315). It is noted that “payments” do not need to be large and may not even offset the lost income from children not working the fields. Both age and gender were used to compare two years of data, 1992 with 1995-96. The time use data suggest that a positive difference occurs in the categories; however, there are variations related to gender and age. For example, boys in the 6-10 category increased time in school more than girls in that same category. Girls in the 11-19 category responded to the program more positively than boys in that same category. This is an opposite gender attendance pattern than those noted in Cambodia where older girls may not attend school regularly as they are expected to perform household tasks (MoEYS, EFA, n.d., p. 10)

Gender

Inextricably linked to the poverty trap issue is the question of gender equity, in both the student and teacher populations. This is an issue in many developing countries but it is of great concern in this country where so many men were killed during the four year period of the Khmer Rouge leaving households to be headed by females who were treated as less than important. Cambodian cultural norms suggest that women are more vulnerable and are not expected to be self-sufficient, especially in rural areas. My own experience tells me that a woman alone can be viewed as unusual. One tour guide, a man in his late twenties, repeatedly asked me where my husband was and would not or could not accept my explanation that I was traveling by myself. He was quite concerned about women smoking and was visibly relieved when I assured him that I did not smoke.

Luco’s UNESCO report (2002) includes interviews regarding the traditional views of women. Excerpts from these interviews show the residual feelings among the older generation regarding women. In Cambodia’s case, those in the 40 – 60 year-old range are considered the older generation. Many of Luco’s conversations with Cambodians reveal the extent to which
domestic violence was, or is, an issue in the country. A female leader of a woman’s organization states that in two or three families out of ten, the wife is hit by the husband (p. 149). An excerpt from an interview with a Cambodian Human Rights worker illustrates this mindset:

Traditionally, if your wife is bad you have no choice but to hit her. Things have started to change with women’s Rights [sic] principles. Men are learning it is an offence to hit one’s wife. (Mr. Sitho in Luco, 2002, p. 148)

One man speaks directly about trying to resolve what he has been told about women’s rights and what are clearly his true feelings:

Now, men are afraid of women’s rights. Women say they have rights. It’s a new concept. They want to do everything, even silly things. We cannot tell them anything because they say they have rights, that they are justified in speaking up because it’s the right of women to do so. It is good to talk but not to talk nonsense! (Mr. Rin in Luco, 2002, p. 148)

Another man describes what happens in the case of rape:

When a girl is raped, she usually doesn’t say anything out of shame. If she was a virgin, she knows it will be difficult for her to find a husband. But, secret negotiations can be entered into with the rapist. He will pay a financial compensation to the girl’s family. (…) If the matter becomes public knowledge, the father may try to marry his daughter to the rapist, if he is not already married. This is to preserve the girl’s reputation. (Mr. Pol, p. 62 in Luco, 2002, p. 124)

Women’s issues that go beyond the well-known and tragic sex trade, continue to be a concern.

The EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) is clear regarding the need to achieve greater equity for women: “In Cambodia, it is particularly apt that gender is addressed as a cross-cutting goal underpinning all others” (p. 22). The report continues by noting that gender disparities are “substantial” in Cambodia (p. 22). The writers do not shy away from the idea of gender equality, despite the socio-cultural leanings in Cambodia (Luco, 2002). When discussing gender, the EFA writers frequently use the phrase, “significant inequities.”

School enrollment and attendance is a problem. As noted in the previous section, because girls are often needed for domestic chores, their attendance suffers. Additionally, many families,
particularly those in rural areas, are simply unwilling to invest in educating a girl (MoEYS, EFA, n.d., p. 11).

The 2001-02 national enrollment figures show a drop in female primary enrollment, illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percent Males</th>
<th>Percent Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MoEYS, EFA, n.d., p. 11

The education of women is of particular importance as their understanding is needed as Cambodia struggles to develop in programs designed to improve health, reproductive knowledge, and childcare (MoEYS, EFA, n.d., p. 19).

The Question of Female Role Models

The EFA (MoEYS, n.d.) reports that few female role models exist for girls and that the country’s teaching corps is skewed toward males. Unlike many developed countries where the vast majority of elementary teachers are female, 63 percent of primary teachers are male and 73 percent of the secondary teachers are male (p. 11). These figures may be even greater for rural schools, thus replicating the belief in these areas that education is not for females. The EFA notes
the problems this creates and decries the lack of “powerful role models to young girls in rural
and remote areas” (p. 11).

Curriculum: National and Local

The Policy for Curriculum Development (PCD) 2005-2009 (2004) outlines the general educational aims for Cambodia and specific goals for each grade level, grades 1 through 12. This thirteen page document outlines the overall aims:

1. develop a love of learning that will enable them to pursue employment and continue life-long learning;
2. have attained a foundation knowledge of Khmer language, Khmer literature and Mathematics [sic];
3. have the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to improve and maintain their own physical and mental health and to contribute to the improvement and maintenance of the health of their families and wider society;
4. have the capacity to manage and take responsibility for their own actions and decisions and be self-reliant;
5. appreciate the value and importance of Science, Technology, Innovation and Creativity;
6. have employment related skills, an understanding of and positive attitude towards work and a capacity to manage and work effectively and harmoniously with others;
7. have the capacity to exercise judgment and responsibility in matters of morality and a commitment to identifying, analyzing and working towards solutions of problems experienced by their families and society, [sic];
8. have an understanding and appreciation of other people and other cultures, civilizations and histories that leads to the building of a public spirit characterized by equality and respect for others’ [sic] rights;
9. be active citizens and be aware of social changes, understanding Cambodia’s system of government and the rule of law, and demonstrating a spirit of national pride and love of their nation, religion and king;
10. have an appreciation of and be able to protect and preserve their natural, social and cultural environment [sic]

(MoEYS, PCD, 2004, pp. 4 & 5)

Primary teachers (grades 1-3) are instructed to spend the following number of lessons each week teaching the subjects listed in Table 5 in order that each child “has a strong foundation in literacy and Mathematics [sic] and that they develop their health, physical appearance, moral understanding, learning skills and life skills” (MoEYS, PCD, 2004, p. 9).
Lessons are 40 minutes in length. Teachers are required to spend the following specific instructional time each week:

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Lessons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Social Studies (including art education)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and Health Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Life Skills Program (LLSP)</td>
<td>2 – 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How do these requirements translate into practice? How do teachers feel about these necessities? Does a teacher feel these policies help her students? Of course, these questions are universal considerations for teachers, but the answers are particularly necessary in a country striving to rebuild.
CHAPTER 4: METHODS TO PAINT THE SINGLE PORTRAIT

“If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.” Mother Teresa (in Slovic, 2007, p. 80)

Looking at the One

Many who study genocide, confinements, and massive social dislocation look at the power of viewing these horrific experiences through the eyes of individuals. Anne Frank’s diary has taught nearly three generations of schoolchildren about the terrors faced by victims of the Nazis. Zlata’s Diary (Filipovic, 1994) gave my former eighth graders an up close and personal account of the situation in Sarajevo. The Candy Bombers (Cherny, 2008) tells us how a U.S. pilot crafted a plan to delight children of occupied Berlin by dropping chocolate bars to them during the airlift and in the process helped to develop positive attitudes toward the United States. In his study on psychic numbing, researcher Paul Slovic (2007) states:

I shall draw from this research to show how the statistics of mass murder or genocide, no matter how large the numbers, fail to convey the true meaning of such atrocities. The numbers fail to spark emotion or feeling and thus fail to motivate action. (p. 80)

As the opening quote from Mother Teresa indicates, there is something in humans that responds to the story of one individual. Slovic (2007) discusses the need for humans to “feel the reality” and describes how a personal story can touch others and encourage action. And this research is the story of one; one who brings hope to so many children. As I looked at Miss Phalen’s life I asked: What is this woman’s professional literacy life? How does she build literacy in this small village? Her personal story will not only add to the limited work about Cambodian education but may also prompt charitable organizations and foundations to better understand the daily workings of a primary school and the needs of teachers and students.

Feminist researchers such as Hesse-Biber (2007) say that it is important to look at women of various racial, cultural, and ethnicities who have been neglected by mainstream research, and we must begin with women’s lived experiences. Cambodia is a place where little contemporary
research has been or is being conducted, especially regarding the everyday experiences of female teachers. And as such, it is appropriate to tell the story of one woman in this faraway place because it has not been done before and to do this, I used a case study of one, with an ethnographic lens, situated within a feminist stance.

The Case Study

Yin (2009) tells us that a case study is used when we want to develop an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within a specific context by using multiple sources of data (p. 18). He explains that case study is the preferred design when one is “examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated” (2003, p. 7). Additionally, Creswell (2007) tells us that it is necessary to define the boundaries of a case. Miss Phalen (pseudonym) agreed that I could observe her both at school and at home along with conducting interviews with her during between June 10 and July 4, 2009 so that I might paint this picture of her as a Cambodian village teacher.

Using Yin’s (2009) work, I initially offered a somewhat paradoxical justification for this single case study. I used two seemingly contradictory considerations of the five justifications discussed by him. He states that one would choose a single case design when it represents a unique case (p. 47). To the Western reader, a rural Cambodian school is unique; even Cambodia is not a country many Westerners think about. To see this, we have only to look at the LSU Libraries Online Catalog. A search of this catalog, using the key subject word “Cambodia” produced 567 titles. Compare this to the number of titles for India – 7488, Thailand – 2729, Iraq – 2632, and Vietnam – 3595. In searching for a book describing education in Cambodia, I found only one published author on his topic, David Ayres (2000).

Yet, I also argue that this case is typical. In choosing the teacher for this holistic study, I focused on a woman I found representative of other female teachers I met. Her treatment of me
as a colleague rather than as an expert was notable, occurring during a pilot study I conducted in June 2008. During that time I considered that some teachers may have wanted my approval rather than providing me with accurate information and opinions. This is a key consideration and one that any researcher must be mindful of. This was one of my main reasons for choosing Miss Phalen for this study. During my pilot research, she appeared eager to interact with me rather than simply nodding her head and looking at me as a “wealthy” American. For example, one evening she insisted I leave our comfortable dinner table and join her on the dance floor to attempt some native Khmer dancing. She laughingly modeled this slow dance, done with graceful movements of the hands, and was not afraid to correct me or laugh at my awkward attempts to copy her. My interpretation was that she saw me as a person with vulnerabilities rather than as an “expert” from a “global superpower.” She even drew a diagram of a Khmer classroom and explained to me the government’s required seating arrangement. She was not afraid to tutor me about this policy.

Thus, while seeming contradictory, these justifications depend on how one situates the case. For Cambodia, this case may be typical, but for the Western reader, the case is unique. I will discuss this in greater detail in the final chapter of this study.

Using an Ethnographic Lens for Case Study

Creswell (2007) tells us that ethnography focuses on a cultural group. The ethnographic researcher looks at the patterns of the cultural group and seeks to describe the values, behaviors, and beliefs of this group (p. 68). Moreover, the researcher becomes immersed in this culture-sharing group. James Spradley (1980) writes, “The central aim of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native point of view” (p. 3). I gravitate toward Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul’s (1999) belief that ethnography is a “human endeavor” (p. xiv). They describe the importance of human interaction and contend that these face-to-face encounters are
what give ethnography its rich flavor. As an experienced teacher and traveler, I have seen the value in meeting another’s eyes or having a personal discussion to further understanding. This intimate contact is an essential component in an ethnographer’s toolbox and one which is key when conducting a successful ethnography as the researcher must build rapport to further the relationship and gain the trust of participants. It is a way to bring women’s voices and ways of seeing the world out of a paternalistic structure and into the world’s view (Gilligan, 1993).

Alex Stewart (1998) discusses the relationships one must build when conducting an ethnography, advising the researcher that learning must come as a result of both etic and emic perspectives along with the interaction of these perspectives. Spradley (1980) is clear: “ethnography means learning from people” (italics in the original, p. 3). This necessity to learn from another and to concern myself with various perspectives and interactions is one which fits my style well along with my research rationale and questions, for I believe this intimate portrait of Cambodian education, learned from the life of one teacher, will add to an understanding of how literacy is being developed in this country.

While conducting the ethnographic study, the researcher must realize and accept that he or she will have little or no control over what happens and must respect the position of being an “invited guest” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 2) in a natural setting. The ethnographer must always be open to the unexpected. This was true during my research as I found that the word literacy did not translate well. I had to give many examples and be alert for alternate examples of literacy, including oral literacy as well as written literacy.

An additional consideration is that human behavior is framed within a sociopolitical or historical context (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) which seems, given the recent history of Cambodia, a valuable necessity for this study. And when one looks at LeCompte and Schensul’s (p. 45) discussion of the role critical theory plays in ethnography, specifically that the researcher
may function as an activist and advocate, the choice of an ethnographic lens fits well with my feminist and Freiran perspectives which advocate participatory processes (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007).

The Study Design

I look to Yin’s (2009) depiction of a case study design to help describe this research. All of these models happen within context, which Bronfennbrenner’s (1976) circular metaphors help us to understand. The macrosystem of rural Cambodia in the years following the Khmer Rouge means that many Cambodians still live with the memories of that horror. As I found in my pilot study, these memories are present in the village system; thus an ethnographically-informed case study is appropriate for this research.

Because I studied one teacher, I identified the single case as my design unit so that I portray what Yin (2009) calls a holistic picture; in my case, a picture of one woman rich with details describing her home, her struggles to reach students in her classroom, and her musings about her life. I believe this vivid portrayal will help fill a missing component in the literature and provide a context for improving educational systems faced in this society.

Yin (2009) tells us that the boundaries between the context and the case may not be sharp (p. 46). Bronfennbrenner’s (1976) metaphor helps to understand this. A person cannot be separated from the setting and history in which he or she lives. This is true in Miss Phalen’s case as her life in the classroom and village are intertwined. Additionally, it was important to better understand the views of villagers so that attitudes about education could be revealed.

Data Sources

As Yin (2009) notes, the techniques of the case study researcher are similar to those of the historian but also include using information from contemporary data sources such as observation of events and interviews with participants. These multiple sources are necessary
when doing case study research (p. 13). Multiple sources ensure triangulation. For this study I relied upon two main sources of data. One main data source came from my field notes generated from observations of the teacher, her classroom, along with her home and the village. I observed everything. Even when I thought I might have time for relaxation, I was usually engaged in valuable observation. Field notes from experiences such as a dinner in the town or joining a tour group yielded important information about literacy practices. My notebook was always with me. Examining the data from this mesosystem helped me to set the portrait of the totality of Miss Phalen’s professional life in this time and place.

Another main data source involved information shared by teachers and villagers in interviews. Formal interviews with individual teachers were conducted in their classrooms while interviews with villagers were conducted in their homes. Time spent interviewing varied with the person as some individuals were more eager to add details and deviate from my questions by offering additional thoughts and examples. All interviews were conducted in Khmer with the assistance of a Khmer/English translator.

While I had pre-determined interview questions for teachers, my observations led to refinement of these questions and yielded many additional questions for both formal and informal interviews. My formal interview questions are available in Appendix E, but emerging questions were based on observations and my further understanding of the culture. Careful observations and detailed field notes allowed me to see gestures, voice tone, and to understand the nuances of life. This is what the portraitist uses to write the detailed narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) and these field notes became the primary source for writing my portrait of Miss Phalen.

I also had the opportunity to conduct a focus group. This was not a planned component of my research but was an opportunity that arose during the course of my time in Cambodia. My
gatekeeper was meeting with a group of rural teachers at a small guest house on the outskirts of the city and offered me the chance to ask questions of these 19 teachers (6 men and 13 women). Again, a translator assisted me along with my gatekeeper who speaks both Khmer and English. The teachers were a lively group and eagerly offered descriptions, often interrupting one another to add details or corrections. I initially had three open-ended questions: 1) Describe your school library; 2) Tell me about available reading material; and 3) Help me learn more about your teaching techniques as they relate to literacy development. As is often the case in qualitative research, some topics required more in-depth questions. While I had planned about an hour for these questions, the teachers seemed to relish the chance to talk, and we discussed literacy for an additional 30 minutes.

Interview questions for villagers depended on what I observed. For example, if pictures were displayed, I often asked about these as a means to better understand literacy in the home. If children were present, I talked about their experiences in school. While the wording of questions varied, my goals were to discover villager attitudes about the school and education in general and to better understand how literacy is exhibited in homes and the village.

Secondary data sources were the photographs and videos I took while in Cambodia along with digital sound recordings. These helped me to recapture the feel of the countryside, background sounds, and richness of the environment. When writing my final portrait I often returned to slideshows to both put myself in the picture and to view the scene from a different perch.

While I planned to examine written documents such as the papers Miss Phalen grades or textbooks she must use, these were limited in scope and did not provide as much material for the portrait as other sources. However, looking at these did help me to formulate follow-up interview questions and topics for casual conversations. For example, my observations both in homes and
in the local market led me to explore the popular fashion magazines and pictures torn from them. I purchased several new copies and brought them home to help me remember this important literacy for females. When writing I often took out one of these magazines and placed it near my computer. This conscious and constant reminder provided a key connection to those who live half a world away.

Before going to Cambodia, I examined documents distributed through Cambodian governmental offices, NGOs, and donor organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank to better understand the nation-wide educational expectations in Cambodia. These documents were another secondary data source and were valuable in setting the stage. I used photographs of posters in schools illustrating various educational requirements along with copies of Khmer textbooks which are currently in use. Information from these multiple data sources provided triangulation for this study. This design is in keeping with Yin’s (2009) belief that case study research “…allows investigator’s to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p. 4).

Is This a Quality Design?

In determining design quality, I again turned to Yin (2009) and considered construct validity, internal validity, and reliability. Below I address each of these conditions as they relate to my Cambodian research.

Yin (2009) states that construct validity can be challenging when doing case study research (p. 41). He describes the need to use multiple sources of evidence, establish a chain of evidence, and ask key informants to review the report. So that I could establish construct validity, I interviewed and observed both directly and as a participant. This gave me method triangulation. I digitally voice recorded all formal interviews, took detailed notes when observing, and used my camera freely in public areas. I listened to these interviews during the
evening hours and took my questions back to the translator or person interviewed so that any gaps could be better explained or questions answered. I did not identify any of my participants in writing or using voice media.

Yin states “…internal validity is mainly a concern for explanatory studies…” (2009, p. 42). My study is not a causal study design but interpretations were made; therefore I was aware of my potential biases or possible incorrect inferences and, as such, I asked my gatekeeper to review portions of the results along with certain key informants.

Moreover, according to Clifford Geertz (1973) it is important to present “thick descriptions” for the reader and Creswell (2007) notes the importance of stating researcher reflexivity so that readers may make their own interpretations. Thus, within the Portraiture Approach, I used detailed description of specific events to allow readers to form their own interpretations.

Reliability is another design consideration discussed by Yin (2009). As he describes, reliability implies that another researcher, doing the exact case again, as opposed to researching a similar case, would arrive at the same interpretations. While it is highly unlikely that another educational researcher will go to this particular village, Yin suggests alternatives to establish reliability. One procedure is to always conduct research as if someone is observing. In my case, someone was watching me. I needed my key informants to help with translations. Either my gatekeeper or translator was always with me. Additionally, even my presence in the school and village changed its people and that place. Not even the most unobtrusive researcher can expect that her presence will not have an effect on a place. However, I found that because I had been to this place in the past, my presence was not an “oddity” but rather I was welcomed with open arms. The range of experiences I saw in classrooms indicated to me that no one was changing the way teaching was usually done for my benefit.
Role as a Researcher

I previously identify myself as a White feminist researcher, a woman who looks at the life of a woman in an attempt to hear her voice and paint her picture. Feminist researchers discuss the need to begin with the lived experiences of women (see for e.g. Hesse-Biber, 2007 or Kirsch, 1999). Women such as Carol Gilligan (1993 & 2003) along with Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis (1997) offer data interpretation methods that are appropriate for the types of research advocated by feminist researchers. Additionally, the importance of advocacy is a role embraced by many women who do such research along with those using a Freiran perspective (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007). I consciously contribute to this body of work with this study.

Along with feminist researchers and those with a Freiran perspective, Stake (1995) acknowledges that although researchers are expected to “show restraint” (p. 93) regarding advocacy, the reality is that, “Discretely or not, they do their level best to convince their readers that they too should believe what the researchers have come to believe. They too are advocates” (p. 93). He continues with the acknowledgement that while phenomena should be accurately described, these observations are influenced in numerous ways including “the mood, the experience, the intention of the researcher” (p. 95). Stake explains that it is “better to give the reader a good look at the researcher” and to “leave on the wrappings of advocacy” that serve as a warning to the reader that there are inherent beliefs on the part of the researcher. This is the reason I began this study by stating my biases and beliefs.

As a longtime teacher, I see many parallels in the role of a good teacher and the role of a researcher and agree with Stake’s (1995) idea that as both teachers and researchers we must be open to the unknown and willing to be flexible. As teachers, we are constantly faced with situations regarding instantaneous decisions; researchers face this same situation. On any given
day, teachers may need to give attention to the physical needs of a child (i.e. hunger, health, etc.) rather than focusing on the teaching of skills or assessment. Stake notes the necessity for researchers, too, to make “continuous decisions” (p. 91). I had to make these continuous decisions, too. I initially thought that using the *I Poetry* of Gilligan, et. al (1993) would be helpful in interpreting data. I found, however, that this was not the case given the need to translate everything. My translator often used the words, “She says.” I made the field decision to rely on my detailed notes and recordings to write the portrait as some of the “poetry” seemed to be “lost” in the give and take of translation.

This is an example of what Yin (2009) means when he encourages the researcher to be flexible and willing to change questions or methods as events take place. Years as a first grade teacher have given me the perspective that flexibility is a key to success; therefore, as I designed this research I was aware that “life happens.” While I was concerned about not using *I Poetry* because it had been a part of my original methods for data interpretation, I thought back to Yin (2009) and realized its use would not be appropriate. As with qualitative field research of this type, I was adaptive.

As I began my research, I knew of the need for flexibility, given weather, safety, translation, and many other unknown issues. In my pilot study, I discovered my informants were more willing to share details about their lives under the Khmer Rouge when I reached out and patted arms. I had read that this show of affection was not appreciated in Cambodia, but I observed during the time with my in-country gatekeeper that she often did this to show empathy and to establish a connection. This is important in Cambodia when dealing with the generation that survived the Pol Pot era. When I later asked her about this she explained that even her own parents needed to know that people cared about their struggles before they would share information. Later, when walking along the streets of the city with a younger female Cambodian
friend, she reached to hold my hand as we walked along. My translator explained that this woman likely felt friendship and this was an appropriate way to express a connectedness.

Furthermore, just as teachers anticipate issues with learning, researchers must also anticipate any problems which may be encountered when conducting research and the possible misunderstandings by readers of the final research report. These two issues are addressed through careful planning and seeking the help of others. For example, one problem I encountered was the extreme heat in the crowded classrooms which had no air conditioning or fans. During my pilot study (June 2008), this was a problem for me. I brought a wardrobe that was better suited to this heat, moist towelettes, and a small personal hand fan. Yet, despite my awareness, preparation, and assumptions I still found the heat to be a problem for me as I wasn’t born to nor accustomed to jungle humidity and heat. I was nervous about the many dogs in the village and tried to prepare by reading more about this, but as the next two chapters will show, perhaps this preparation was counterproductive to my attitude.

Along with these examples I also encountered a problem I had not anticipated: the village cooking fires. These wood fires burned constantly and it took several days after leaving Cambodia for the smell and taste of this smoke to leave my lungs and throat. Fortunately I had my asthma inhaler with me.

Sampling

Creswell (2007) discusses four aspects of sampling in qualitative inquiry: events, settings, actors, and artifacts (p.126). Simply by the nature of my research purpose and questions, the setting for my research was rural Cambodia. And while it may seem foolish for a researcher who lives in the United States to claim, this, for me, was a sample of convenience. My husband currently has several initiatives in Southeast Asia and through a chain of everyday, rather mundane events, met the woman who was to become my gatekeeper, Chanthavy (pseudonym), a
A vivacious young woman who is concerned about education in her native country. During our time in this country, Chanthavy made it relatively convenient for me to visit schools and teachers by offering me transportation and providing translators.

According to Miles and Huberman’s chart (Creswell, 2007, p. 127), this is a sample of convenience and my pilot study tells me is a typical case for rural Cambodia. I might also identify this sample (Cambodian teacher) as a “politically important case” given that I have a stated bias: I believe that the United States Government, bombed the homes, schools, and rice fields of the everyday people of Cambodia. This helped set the stage for the horrible genocide that was to follow. We left the Khmer people to deal with the killing fields and the devastation that remains in modern Cambodia. Additionally, my contacts in the U.S. Department of State have expressed an interest in my research as there is limited information as to how educational funds can be used effectively in this region. I have been asked to give a briefing to State Department employees. This agency, led by Secretary Hillary Clinton, is attempting to understand how the U.S. government can better support Cambodian education, especially as it relates to opportunities for females. I have been approached by various individuals within that agency to share and explain my findings.

Data Collection

Field note data from my observations became the primary data source for writing this portrait. I relied on interview data and data gathered from a focus group of teachers to add detail, answer questions based on my observations, and to fill in important information, especially as I considered literacy in rural Cambodia. Because data from these observations and interviews were essential to my portrait, below I synthesize how the literature about observations and interviews became a guidepost for my Cambodian experience.
Observations

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) write of the importance of the setting to the portraitist. Because human experience is “framed and shaped by the setting” (p. 41), this method for observing and taking field notes makes it particularly relevant for Cambodia. Looking at the macro picture of the country and village before observing deeply the micro picture of classroom and teacher is what the portraitist does. It is important to note every detail from nuanced expressions to silences. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis tell us that the picture is in the details and no detail is too small to transport the reader to the world of the writer.

Because I have kept detailed travel journals for years, I have been practicing this skill in three volumes, without realizing what I was doing. I found notations such as odors and the feel of material can add to the richness of a picture, which is also described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). This practice became important as these types of details formed the basis for my portrait.

During previous work I have identified myself as what Gary Shank (2006) terms an “embracer” in that I try to take in as many details as possible and am not temperamentally suited to omissions. Because of this, in addition to my field notes, I used photographs, digital sound recordings, and videos to help me recall as many details as possible to help paint my eventual portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

When doing observations, I found that an observation sheet with two columns, one for my notes and the second column for my impressions was helpful. In the evenings I read over not just the note section but also the impression section and made a list of questions and/or other phenomena I wished to observe. I also used a digital sound recorder and made observations about my surroundings as I walked through and in the village. Even listening to the recordings of interviews added to the “portrait” of the village. When I listened again to my tape of the Khmer
Rouge survivors, I was struck by the constant animal sounds in the background, ranging from barking dogs to crowing roosters. Of course, recording personal notes does not work in a classroom, so handwritten notes are a more reasonable method of data collection. These handwritten researcher notes became important and necessary. I had bought a computer that would allow me to take handwritten notes. A program would convert these to a typed document. But I discovered early in the observation process that due its novelty, this computer was a distraction in the classroom. Children turned around and watched me intently. I put it away within the first hour and took out my paper and pen. No one bothered looking at me then.

Interviewer Attributes

Because interviews, both structured and semi-structured, were a source of data I turn now to Corrine Glesne’s (2006) discussion of interviewer attributes. When I first began collecting data via interviews, I found I wrote too many questions and rushed through the interview in order to complete my task. During my pilot study I learned the power of silence; perhaps this was due to a marriage of emotion and practicality on my part. The sorrow I felt as these women related their stories was powerful, and yet I had to wait for the translator. As this man turned to speak to me in English, I watched as the women nodded, dabbed at the tears on their cheeks, patted one another’s arms, and in their eyes I could see the reaching back for detail as they prepared to relate the next horror. I learned, too, that my sense of “being” with these women was more important than the questions. Silence on my part was a more powerful “questioner” than was an actual question. As I learned to let go of my list of questions, the stories came pouring out. I was what Glesne terms a “learner” in that they became my teachers, and I merely listened (p. 94). These are also the moments that make a rich, textured portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
Glesne (2006) discusses other characteristics of a good interviewer: anticipating (asking yourself what a situation might require), analyzing (considering the totality of the process such as thinking about meanings or relationships), nondirecting (listening for the respondent’s experiences and beliefs), patiently probing (asking for more information via questions, silence, or sounds), nonthreatening (making sure your respondent feels safe), being aware of power and hierarchy (dealing with any perceived status differences), being caring and grateful (this may be reciprocal on the part of the interviewer and interviewee). I learned that all of these attributes were important in Cambodia, particularly what Glesne calls nondirecting and patiently probing. It was important for me to sit and talk about a farm or basket before launching into my prescribed questions. I had to feel comfortable changing the way the questions were asked depending on the participant’s situation. For example, an older woman who sat cleaning reeds needed to hear me praise her for her beautiful handiwork before it was appropriate to ask questions. I often needed to sip water as a courtesy before any formal discussions were held.

“Pol Pot was not a Khmer. He was a Vietnam.” I kept hearing sentiments like this again and again when in Cambodia. These were expressed to me by professional tour guides and by villagers. I had read the history. I believed otherwise. But why did so many Cambodians hold this belief and freely offer to me as fact, even when I had not asked any questions about him? There are many possible reasons which are beyond the scope of this research but the dilemma illustrates another aspect a researcher must consider when interpreting data: the functions of verbal communication. Shank (2006) describes what he considers to be an essential part of Jakobson’s linguistic model (2006) for conducting interviews. The above strongly held and often-shared statement about Pol Pot’s heritage illustrates what is called the referential function. The researcher must analyze information in terms of what she or he knows about the world. A participant may freely lie or may convey what he or she believes to be the truth. This statement
about Pol Pot may be a good project for future research. I never found a clear answer as to why this belief is so stridently held but it is an example of sifting through the known facts, something which I did when I visited a school on Lake Tonle Sap and did not see a single textbook on or in a desk.

The emotive function refers to the messages the participant may be sending via body language and tone (Shank, 2006). A transcript will not be helpful in helping the researcher to recall these verbal cues, and even listening to a tape will not reveal the body language components of an interview. I once interviewed an “expert” and noted his posture change when he talked about visiting the skulls of Cambodia. This is one reason it was necessary for me to transcribe my own tapes and to write notes immediately after interviewing a participant. I often stood on the dirt path around the village and made notes about an interview, noting change in voice and posture immediately after a visit or observation. While my tapes captured the participants’ voices, my focus in transcribing was the dialogue. It was necessary to immediately note aspects of the villager’s tone and body language for further understanding.

The conative function deals with the persuasive aspect of a conversation or interview (Shank, 2006). People want to persuade us. In a practice interview I conducted, a person’s voice became louder as he explained the role of Admiral McCain in the U.S. bombing of Cambodia. He wanted to be sure I “got” that information. I knew the teachers at the Apsara School likely wanted to be sure to convey to me that they had few materials.

The metalingual function (Shank, 2006) was the most difficult for me to discern when in Cambodia. It involves the reading of all codes and what they might mean. I was aware that I should not wear dark clothing or black shoes when in a village and that I should remove my shoes when entering a home. The sharing of food and drink is one of the metalingual codes that required time for me to fully appreciate. I was always concerned about drinking water but knew
that I would get better information if I shared sustenance with villagers. This is an example of one code I began to practice.

The poetic function of communication refers to the way in which the participant tells the story. Even though I did not understand Khmer, I could tell from listening again to the tapes of my interview with the Khmer Rouge survivors that when the story of a baby’s birth is told, the language and tone became wistful, as if the woman is seeing something, far in the distance that holds both elation and an intense fear.

An open channel of communication is important. This involves the flow between the interviewer and the participant. Called the phatic function, Shank (2006) describes it as both the least important and the most important of these six elements (p. 44). This may involve signals such as squirming in a chair that shows a participant is finished with the interview. Initially I had been concerned that I would not be able to read such signals but I found that it was fairly easy to do, from tuk-tuk drivers to mothers in a village home.

As I conclude this section, I note that giving someone a bright smile and open armed attitude usually gets me far, from having an elderly woman give me the highest sign of respect in Tibet, sticking her tongue out at me, to being constantly surrounded by children in a Thai village while other Americans were ignored. During one excursion in Cambodia I visited a village with various U.S. government officials, including representatives of the State Department. I have a wonderful video of that time where the rest of the Americans stood around and looked at one another while I jumped rope with the children. I believe that one must make these kinds of personal connections when working and interacting in various cultures.

Timeline

While my formal data collection was conducted during three weeks in June/July of 2009, in the spirit of both the Portraiture Approach and of those who seek to better understand a culture
other than their own, I do not reduce my experiences to a simple table. This would be nearly impossible given the richness of the Cambodian experience. I cannot say that I spent six hours a day making observations. Everything was an observation; I immersed myself in village life. Each experience was a data gathering opportunity. These ranged from sharing a dinner at a local Cambodian restaurant with other Westerners to escorting an American woman to a local market as she shopped for souvenirs. As a researcher, my eyes were constantly attuned to alternative literacies at work and cultural educational examples. Additionally, later reflection revealed that I had been preparing for this research since 2001 when I first breathed in the humidity of Southeast Asian air. Year of traveling to this part of the world have given me an understanding of the nuances of culture that books and journal articles could never have revealed. And it is these experiences led me to Cambodia and to my 2008 pilot study.

The time I spent in Cambodia in June 2008 allowed me to both gain entrée and establish rapport which is part of what Creswell (2007) discusses as part of the data collection cycle. Between June 2008 and July 2009, I was in continual email and Facebook contact with my gatekeeper and asked my husband to engage in various conversations with Miss Phalen so that she knew I am thinking of her. I received permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before doing formal interviews or observations. This final documentation was granted in May 2009.

I traveled to Cambodia in June 2009. I knew that school was in session during this very hot month. I spent the first few days observing and walking through the village. During this time I took field notes and engaged in casual conversations. In the evenings, I looked for patterns and planned events for the next day, based on these observations.

By the third day I was observing in my participant’s classroom and home. I interviewed her in a structured and semi-structured manner and engaged in semi-structured interviews and
casual conversations with her relatives. I also attended two dinners and a karaoke event, a popular form of entertainment in Cambodia. We made an excursion to a near-by market and a town together allowing me a glimpse of her daily, lived experience.

During the three weeks I alternated between observing in Miss Phalen’s classroom and the classrooms of other teachers. I interviewed these teachers and continued walking through the village to become a familiar sight. I often returned to classrooms and asked follow-up questions of these teachers. I engaged in conversations, triangulated data, and made observations or conducted interviews based on the previous evening’s data analysis.

Near the end of the second week I began interviewing villagers formally. I varied this with continued observations in Miss Phalen’s classroom and other classrooms along with visits to the pedagogy school, book shops, and markets to better understand any literacy uses in the village and town. These observations and interviews continued into the third week of field work.

During my last few days, I held a focus group and checked with my participant about my understandings of her life. I showed her what I had observed and explained what I understood as meaning. Additionally, I checked with my gatekeeper and translator as to these interpretations.

As previously stated, everything was an observation. Listening to a tuk-tuk driver helped me to better understand local practices. Bargaining in a local market revealed the marks a shopkeeper made in a notebook. When eating out with friends, I smiled to see the restaurant owner walk by her son who labored over his homework at a corner table. These experiences, combined with the new literacies technology provides, helped to enrich and complete this portrait. After returning home, I emailed my gatekeeper and translator about interpretations and to ask additional clarifying questions. I asked my gatekeeper to read portions of my chapters. Both of these individuals were always responsive and helpful. This helped to triangulate my data interpretations.
Data Interpretation

During the data interpretation phase of my research I was guided by the Portraiture Approach (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Below I discuss Lightfoot’s (1983) Portraiture Approach as it became the primary method for analyzing and writing about my research. I also briefly explain the Listening Guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003) as it added to my understanding even though I did not rely on it due to translation issues. I did, however, use it before I went to Cambodia to better understand the writings of Khmer Rouge survivors.

The Portraiture Approach to Interpreting Data

Perhaps it is because the Portraiture Approach relies so much on the human experience that I embraced it. I found it particularly meaningful for my work in Cambodia because of its underlying philosophy that the human experience derives meaning from the setting, whether historical, cultural, or social, in which the experience occurs (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). A portraitist needs to richly and thickly describe the physical setting along with identifying a personal place from which she or he will paint the portrait. Metaphors are used to help tell the “story” of the person and place. The context, along with the main actor, is dynamic as the story unfolds. It is used to combine the empirical with artistry to “…to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 3).

Using detailed field notes, the researcher “gathers, organizes, and scrutinizes the data” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 185). She searches for the threads and patterns, looking for themes and understandings. The researcher reads and rereads her notes at the close of each day as this not only helps her to reflect on the events but also helps her to make sense of what she sees and hears. These thoughts and ideas about emerging themes and patterns are noted in
what is called an “Impressionistic Record” (p. 188). This is what I did before writing the final portrait. I wrote memos to myself, and constantly compared these thoughts and searches. During my time in Cambodia, I took detailed notes and then wrote memos and searched for themes. I was vigilant to changing perspectives, to dilemmas, and to new areas of inquiry. I found this to be necessary in Cambodia as often ideas were not offered, but I had to ask based on observations. For example, I had noticed the blue and white handwritten signs in every classroom. I asked what these were and was told, “These are the names of the top three students in the class.” Later, I reflected on this and asked if these were boys and girls or if one gender prevailed. As I discuss in the next chapter, the results of this became important. This was an interesting component of my findings that would never have been revealed if I had not reread and reflected on my observations in the evening. This rereading and questioning is part of what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis call “the nagging puzzle” (p. 188).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) encourage researchers to be especially mindful of the puzzles and connections. The researcher is encouraged to maintain “the integrity and complexity of human thought, feeling, and action” rather than merely being concerned about the “broad categories of behavior” (p. 191). This necessity to describe the nuances of thoughts, feelings, and actions is one reason Lightfoot (1983) uses such detailed portraits of high schools in *The Good High School*. I used her portraits as a guide to write my own. Her metaphor of the portrait is one that influenced me as I wove the threads of data together to create my own portraits of people and places in rural Cambodia. I use terms such as *portrait* and *tapestry* to refer to the sensory images that result from analyzing my data. These metaphors became powerful for me as I considered the weaving together of data gathered in a classroom as a teacher, Miss Phalen, wove together intricate lessons, creating her own tapestry of the art of teaching.
As Lightfoot (1983) describes, I, too, continually read and reread my notes to uncover “the persistent repetitions and elaborations of similar ideas” (p. 17). This technique heightened my awareness so that when like ideas appeared I would underscore these. During this process I began to see what she calls “the skeleton of the story” (p. 17) so that the “plot” could be told (p. 18). Additionally, she cautions that it is important to return to the original field notes and interviews often during the writing process so that distortions do not emerge. This became an important component for this research as, while writing, I was aware that my portrait of Miss Phalen might appear overly positive. I frequently returned to my notes, photos, and recordings to find that, despite the hours and days I spent with her, I had no notations or remembrances of what could be termed negativity.

Moreover, as Lightfoot (1983, p. 18) describes, in Portraiture, it is necessary to offer the reader many examples to vividly illustrate the phenomena. I have done this in many places in the following chapters. I read and reread notes to find the most representative examples of the story of Miss Phalen and literacy in this village. Often these examples are the usual, the norm, for the classroom situation. Two exceptions to this are the school on Lake Tonle Sap and the two boys outside of the restaurant. These portraits are unique pictures that enhance the totality of what is literacy in Cambodia. But, I add that these too, were written by carefully reading and rereading my field notes, and by reflecting on the situation in order to uncover the plot of the story. These are the “small facts” and, as Geertz advises, “Small facts will speak to large issues” (1973, p. 23).

The Listening Guide

As a researcher, I gravitated to the Listening Guide Approach, as it is based on relationship and getting “…to know the inner world of another person” (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 157). The guide can help to interpret interview data or may be used to analyze documents. I used
this as a guide to better understand the memoirs of Khmer Rouge survivors (see an example of this interpretation in Chapter 2 and Appendices A, B. & C).

A series of steps are followed to uncover the complexities and many layers that make up the entirety of human experience. To achieve this result, the researcher begins by listening to the transcript of an interview many times. The word listening is used purposively as the process requires a more active interaction with the written transcript than merely reading it implies. As the researcher listens, he or she underlines sections, makes notes and hears the many voices that speak from the page. In the beginning, one likely hears the plot and may listen for how the subject portrays herself or himself. In the next step, the researcher constructs an I Poem by finding all the statements beginning with I statements and the verb following this pronoun. These statements are pulled from the text and written in a poem format. In the I Poetry from the memoirs of survivors, clear stanzas were apparent. I readily saw shifts in time and emotion. This allows the researcher to then “identify, specify, and sort out” (p. 166) the various parts of the interview. It is here we get an understanding of what is important, of what this person is conveying about his or her experiences. We begin to hear the multiple meanings and voices in the interview.

The Final Picture: Writing the Portrait

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) encourage the writer to consider a broader audience than merely the “academy.” With the Portraiture Approach, the researcher writes for a wide audience; she writes so that the larger community will understand her findings. Portraiture has been called “a people’s scholarship” (p. 10). As such, I wanted to bring the reader, any reader, to the world of my research. Readers should feel as though they are bathed in the steam of Cambodia as they gingerly sidestep along the dusty worn path of the village, avoiding the jutting rocks or overhead fronds, their eyes fixed looking for signs of landmines, knowing they
cannot be detected, all the while listening for the silent steps of the village dogs. A story is woven and detailed pictures are painted. Words of participants are freely used in the portrait. Staying true to the form of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s (1997) Portraiture, I, of course, cite sources that are published but do not cite with the “personal conversation” notation the ideas shared by those I interviewed. It is to be assumed by the reader that these anonymous participants are those who agreed to talk with me about their lives for the purpose of this research.

Minute details, descriptive adjectives, metaphor, and symbolism are essential. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) give a powerful example of the use of metaphor when they introduce “the gray hulking building” of the Harvard School of Public Health to foreshadow its purpose in the real world of Boston’s streets. These types of rhetorical devices are helpful as one writes an ethnographic portrait. These researchers encourage the use of such rhetorical devices to report results and to help the reader to understand the totality of life. As such, the realities of life in a rural Cambodian school are bathed in the metaphors of the Cambodian village. Portraiture is a way to tell the story, the story of Miss Phalen, her classroom, and village. “Listen” as Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) describes Portraiture:

I found myself inventing a new methodology, one I eventually called “portraiture” as a way of reflecting its cross between art and science, its blend of aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigor, and its humanistic and literary metaphors. To say I “invented” the form is a bit misleading. In fact, I had been greatly influenced – however subliminally – by a long arc of work, reaching back two centuries, that joined art and science. There is a long rich history of dialogue and collaboration between novelists and philosophers, artists and scholars. (p. 6)

By using metaphor and symbolism along with meaning-laden adjectives and adverbs, the rich description of the portraitist informs the reader, any reader.

I invite my readers now to “listen” to the connections: The attention to the everyday lives of participants, even in research reporting, is the dialogical, participatory work encouraged by
Freire. For “the academy,” Portraiture can be viewed as an alternate literacy for it invites the writer to utilize the richness of language rather than a traditional formulaic reporting of research.

Concluding Remarks

As I began my research journey, armed with cameras, computers, recorders, and electrical converters, I told myself that this research is a story, a story that will be told using the ways women typically tell stories: with narrative and the rhetorical devices that promote understanding. It is one primary teacher painting the portrait of another in a different world with seemingly insurmountable challenges. This research will bring insight and voice to what it will take to create a better future from the ashes of the past. This is not a broad survey, but one view: a view of a teacher who struggles with improving the literacy of her young students, a view from a village school that has survived atrocities, and a view from a country and a people who search to transform their lives from the killing fields of desperation to fields of hope.
CHAPTER 5: THE CIRCLES OF A TEACHER’S LIFE

“I want to help my students. When they read and write I feel happy. They are successfully and will bring success and happiness to our country.” Miss Phalen

The Circles of Education at Miss Phalen’s Apsara School

To a visitor, the Apsara School (a pseudonym) may seem to sit as an extension of the large town nearby. But it is a world apart. Spending ten minutes in the back of a motor scooter cart called a tuk-tuk transforms the world from one of hoards of motorbikes and rushing humanity to a dusty village scene where bicycles rule and people know one another’s business. The metal gate is more than a physical barrier between the rare paved road and the school. Very few outsiders venture into the schoolyard and to the village beyond, and conversely those who call this place home have little interaction with and understanding of the world outside this oasis. Few teachers go into the city on a regular basis and most children have never traveled beyond the limits of their village.

As one leaves the paved road, dirt takes over and there is an intimate sense of intense interaction with the land. The village is a place where rice paddies are common, where chickens are both pets and dinner, and where water is either scooped from the muddy pools near-by or, for the lucky ones, hand pumped from a homemade well. It is a place where women cook over open fires and naked children chase chickens and nap in swinging hammocks. The dusty schoolyard is an anchor of sorts for the maze of footpaths that snake through the village, connecting the lives of the people. The Apsara School acts as a concrete monument to the wishes and dreams of those who live beyond its grounds in the stilted huts and palm-thatched hovels. The school has been here for a generation. Mothers and fathers in the village remember sitting in the dark classrooms, but there is little memory beyond that as the grandparents were victims of the Khmer Rouge, and written records for this spot do not exist. But despite the lack of educational memory, the dreams
for education are vivid; the hopes for the future are intense in this land of contrasting pictures. Today Cambodia struggles to transform poverty and despair to prosperity and hope.

Miss Phalen is one of the ten teachers here who strive to bring these hopes and dreams to fruition. To describe her as having a bright, wide smile and large twinkling eyes seems almost trite, but it is so accurate that to neglect this detail would be a critical omission. When she talks of her students, this smile becomes even more brilliant and her black eyes dance. It is a facial expression that exudes belief in their future and in her chosen mission. It is this mission, in this school, in this village that makes up the pages of her life’s gallery. From the view of this world as one bumps into Cambodian air space to the one light at Miss Phalen’s simple home to the classrooms of her colleagues and the pedagogy school where she completed her two year teacher training program, this chapter paints the portraits of her life, the life of a primary school teacher. But I begin with the landscape view: the picture from the sky.

The Bird’s Eye View: The Macrosystem That is a World Striving to Develop

Although the fluffy clouds below are benign and cottony white in appearance, the little plane bounces from side to side drawing gasps from the passengers as it cuts through the innocent cover to reveal the pot-marked land below. A patchwork of brown mud, flooded green rice paddies and tall scattered palm trees comes into view. Despite being the rainy season, this place seems dry and forlorn. It is not the lush jungle palm world of Thailand nor is it the busyness of a big Asian city. A new paved two-lane road cuts through the brown waterholes and green fields somehow announcing by its newness that this is a country straining to move from its desperate past to a brighter future.

This is confirmed when the plane screeches to a halt in front of what, from outward appearances, seems to be more of a resort than an international airport. The steps are released and the half-plane load of passengers is greeted by a mass of hot, humid air. I breathe in and
smell only the hot. We walk in line to the polished wood building and into a large area where unsmiling men in uniform sit behind a large curved counter. This is “Visa upon arrival.” I neatly tuck the required fee, a twenty dollar bill along with my visa application and photo into my passport and hand it to the first officer. There is no conversation and little acknowledgment. I step aside to watch and wait and to track my passport as it is thrown from grimfaced man to grimfaced man, down the counter until finally my name is called. I take it from the last dour-faced immigration officer and attempt to win at least a nod from him. I fail.

As I wait in the next line for my visa stamp, two immigration officers are deep in conversation, and again I wait for what seems like an unusual amount of time, even for immigration for them to motion me forward. Again it is a long wait as various papers are stamped and my photo is taken. I finally arrive in baggage claim where my luggage is already spinning on a small conveyor belt. I grab it and awkwardly struggle to place it on a metal cart.

I steer my possessions toward customs, completed form in hand, wondering what delays might now await me. But no one is here. I am alone. I look around and see no officers. After standing for several minutes I finally place my declaration on the desk and walk into the bright sunshine.

A group of men, holding neatly lettered name posters waits in anticipation at the airport’s exit. But I don’t need to see my name. Instead my translator’s smile greets me and as we ride to the small guest house where I will stay.

Here in This Place: The Picture of the Mesosystem of the School

The school that stands in this spot is different than the Apsara School of a few years ago. The original place has been rebuilt largely through the generosity of a Western donor. Gone are the wooden walls and palm-thatched roof and in their place are poured concrete floors and walls. A small building to the left contains the two rooms that serve as administrative offices. Here is
the only source of electricity so one of these rooms doubles as the spot where children go once a week to watch DVDs. A handmade wall poster illustrates the school’s structure; it shows little more than the name of the principal with ten lines running to the names of teachers and the grades each teaches. All teachers are responsible for two groups of students. One group arrives, often two or three children to a bicycle, at 7:00 am in the morning. After the four hour session, these students return home and another group arrives at 1:00 pm for the second four hour session. Going to school in shifts was common during the Lon Nol period. That practice continues. These two shifts of children crowd into the rooms that make up the main coral-colored L-shaped part of the school. White-latticed wood decorates the porch-like area that lines the school. During recess, many teachers sit on stone benches and watch their young charges at play. White wooden classroom doors can be pulled shut, but this is rare when children are present. The open doorways and the windows without glass allow what little breeze there is into the classrooms. The flag of Cambodia, the world’s only flag to bear an image of a monument, Angkor Wat, the famous ancient temple that draws tourists to Cambodia, hangs on a pole in the middle of the school’s courtyard. Here and there a few trees attempt to grow in the dusty brown dirt. A few colorful signs, carefully hand-labeled in Khmer, encourage children to “work hard” and “do your best.” This yard is a meeting spot for work crews of children, it is a playground, and it is a place for village dogs to gather.

Between the two buildings of the L is a small alleyway. Here there is a line-up of bicycles along with a roofed area where women cook breakfast over open fires for those children who attend the morning session. Some teachers switch morning and afternoon sessions so that students may attend school in the morning one week and in the afternoon on opposite weeks. But Miss Phalen does not. She is free to deviate from this policy and does so because she believes
“the little ones need to learn in the morning.” But this also means only her morning first graders receive the free morning meal.

On the porch, just before this alleyway swings the object that first drew me to this school. It is the remnant of an American bomb that serves as a bell. The sound rings through the schoolyard, clanging out the welcome to school or announcing the end of a break. When I began visiting this school, my hosts were almost apologetic about its presence. They feared I would be hurt or embarrassed by its reminder of a brutal time in history, the American War. But my interest in it was so intense that the faculty, gatekeeper, and translator began showing me the bell’s U.S. military inscriptions and then described to me the preponderance of such bells in Cambodian schools. My translator took great pride in telling me about “the great big bomb” that hung in his former elementary school.

Behind the last two classrooms of the bottom of the L is the newly constructed bathroom with two Western-style flush toilets. The door seems perpetually open as if to advertise the modernity of the tiny building. During my time at the Apsara School I was repeatedly invited to use this bathroom. It was as though this was a symbol of a step into an advanced world and a source of pride.

Monday through Saturday this place is filled with the 497 children who attend grades one through six. It is a busy, crowded place where it is common to find nearly 50 children squished onto wooden benches in a classroom with government issued paperback textbooks open on the tables in front of each student. These numbers indicate the student/teacher ratio has not changed since 1979. The enrollment is conducted by the teachers. Prior to the start of Cambodia’s school year on October 1, teachers visit all the homes in a village to enroll children. If a child’s family moves from the village during the year, this student is kept on the school roster. This policy makes daily attendance figures inaccurate as a teacher may note on the front board that 8
students are absent on a specific day but 3 of those students may have moved. When I asked why children were not removed from attendance lists if a family left the area, my inquiry was answered with a shrug of the shoulders and the words, “This is just the way it is done.”

I asked the headmaster if there were any children in the village who were not enrolled in school. This resulted in an answer that included waving of arms and pointing. My translator explained that one boy was not included on the school’s list. This was a source of frustration. Yet, while having one child not attend school is one too many, it is still a remarkable percentage of children who are enrolled in the Apsara School, indicating that this village has a commitment to the school. Here the Khmer Rouge code words equating school and killing have been extirpated.

The Apsara School has an enrollment balance of girls and boys, and in the time I was there, I did not notice an unusual number of either girls or boys absent from school. This was easy to discern as the attendance figures are written on the board at the start of each session. This seemed to dispel the notion that these villagers, at least, did not value male education over female education.

Along with this display is a blue poster showing the names of the top three students in the class. My translator and I began a game of sorts with these blue and white-lettered posters. After visiting two classrooms, which meant I had viewed top students in four grades, I saw the pattern: all top students were girls. My translator then always looked to the poster upon entering a new room and would turn to me with great laughter to confirm, “All girls!” During my time in Cambodia I only found one boy listed as a top student. This child had a unique situation in that his mother is a teacher at the school. He attends the morning session as a student and returns for the afternoon session to “play.” During this time he can be seen poking his head into open windows, loitering in doorways, or even sitting on a classroom bench looking over an older
student’s work. Despite being in second grade, he was often a fixture in Miss Phalen’s afternoon fifth grade session and listened attentively to what went on, intent on absorbing all that the school has to offer.

When I visited the pedagogy school I wanted to see if this pattern of females as top students continued. The tradition of displaying names was not practiced here but when I asked three different groups of students if boys or girls were more likely to be top students, I always got a big laugh and quick answer from the young men and women, “Girls!”

Quick Snapshots: The Microsystems, Mesosystems, and Macrosystems All Around

Cambodia is a country with many national holidays and these are celebrated at the school as time off. In contrast to schools in the United States, notes are not sent home nor are newsletters displayed advising parents of the vacation, rather teachers mention the holiday to students the day before. Additionally, teacher absenteeism may also reduce instructional time. During the period I was at Apsara School, one teacher was absent twice. Her room was shut tight and children merely turned around and went home, a sharp contrast to the U.S. habit of calling substitutes for absent teachers.

The other practice that seems to reduce teacher/student interaction is the number of breaks given to students during a four-hour session. Three fifteen minute school-wide breaks are announced by the bell; and children are invited to stand as they politely salute the teacher with their hands folded together and heads bowed to thank her for their learning. Then they are free to stream into the front school yard to play jump rope, spin cardboard cards, race and chase, or blow up balloons. This means that at the Apsara School students are generally given 3 hours and 15 minutes of instruction six days a week during the school year which runs from October 1 until the end of July. While school attendance is mandatory in Cambodia, the Apsara School is indicative of other schools I have visited. It stands because of a Western donor; and its
enrollment figures are such that children cannot attend all day sessions so the half-day solution is used to provide education for as many students as possible. According to my gatekeeper and translator, there are many rural areas of the country where schools do not exist so the mandatory school attendance is not attainable.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the yearly census by teachers is important is because the Cambodian government supports the expenses of each student at the rate of 700 Riels per year. This is the equivalent of about 17 cents for each enrolled child. This may clarify why schools persist in keeping on the enrollment list children who have moved from the area. On more than one occasion when I asked if the teacher knew why 8 children were absent, I heard explanations that 3 of those children had moved away and they were always absent. As this money is used for school upkeep and limited supplies, every Riel is needed by individual schools.

Teacher salaries are paid by the national government and are based on years of service. A beginning teacher may earn about thirty dollars a month with forty dollars per month being a usual salary. Those who have taught for a long time may earn as much as fifty-five dollars per month over twelve months. Principals earn about one dollar more each month.

The government mandates curriculum and supplies textbooks of between 100 to 200 pages per subject. Subjects include Khmer literature, math, science, and social studies. These paperbacks are printed in black and white, devoid of color photographs or illustrations. Children are not permitted to write in the books as they are collected at the end of the school year to be reused with a new group in October. One lesson covers approximately two pages in the book, and as I observed near the end of the school year, it seemed no class was near completion of a book.

Students must supply their own notebooks which are thin paperback books with graph paper pages. These notebooks are carried home by older children who may have a homework
assignment consisting of two or three math problems or questions to answer in science, often a literal question about the day’s reading and a problem solving question. Whether the assignment is completed in class or at home, these are handed to the teacher who grades them during class or during a break. I never saw a teacher leave a pile of notebooks on his or her table overnight. Children sat and waited for the grading to be complete. Grades are numerical, from one to ten with ten representing a perfect score. Anything less than a seven is “not considered good.” Final grades are based on these graded lessons, a final exam, and other papers.

In addition to purchasing notebooks and pencils, families are required to provide uniforms for children. The expected attire is a white blouse and navy blue skirt for a girl and a white shirt and navy blue long pants for a boy. While this is the expectation throughout Cambodia, I noted several exceptions. Boys wore brown pants while girls sported multi-colored blouses. When I asked about these variations, I was told the following, “We know some families just can’t afford what we want them to wear. We would rather have the child in school than to turn someone away because they do not have the correct clothes.” This was one government policy that local teachers felt free to ignore. They balanced adherence to a dress code with school attendance, and presence in the classroom was more important in their view.

While the national uniform requirement may often be ignored, teachers seem to take seriously the government mandates regarding curricula and strive to meet the required minutes per week of each subject area, given their own situations. The one exception I noted was the Local Life Skills Program. No teacher seemed to know what I meant when I asked about the content of these lessons. This may have been an issue with translation but when I described the subject, I was still met with confused looks. There were several concepts integrated into lessons that I would classify as fulfilling this requirement such as how to deal with mosquitoes, the cultivation of aquatic plants, and the necessity of drinking clean water but I noted nothing that
was overtly termed a Local Life Skill. Other mandates such as the content of what must be taught are followed closely as is the requirement that children sit grouped according to ability so that more able students may help the less able. According to this plan, students sit in groups of four: one high ability student, two average students, and one lower achieving student. To the Western eye this may seem like labeling children and unusual grouping, but time spent in a Buddhist culture leads me to believe this likely has more to do with the propensity to feel responsibility for others.

The Portrait Gallery of the Classroom System

It is not the sights and sounds that first come rushing back to me when I recall my time in Miss Phalen’s classroom, it the powerful senses of smell, taste, and touch that reverberate through my body. I take a deep breath and still feel the hot burning wood from the near-by village cooking fires. This melts into taste as it flames through my nose and mouth, down my throat and rests in my lungs. I squirm and feel the puddle of sweat that collects as streams of perspiration flow down my back to finally stagnate in that delicate spot between my rear end and the hard wooden bench. I always took a seat in the back of the classroom, near the opening that allowed what little breeze might pass by, to cool me. This was a futile wish, and only added to the filling of my lungs with smoke, but I determined it was the better of the two physical challenges.

As I sat, I began to notice the sounds: the pecking of chickens in the alleyway in back of the classroom, the crowing of roosters, and the barking of the many dogs that inhabit the village and often make their way into the schoolyard. No one but me seems bothered by them, even when they copulate outside a classroom. I could constantly hear a cacophony of children’s voices from near-by classes. Because all openings in the school are free of glass or closed doors, sound easily travels, making the school resonant with young melodies.
Miss Phalen’s classroom is perhaps the most brightly decorated of the rooms I visited. Like most other classrooms, dancing shapes carefully cut from once bright construction paper, hang on a string that crisscrosses the ceiling. These are now faded with age. Miss Phalen tells me they were made several years ago, but she tries to add to the chorus line of shapes when she has the paper. A pencil sketch of Angkor Wat hangs proudly covering the dull cement wall just next to the door. A former student presented this artistic rendering to the school. And like all classrooms I visited in this school and others, photographs of the current king along with his mother and father, hang just above the board in the center of the room. Small tables displaying plastic flowers serve as a teacher’s desk and hold student notebooks along with teacher belongings. They are a fixture in every room just as is a large board near the back that holds student-created art. In Miss Phalen’s room this art seems fresh, created during this school year. Some are childlike drawings labeled with big letters, likely produced by first grade hands while others are intricate depictions of various science and social studies concepts, neatly captioned. Other rooms display similar variations of this infusion of art and literacy while a few boards are ill-kept with faded drawings and missing spaces where the papers have dropped off, never to be replaced.

These are the sensory memories, but they are quickly replaced by the teacher and researcher in me that recognized a master teacher who, despite the many limitations of her situation, was able to actively engage 46 students by using her energy, body language, and positive reinforcement. Whole class instruction that is accomplished via recitation may be the norm in Cambodia but there are variations as to how this is accomplished. Individual teachers always bring a personal energy and enthusiasm to the profession and Cambodia is no exception. It is the “being” of Miss Phalen that makes her class sing with energy.
Her smile never stops. Her glistening teeth and brilliant smile match her dark, dancing eyes. There is something about her dance-like steps, open arms, and easy laugh that indicates a truly exultant, expressive educator. I have asked many to tell me what they remember about Miss Phalen, the answer is the same: she seems so joyous. This joy easily translates to her crowded, sauna-like classroom. Her small body easily glides up and down the aisles, stopping to bend over a student, hand on the child’s shoulder to whisper, guide a small hand, and then clap and cheer. She is like those U.S. student teachers I evaluate with high marks. She rarely stands in front of the class to deliver a lesson. She uses movement to motivate and to involve all the students in her class. Without ever having been told the power of proximity, she somehow naturally understands this component of Madeline Hunter’s work (1982).

During our many conversations, Miss Phalen talks about her love of teaching and says she hopes so she can “help her students to reach their dreams” so that they can “help Cambodia and its people.” She says she wants to “share knowledge with the next generation for a brighter future.” This theme of help and hope is repeated by most teachers I encounter. The idea of a better future is a familiar one in Cambodia. She tells me she will spend the “long vacation” from July to October teaching those who need extra help. When I ask if she will be paid for this work, she laughs loudly and says, “Yes, oh, yes.” I do not need this translated. As she talks about those children who do not succeed in class, her eyes water and her smile, for once, disappears. She asks me now, and continually during this data gathering period, for ideas as to how to help these children. She never appears frustrated, but rather is searching for ideas. She says she enjoys the monthly Thursday afternoon faculty meetings where ideas are shared among the faculty as to how to deal with “those who are not learning.” I ask if she offers ideas at these gatherings, but she says she likes to listen. I am not sure she understands her own ability to motivate and to involve the vast majority of children in her classroom.
She constantly returns to the theme of helping those who are not learning. This is not unique as I hear about this need for remedial ideas constantly as I move from classroom to classroom. Miss Phalen asks me to “tell me what I am doing wrong” and to “give me ideas to help my students.” There are many pleas to “correct my teaching” and I begin to see that she, like other teachers I have talked with in Cambodia, tend to focus on what is wrong with the classroom rather than on what is positive about her teaching. Like their American counterparts, they are used to a deficit orientation.

When asked to talk about what she thinks about her own teaching, even to describe her successes, the description again focuses on what is wrong. She delineates the many teaching tools she lacks: pictures to help children understand words, colorful books, materials to illustrate math concepts and to conduct science experiments. To my surprise there is no talk of computers. When I inquire about this she says she does not know how to use one and that “computers and the Internet are expensive anyway.” These rural teachers seemed nonchalant about technology, showing no great desire for it as there was little understanding of how it could be used. Teachers expressed a greater need for hands-on material for their primary students such as pictures and blocks. Even now as I write, I cringe, guiltily thinking of my past well-stocked first grade classrooms. During my years in this “Eden” I had little appreciation for how much it meant for me to nonchalantly pick up a ten-block for help in explaining the numbering system. If Jillian wanted to read about fairies, I ordered nine books on that topic to encourage her. There is nothing of that opulence for Miss Phalen and her students. Yet, she readily discusses her dreams for her students and her belief that reading and writing are the pathway for these children and her country out of poverty.
Looking Closely at a Microsystem of Professional Literacy Life: The Tapestry of a Sight Word Lesson

While initially looking at this lesson in detail may seem to be a snapshot that merely captures a specific time and place, over the time I spent in this classroom, my field notes confirmed that this is a rich tapestry in the gallery that is Miss Phalen’s professional life. The teaching methods here are bright colors of vibrancy that excite and stimulate her students over and over again. All lessons are woven together with the threads of expert teaching including encouragement of active listening, attention to motivators, and positive interaction with her students. I examine the details in this tapestry as it is representative of the way in which she so intricately weaves together learning opportunities for her students.

When I enter the room and take my usual place at the back under the opening above the alleyway where rusty student bikes are lined up waiting for the morning session to end, a few of the 46 first grade children turn, flashing bright smiles at me. They have figured out that I am here to learn. There is now a partnership among us. They are learning about Khmer letters, spelling, and sight words while I am learning about their teacher. As each child settles into their seat from the first morning break, a few remnants of play are visible. One pony-tailed girl fingers a tiny plastic doll under her table. She swings her bare feet above her too big, plastic pink flip flops that have fallen to the dusty cement floor. Her legs seem to move in rhythm with the gentle manner in which she pets the doll’s head. I turn to watch as a trio of small boys jostles together as they get out their stubby chalk and well-used slates. By the time I look back at the girl, the prized doll has been safely bedded in the table cubby. She never touches it again during the lesson.

Miss Phalen stands on the raised cement platform, her homemade stick with its whittled tip, in hand. Her voice takes on a sing-song quality as she points at the words she has written on the board and sings each Khmer letter to the class. They echo her, in perfect unison. At the end
of this melodious performance, she stabs at various words. The class reads and she celebrates the correctness of it all by nodding, giving a slight jump, and grinning at the class. There is no semblance of sitting straight, bottoms on the benches, a demand I have heard in most of the classrooms I visit in south Louisiana. These children are sitting on their legs, leaning forward in anticipation or even standing pointing in the air at the board. It is a group of individuals, yes, but somehow they are a chorus, too. I look around for those who are merely echoing the recitation, a fragment of my own reading methods days comes to life in my head as I recall my own reading methods teacher’s warnings regarding choral reading. She implored us to be wary of it for too many children merely copy with little or no connection to text (Dunne, 1972). But all eyes seem to be directed at the game she is making of pointing at random words. They delight in her delight. She laughs and they laugh. Despite the stifling heat, the atmosphere is one of joy and comfort. Movement and shouts are directed toward the lesson. The crowd is happily learning within these humid cement walls.

When she finishes with what I would term the modeling portion of the lesson, the guided practice section follows. Later in a semi-structured interview, I ask Miss Phalen about the lesson steps she plans as I am interested to discover if she uses a model, guided practice, and independent practice structure. She shakes her head and says, “I just do what children need to learn.” But her instincts reflect the practices of a U.S. lesson plan model: motivate, model, allow for guided and independent practice and then summarize.

I follow-up by asking questions about her courses during her two years at the pedagogy school. She tells me she had to write many lesson plans. But when I question her about the structure of these plans, she gives me a blank stare and finally says in a quizzical manner that she had to write plans showing she knew the material. After my visit to the pedagogy school I have a better idea of what she means regarding the importance of recounting the content of a subject.
area rather than awareness of lesson plan structure. While she may not explain to me her understanding of the “art” of teaching, she practices it using a climate of safety in her classroom, positive reinforcement, and teacher proximity, all components I strive to instill in my own teacher interns, components that point to best practice teaching.

As I observe, I use the lesson terminology and methodology I know, comparing her practices to my teacher view and write in my field notes that she has moved on to guided practice. She is about to choose students to come to the board. I don’t need a translator to let me know she is looking for volunteers and that these children love to come to the board. All hands wave wildly in the air, children are standing in anticipation, and there is a buzz. She adeptly waits, delighting in their enthusiasm. The drama is here. She does not choose quickly, but rather, as I often do, waits to garner as much joy as she can out of the active volunteers. I recognize the practice of employing “wait time,” a classic teaching strategy. When three students are called to the board, there is an audible moan of disappointment. Miss Phalen races her sandled feet down one of three aisles and jokes with children to be the teacher at their seats. The three chosen little ones dance to the board, smiling brightly. Miss Phalen swishes back to the front where she pulls two more sticks from behind her desk. One girl, with a bright red clip holding back her hair, is the self-chosen leader. She begins and has the loudest voice. Her voice projects and the two others echo her along with the cadence of her stick as the words are read. When these pointers are gently placed on the floor, the class erupts into wild applause, led by Miss Phalen. Two other groups are called to the board to read; and in much the same way, one girl seems to lead while the other two students follow. Each time, wild applause breaks out. The classroom has become an interactive audience as students demonstrate their understandings. Miss Phalen’s body language insures participation. She easily glides up and down aisles, pausing to peer into a child’s eyes as if to say “I see you watching. Good job.” She places hands on shoulders and
pauses near those students I have come to learn will later have difficulty. From my perch in the back, I have a view most teachers do not have the advantage of seeing on a regular basis. I watch hands and feet. I wait for the little shoves and foot fights in which even my first graders who were strategically seated at the most expensive of multi-colored tables designed for any sensory integration issue, always seemed to participate. There were none. No, here most feet could not touch the floor. This would give most U.S. occupational therapists pause for concern. In these too big tables and benches, legs were curled under little bodies or tangled in place as if dancing along with the song of the lesson. No one “accidentally” kicked another. No hands reached into cubbies in this room to make a plaything out of the remnants of a wrapper or even to blow up a balloon or bat one around, behaviors I learned were common in other Cambodian classrooms.

As I ponder this, Miss Phalen moves to a deeper component of the guided practice lesson. U.S. educators label this “checking for understanding.” I watch in a mixture of anticipation and physical frustration. Insects have started buzzing around me. I’m sure they are attracted to the sweat streaming down my face, arms, and legs. They bite around my ankles, and I squirm as children pick up their remnants of chalk to write on slates. Miss Phalen slides her way along the aisles. Her constant motion has me envious. It certainly must keep the biting bugs off, but how does she do it in this heat? Her face shines but there are no visible drips of sweat. She is empathetic and energetic as she playfully tells students to put their slates face down on the tables. I wait, expectantly with the rest of the class as she pauses dramatically before giving the command to turn the slates over and write a specific word. There is laughter as children write the words, slam the slates back down and then, on command, wave them in air to show the word each has written. This is active listening and active participation at its best. The drama and joy of the leader sweeps the class along in excitement. Children cheer and clap for the correct answers as Miss Phalen dances along the aisles pointing out correct words or even nicely written words.
Here and there a child falters with an answer. She stands near and whispers to the child to achieve a zone of proximal development. Loving and thankful looks are focused on her. There may be limited supplies in this room, but there is not a limit on excitement. Miss Phalen uses drama to engage her class in learning. I watch in awe and wish I could transport not only her but the entire classroom to the U.S. She is a model of how the teacher’s art, not the hands-on material or test preparation booklets, make the difference, and ultimately engage all children in the lesson.

Then just as suddenly as the slates were taken out, they are hidden away again. Miss Phalen is swishing up and down the aisles dividing the class into six groups. Each group must write several sentences with the words. In front of me, seven children put their heads together and whisper ideas while a girl carefully writes on a scrap of paper provided by Miss Phalen. As the children involve themselves in their work, their teacher is a perfect demonstration of proximity control (Hunter, 1967) as she again moves about the room, looking over shoulders, pointing out words, asking questions to guide the writing, and even making jokes. Groups laugh and erase as incorrect structures and word choice are pointed out. In front of me, two boys inch away from the group and begin a pushing match. Miss Phalen quickly notices this, moving to the group to ask a question. This is enough to make the boys rejoin the effort. I want to sigh in appreciation. She employs Hunter’s (1967) techniques professionally and effortlessly.

Finally Miss Phalen returns to the front of the room and asks representatives to line up and share their products. Fingers are pointed by the group members until finally six girls and one boy stand to share their work. As each child finishes reading, wild applause and cheering reverberate through the room. Just as the lesson is complete, the bell sounds. Miss Phalen stands in the center, reviews the lesson, and then asks the class to stand. They fold their hands in a polite salute. In one whole-class voice, they loudly praise their teacher for the lesson. These are
well-practiced words that sound like a chant, and she replies with equally rehearsed words which involve imploring them to work hard so they can be successful. Now they are free to play. But not all do. About ten girls stay behind in the room. The pointer sticks click away on the board as the girls play teacher and read the sentences again and again. They smile, laugh, and dance around, in an impersonation of their beloved teacher. I watch this lesson review and marvel at the opportunity this gives the actresses for deeper thought as sentences, stories, and rhyme are created. Miss Phalen sits at her table and grades notebooks. She is disturbed at one point by a little boy who comes to stand near her. She looks at him, opens her tiny purse, and pulls out paper money. The boy takes this and flies out the door, likely to buy a drink as when the class returns he is carrying water. Throughout the entire break, the group of girls has remained in the classroom, continuing their education through play. This repetition gives the girls key additional practice and likely helps them achieve “top student” status.

The Collage of Miss Phalen’s Life

The term “house” in rural Cambodia means more than simply a building. Rather, it is an area, usually consisting of a main house with a varied number of sleeping rooms, a separate building for cooking, an outhouse, and an outdoor gathering area. Homes may be one or two stories and are constructed of wood or concrete. Miss Phalen’s home is a white concrete two-story building just off the road. It is, from outward appearances, one of the most modern homes along the road. A small cart full of water, toothpaste, pink toilet paper, condoms, and gasoline in used soda bottles sits in front of the house. Here, Miss Phalen’s niece sells these needed goods to villagers. As we wind along the pathway to her outdoor area, we pass a small white spirit house on a pole. These are common sights in Buddhist Southeast Asia for it is believed the spirits of dead ancestors must be provided for as no one wants the spirits to inhabit the family home. Thus, a place for them is erected, with food and water outside of homes and even hotels. Suddenly, an
oversized white duck runs toward me in a menacing way only to be shooed away by Miss Phalen. There is a long set of steps which lead to the sleeping areas “for the hot season.” Sleeping rooms underneath are “for the colder weather.” Inside these dark rooms are wooden platforms where bamboo mats can be rolled out for sleeping. Clothes are draped over pieces of wood in each room. A few geckos scurry up and down the walls, with no means of escape to the outside world other than through the open doorway.

In the middle of this house area sits a large maroon-colored stone table and benches. A few feet away is the traditional wooden platform where the family sits to talk, wipe out dishes, or do other chores. Behind the platform is a small building where cooking is done. Piles of discarded cans and bottles are strewn in front of the small building. The open door frame and sizeable gaps between the boards offer a bit of light to the dark interior. I peer inside. Rice simmers over an open fire. The wood smoke is overwhelming to my already sensitive nose and lungs, and I turn quickly away but not before noting the metal pots and pans that are lined up on the dirt floor. A few candles sit, waiting for nightfall when they will become the light source for this wood building. Chickens of all sizes race about. One large bird hops the two feet to the wooden platform and pecks at the newly wiped bowls. I shuffle past the discarded rice bags, rotting food items, and glass bottles that litter the ground to study “the backyard” where tall banana leaves wave. A man is relieving himself in this area.

Miss Phalen lives here with her mother and niece. She is the last of her siblings to call this place home. Her brothers and sisters have moved away and her father is dead. At twenty-eight years old, she says she is happy to be here, taking care of her mother. After graduating from the pedagogy school, she taught for two years in a more rural area until she could be transferred to this village school where she has spent the last seven years.
As darkness begins to shade the land Miss Phalen brings out a car battery and fastens it to a lone fluorescent bulb dangling above the table and benches. It is under this single light that she writes her weekly lesson plans as she is not allowed to do this at school. When I ask about her feelings regarding this required homework she tells me that this task is best done at home as she is always so busy watching the children at school. My mind flashes to American teachers and planning times built into daily schedules. After she completes her weekly task, she must hand these plans into the principal for storage in a file. As we discuss the multitude of at-home tasks of teachers, including the worry about encouraging unmotivated students and those who cannot learn, her mother carries dishes of rice and fish from the cooking building. Several women pass by on bicycles and wave to us. An elderly toothless man pauses to stare at my hair. Her house is on the thoroughfare to the main road so many people greet her and often pause to talk. There is a friendly and communal feel to this place.

Miss Phalen points to the light and tells me that someday she hopes to get a television set. But for now her entertainment consists of listening to music and performing karaoke and traditional dancing. When I first mention the word literacy, both Miss Phalen and the translator have difficulty understanding the concept. I give examples in as broad of terms as possible, citing the newspapers, magazines, texting, reading the words on a karaoke screen along with books. I ask about opportunities for writing by showing my personal journal and talking about the possibility of making lists for the daily market trips. Miss Phalen shakes her head and answers by explaining there are no books in the house, only a few old magazines detailing trends in fashion or Khmer entertainers. She enjoys reading these but says she wishes she had more magazines as these are out-of-date. To my amazement, the other literacy-related activity she discusses, besides reading the karaoke words, is her cell phone. She tells of texting her friends and fellow teachers. When I ask her to show me this, I see that all the texting is done in English.
due to lack of Khmer characters on the phones. Because she has a limited English-speaking vocabulary, I am interested as to what she texts. She shows me the word “hi.” This is what is texted back and forth. She simply likes to keep in touch with others in this way. As for speaking, Miss Phalen uses the phone to freely chat in Khmer with friends and colleagues. She and others like her appear to use a cell phone for oral communication just as frequently as any Westerners in her age group. She talks about writing her lesson plans but because of a lack of paper, she does not write in any other way on a regular basis. Again, shortage of material is a stumbling block. Miss Phalen returns to talk of her students as she describes a desire for colorful books for them. Other than this description, she has little more to say about other literacy uses in her classroom and in the village during this discussion or during any of the informal conversations we had. I was never able to identify any community-literacy building activities in which she encouraged her students to participate.

Later, we have the opportunity to leave the village area and go into the near-by town together. This is an unusual venture for Miss Phalen. She has never been to what is called the “mall.” As she enters the air-conditioned bright three-storied building, her eyes widen. She points to the escalator, and nearly screams, “Oh my gosh,” in English. She grasps the edge of the moving stairs and gingerly steps on, following my lead. We giggle together as the stairs move. She peers at the six stores below as we are carried upward. When we are deposited at the second floor, she eagerly points upward, and we ride again to the only store on the third floor, a place that sells appliances and electronics. As we walk in, her face lights up. I follow her to a section where stoves are displayed. She lovingly caresses them and asks me to explain these appliances to her. She examines the cord and plug as I explain this is the way we cook our food in the U. S. We then walk over to the refrigerators. Her home has no means of keeping food cold, and she must visit an open air market everyday to purchase grocery items. Her quick wit is evident when
she turns over the price tag and screams, laughs, and then quips, “It would take me many lifetimes to save up for one of these.” She is wide-eyed as we walk past washing machines and televisions. Again I hear about her desire for a television. She wants to keep up with entertainment and happenings in the country such as the current border temple dispute with Thailand.

Another outing takes us to a party hosted by my gatekeeper who has set up a karaoke machine along with a small wooden table with a basket of plastic flowers. Other guests pass the microphone from one to another. Most singers remain seated and their eyes do not leave the screen as the Khmer words to popular Cambodian songs bounce along. When it is Miss Phalen’s turn, she stands to read the lyrics and often looks at the gathering of her fellow teachers as she belts out the solo in her melodic voice. There is clapping when she is finished. Later she sings a duet with a male teacher. Both are recognized as the best singers in the room and conversation stops when these two are “on stage.”

Interspersed with karaoke is Khmer dancing which is a slow saunter around the wooden table. Hands move in graceful gestures as dancers stroll in slides to the slow beat of Khmer music. Others laugh at my poor movements and lack of rhythm as I attempt to glide to the music. Miss Phalen tries to help me but ends up doubled over in laughter as, despite the numerous times I have attempted this type of dancing, I still fail to look graceful. She was a persistent and patient teacher and for several songs pointed to her feet indicating I should glide as she glides. She even took my hands and tried to move them along with the music but was never successful in teaching me to dance Khmer style.

During several social events together I noticed the easy and friendly banter between Miss Phalen and the male teachers. Miss Phalen joked that she would eat when the men served her and often teased her male colleagues about their dancing and what she often called their silly
attempts at explaining how to teach something. Barbs were directed back at her and this good-natured mockery appeared to provide a type of entertainment for the group. Comedy was actively produced in these social situations rather than being passively viewed as something performed by entertainers. The manner between Miss Phalen and males, as with all men and women I observed, was one of friendship, connectivity, and easy camaraderie. Many times I saw women in charge who confidently directed men as to routines and tasks and likewise, men in positions of power were respectful of all who worked for them. There was collegiality. By observing their interactions and classrooms, these colleagues helped me to better understand both Miss Phalen and literacy. I better understood how she fit into the larger picture of Cambodian educators. I turn now to portraits of her fellow teachers.

The Exosystem of Miss Phalen’s Colleagues: A Walk Through Other Classroom Galleries

The loud voices of children spelling, reading orally, or reciting multiplication tables can be heard emanating from the open classrooms at any time of day. Choral response is the norm in all of these classrooms, but the success of this generalized teaching style varies with the detailed practices of specific teachers. While I observed nine teachers at the Apsara School and interviewed all faculty including the principal and librarian, I will only describe the classrooms of three teachers other than Miss Phalen. Two of these teachers were chosen because each represents a different end of the teaching spectrum. The first tries to involve her students in the lessons while the other has a classroom that feels uninspired. By describing these teachers, I hope to show the variation of styles within a single school and broader methodology along with placing Miss Phalen on this spectrum. The third teacher is one of the two male teachers at this school. While the purpose of this study is not to compare male and female teachers, a description may be helpful in further discerning the ways in which literacy is encouraged and could be encouraged in Cambodia. I offer a small snapshot of a fourth teacher as she has a unique
situation thus illustrating the flexibility and difficulties that are inherent within Cambodian schools.

Second Grade

Miss Thida’s second grade class has 43 students who, like Miss Phalen’s group, sit expectantly, two or three to wooden benches that are pulled in front of rough-surfaced tables. A few sentences are written on the front chalkboard. This preparatory lesson sets the stage for reading about the states of water. As the group settles in, I notice the same faded but dancing shapes strung high above the little heads. There is a board on the back wall with pencil drawings, now faded, hung via toothpicks into the weave of the bamboo backing. At the front sits the small teacher’s table bearing a basket of plastic flowers and Miss Thida’s small, child-like purse. A bucket and large bag wait on her chair. Other than the required lists of attendance and numerical grades, along with a nonworking clock, the walls are bare and the air is still.

After the required greeting where students stand and salute their teacher, Miss Thida walks to this bag. All eyes are on her and I feel great expectation. When she pulls out a bottle of water there is an audible gasp in the room. This seems strange as many children have water bottles in their book bags and freely bend down to take a sip. The students seem to know they are going to see a demonstration, likely a welcome relief from the tedium of repetitive answers. Miss Thida turns her back on the group, walks to the board, and writes the three Khmer words for liquid, solid, and gas. She points to each word as she explains that water can be a liquid, a solid, and a gas. She then saunters to the side wall, leans against it, and asks the class to explain this again. About half of the hands shoot up and Miss Thida calls on a little ponytailed girl in the front row who stands and recites the previous description. All clap and Miss Thida smiles. She returns to the board and points to the word liquid. She quickly calls a little boy to the front. He scurries to get his feet back into his brown flip flops and nearly stumbles as he runs up the aisle
with excitement. She twists the cap from the bottle of water, smiles broadly at the glass, and pours a bit into his hand. He laughs. She bends down and asks him several questions: “Could you hold the water? Did the water have a shape? Was the water wet?” As each is asked he takes on an aura of comedian who is entertaining an audience and with great exaggeration, answers each question, albeit correctly. Children clap and roar their approval for his answers, encouraged by Miss Thida. She then calls a girl to the front. She, like the boy, must first slip her dangling legs back into her flip flops before hurrying to the front of the room. She takes the bucket and ceremoniously pours the water into this container. She asks the girl to look into the bucket and to describe how the shape of the water is different now that it is in the bucket. After several questions where the class waits in anticipation, the girl gets to the required concept: that water takes on the shape of the container it is in. When this answer is given the class jumps to their feet and claps along with Miss Thida. The girl skips to her seat.

Miss Thida then launches into a soliloquy about boiling water and steam. The back half of the class begins to shuffle about on the benches. After about five minutes boys are whispering to one another and gradually swinging their legs closer and closer to their seatmates in a bit of a game, while a few girls are playing with their fingers or doodling in their notebooks. I think how this lesson could be enhanced simply by using pictures, which are not available. After several more minutes of teacher talk Miss Thida turns her back, erases the board, and writes more sentences about the shape of water. She takes her pointed stick and asks a group of girls, a group that I noted had been paying close attention, to come to the board. They look at one another triumphantly and walk proudly to the front. One girl picks up the stick and the others face the board and loudly read for their classmates. When they finish, all clap. This celebration has the attention of the boys again. Now many of them are waving their hands. Miss Thida calls on two boys and one girl. The same sentences are read, with the girl who reached the board first, holding
the pointer. This scenario is repeated five times with mixed gender groups. Except for one group, a girl always held the pointer.

The lesson concludes with students reading the sentences on the board chorally. This is repeated several times. Many children are fingering notebooks and staring blankly at the board, often saying nothing. A few, mainly girls near the front, seem to carry the sound for the rest of the class. Others, mostly boys, are pushing one another under the tables. One boy flicks at a bug flying around him. Miss Thida smiles at those in the front who are reading loudly and ignores the remainder of the group.

I hear the ring of the bell. She asks all to stand; they oblige and salute her before running into the school yard. A small group of girls stays behind to play teacher. They take turns using the pointer and reading the sentences to the others who stand and quietly wait their turn but obligingly applaud the pretend teacher. The lesson is repeated over and over again by them. Just as in Miss Phalen’s room, the feel of the girls’ lesson and reactions accurately reflects the feel in the room.

During this break, Miss Thida talks about her class and the struggle to bring literacy to her students. She speaks specifically about this lesson and says, “I need materials like cooking pots so that students will better understand what they will read.” She continues her litany of wishes by noting the shortcomings of her classroom and of Cambodian education in general by stating, “I think the best way to teach students well is to have learning material. I wish we could get more pictures and books and math material.” She wistfully repeats her concern regarding lack of materials, “I think we do not have any pictures. Some students cannot catch on and I try in every way to act out or show them so they can understand. But I need more pictures.” This is a desire repeated over and over again. But infused into this is a belief in her students. “I feel very happy as I think my students can read and write but they still can get better, as any student can.”
She asks for any advice I have, particularly as it relates to instructing those who are not learning but I tell her that I am there to learn from her, my usual reply. As we say good-by, the sounds of the little girls clipping the blackboard with the pointer continue. Their high-pitched voices nearly overshadow the running and chasing games outside.

Third Grade

On the day I observe a third grade teacher, she seems tired and bored. The faded dull yellow of the walls and dusty floor mirror her mood as the vocabulary and spelling lesson proceeds. No dancing shapes flutter above students’ heads nor are there any works of art on the walls. Miss Kunthy’s voice is very quiet, and she yawns frequently. I hear the chickens and roosters. Their sounds almost overwhelm the dullness of this room. There are few smiles. Even my translator, who is usually eager to explain everything, seems bored. His eyes glaze over and he yawns at regular intervals. She rarely moves. Words are written on the board and Miss Kunthy’s flat voice recites them as she reluctantly shuffles to the front and points as each word is said. Very few children look at the board, most are swinging their legs close to a seatmate, doodling in a notebook, or are involved in an assorted number of other activities. At one point there is great excitement among a group of boys near me. I watch as one boy creeps out of his seat and grabs something from another boy’s neck. Soon there is giggling. I strain to see what the drama is about and almost laugh as a tiny gecko is being boogied along the student’s table. The boys watch the puppeteer as the show takes an extraordinary number of twists and turns. The poor creature finally finds release in death and is hidden in the cubby. Miss Kunthy has been oblivious to this theatre. Her monotone voice had rattled on and on so that even I was more interested in the gecko show and neglected to take notes on this part of her lesson, focusing instead on the dancing reptile.
When I pay attention again she is leaning against a wall and three children are at the board. They write, erase, write, erase, and write again. No one, except possibly me, is watching them. Even Miss Kunthy is talking to the principal who is standing outside the opening that serves as a window, holding his baby son.

Finally this trio is released, with no celebration for any accomplishments, and she calls on another group of students to repeat the same assignment. The three work at the board while the rest of us look for entertainment elsewhere. This pattern goes on for an interminable length of time until the bell releases all of us to the joys of the school yard. As I walk from the room, I wonder if anyone, other than those students who worked at the front board, learned anything. And possibly not even all children who worked on this stage were engaged in the assignment as I noted that often two children would work while the third merely smiled or looked at the floor. No words of encouragement were offered to these children. It is not surprising to me that no one stays in this room during the break. All, including Miss Kunthy, stepped into the sunshine.

Later I talk with this instructor about her teaching. She, like others, describes the lack of materials and books. She says that children just do not enjoy the boring black and white books that are in limited supply. She reflects on what it takes to be a good teacher with these words, “I think that to be a good teacher, we must have all material like paper. We need pictures.” She repeats her desire for a specific supply, “I needs [sic] paper.” Then she speaks about her successes as a teacher, “I feel delighted and very happy when they read and write. I think they are doing very well.” Like the others, she asks me for any suggestions I have.

Perhaps I was with Miss Kunthy on a bad day. I have had my own dull days with students. But my teacher antennae lead me to believe otherwise. Some students will pay attention, anticipating an interesting comment or activity if they are accustomed to that happening. There were just too few students who followed Miss Kunthy’s lesson. Additionally,
even on the occasional “bad day” students will stay in during recess in an attempt to be close to or mimic a teacher they like. I saw this in many classrooms at the Apsara School so know this is not just a Western tradition. This closeness did not happen between these third graders and Miss Kunthy.

Sixth Grade

Mr. Manith’s sixth graders were reading about Khmer drums on the day I observed in his classroom. It was a particularly hot and humid day so I took care to find a seat near the opening. It was a few minutes after one o’clock when my translator and I settle into the crowded classroom but Mr. Manith was nowhere to be seen. Five minutes later, the sputter of a motor scooter announced his arrival. He whipped his helmet off and bounded up the few steps to his classroom. The lesson began.

Without missing a beat, he tells the class to open to a specific page containing line drawings of drums. Mr. Manith begins reading to the class about these cultural artifacts pacing back and forth in front of the room. Occasionally he stops to gesture and ask questions. His face lights up when students raise their hands, and he smiles even more broadly when a correct answer is given. He repeats questions as he attempts to make sure everyone knows the memorized answer to the types of drums and materials used to make them.

When he is satisfied the students can recite the answers, they are asked to reread what he has read. He points to one boy who stands to read. Five other boys are following along by pointing at the words. A group of girls near me begins to giggle. They glance at me, aware that I see their inattention to the lesson but they make no attempt to hide the photos they are passing back and forth. They have likely been torn from a fashion magazine as they depict young males and females dressed in what I assume to be expensive attire. Mr. Manith notices this group, and calls on one of the girls to explain the characteristics of a specific drum. She stands but cannot
comply with his request. She sits and he asks one of the boys to do the task. This boy has been paying attention and quickly answers. Mr. Manith returns to the group of girls and asks if they now understand. Another girl in the group is asked to stand and repeat the answer. This seems to diffuse the picture-passing and calls the group back to attention. Mr. Manith continues to encourage those who are engaged in other activities to pay attention. One boy takes out a yellow balloon and blows it up. When it pops, he laughs but I note that he asks this boy several questions during the next few moments in an attempt to reengage him in the lesson.

Mr. Manith repeatedly walks up and down between the third and fourth aisle of the room. The majority of boys are seated here. Like Miss Phalen, he uses proximity control (Hunter, 1967) to keep students engaged. But he appears to focus on the boys. And he is successful. They are active listeners. Many smile when he smiles and are quick to give correct answers to his rapid fire questions. He is nonstop energy. He travels back and forth along this aisle and gestures constantly. When he notices someone looking in another direction, Mr. Manith is quick to move to that spot. He never overtly corrects a student or admonishes someone to pay attention. He just moves to that spot in the room. The whole class lesson continues with Mr. Manith using a combination of lecture, oral reading, and questioning of individual students. There are no drums or colorful photos to illustrate his points. The only concrete object is a ruler which is taken out at one point to show students just how small a particular drum is. The lack of materials means his energy is especially key to keeping the class engaged in his lecture and the oral reading that is performed.

A girl near the front points at Mr. Manith’s shirt which has become drenched in sweat. She giggles, but it is not behind his back. He grabs some material and laughingly points out the wetness to the class. He fans himself with his book. They all chuckle in a moment that seems to connect teacher and students.
As the afternoon progresses, he begins to lose energy and the students become less interested in listening. By 3:55 it is pouring rain, and darkness has settled into the electricity-free classroom. Few are still paying attention to the whole class lesson. Small groups whisper to one another. Mr. Manith ignores them and continues to work with those who still have a book open. He walks down the aisle and uses his marker to write on a table in an attempt to illustrate a point for a boy. He rubs this drawing off and glances at me. I think I discern a sigh.

Finally it is break time and many sixth graders stream onto the porch. Several students remain in the room. A group of girls playfully pokes at Mr. Manith’s wet shirt. He banter back and forth with the gathered boys and girls. It is easy to tell that this is a well-liked and respected teacher who wants his students to be able to correctly answer fact-based questions when they are posed. But he does not use small groups to discuss issues. He later tells me that he has too much material to cover to do this.

When I have the opportunity to speak with Mr. Manith he, like the other teachers, laments the lack of materials and books. He says he has no posters or “colorful pictures.” He wishes he had more material for math. When asked about books, he shakes his head, “I need books for children, much book. The more the better.” Like the others, Mr. Manith knows there is a serious lack of teaching material, but he says he tries to use the local environment to provide learning opportunities and uses land near the school to teach about aquatic plants. He describes his questioning techniques including those requiring factual knowledge such as the color and size of plants along with questions as to how they are used by local villagers. He talks about instructing his students as to proper farming practices and what to do about problem insects and animals. While he never described a teaching technique requiring students to problem solve, his use of local land and practices indicated that as a teacher he had employed problem solving techniques to overcome the deficiency of materials.
The Baby

On the opposite end of the school is Miss Rattana’s classroom. It is unusually dark, even for a school that doesn’t have electricity. The administrative building blocks any sun from the door and the roof of the school’s kitchen shades the window opening. To add to the dreary feeling of this classroom is the knowledge of this teacher’s struggle. She is a young mother of three whose husband died “from an illness” a few months ago. Life is difficult for Miss Rattana as she now must support these children on her limited salary. She cannot afford to pay a babysitter so must bring her baby with her. The child, who is nearly one, is in the room during school hours.

This was not the only baby who spent his days at the school. The principal is married to one of the teachers. Their one year-old was often handed back and forth between the two or held by an older female student. When the young family would climb onto their motor scooter to ride home, the baby was placed in front. He stood on the seat, grasping the handlebars with a big grin. Because two parents are employed at the school, there seems to be a greater opportunity for this baby to be cared for by whichever parent may be less occupied with other responsibilities thus not creating the atmosphere I observed in Miss Rattana’s room.

When I first went to visit with Miss Rattana, she was holding her young son who wore only a shirt. Upon my entry, she placed him on the concrete floor to greet me using a salute.

On this morning, these second graders are learning to write what Miss Rattana terms “French numerals,” a term relating back to the days when the French governed the country. As she shows the children how to write 2, 3, and 4 on the board, the baby scoots about on the floor, stopping occasionally to pull himself up to peer at children. The baby stops at one table where a pair of girls waves their fingers at him. He pulls himself up, and in the process their books fall to
the floor creating a ruckus and stopping the lesson as the girls retrieve their material and quiet the child.

During the time I spent in this classroom, many eyes were focused on the engaging and curious baby as he crawled about, occasionally pulling himself up on a bench or table leg to attempt to entice a smile or coo from his audience. He was a distraction to both the students and his mother who often stopped her lessons to deal with his needs. I offer no suggestions as to how to solve this teacher’s childcare needs, only the observation that the child’s presence added to the attention issues in this classroom. Additionally during the time I was in Cambodia, this classroom was closed twice as Miss Rattana was absent, further adding to the already limited amount of teacher/student interaction time.

This situation presents several interesting considerations. One consideration is economic. This young mother is not paid enough to afford any daycare, even if it were available. Another consideration deals with teacher/student time. As discussed, classrooms are simply locked if the teacher is not available. Despite the baby’s presence, students are getting time with their teacher. This is time that, if Miss Rattana were to stay home, would not be available to these children. But there is another way of looking at this situation. It involves the differences in the Western versus the Cambodian view of “it takes a village.” This baby’s presence may be providing a key lesson: We are all responsible for the care of one another. I think back to the lesson taught to me by “the girl in the white hat” and wonder, “Who am I to even say that this child is a distraction?” In Cambodian culture, the lesson of caring for another person is an essential model. This baby is a constant reminder and model of this lifestyle commitment. Months later, as I write of this classroom, fresh from a summer of watching U.S. news replete with town hall meeting footage, scandals involving infidelity, and a lack of civility from athletes, politicians and entertainers, I contemplate this experience. Perhaps it is Western cultures that need to learn this lesson.
The Exosystem of the Community: What Are the Views?

Although I am an avid “dog person” I admit I have a fear of free-roaming dogs in Asia. When I open the gallery of my mind’s eye, this is the shudder that eclipses all of my senses. I have four dogs of my own and numerous photos of unknown canines in countless countries, but here their menacing transformation from lazing near the opening of a hut to a barking creature that pounces to the edge of the path to stand and snarl seems frightening. The dogs are everywhere and everyone has at least one, often poorly kept, dog. There is no shortage of dogs in Cambodia. Perhaps I had taken to heart the words of warning in tourist guidebooks regarding unvaccinated dogs. My translator knew I was afraid and always attempted to stand between me and a barking dog. One villager advised me to bend down as if I was picking up a rock, thus causing the dog to run away. But it wasn’t until my gatekeeper termed the dogs, doorbells that I began to be a bit more comfortable with the constant barrage of barking. She explained that these dogs alert the inhabitants of the often door-free and certainly lock-free homes that someone is approaching. When I began to think in these terms, I had an easier time dealing with the dogs who told their owners of my approach as I walked through the village.

A paved road cuts this village into two distinct areas. The homes in the area behind the school feel protected by the overhanging trees which shade the sun and embrace the residents. Here and there a small business provides income for villagers. Carts displaying sundries such as bottled water and toilet paper sit side-by-side with gasoline awaiting purchase. A hand-operated rice mill results in bags of rice for locals to boil. Women sit near or under their huts weaving baskets.

More rice fields and open farms give the other side of the paved road an airy feeling. One can walk along this path, see into the distance, and study the open huts. As the path winds its way through this sun-drenched area, boys punch a ball across a net as they play game after game
of volleyball. Children squat in doorways often playing games with one another. Occasionally
the low moaning of oxen reminds me that these are the primary means of plowing fields. Men
might drive rickety trucks full of baskets to market or work on a government construction
project. Women can be seen bending over the water-logged rice fields, replanting the seedlings.
Often older women shuffle along the path, bent over so they no longer can look another in the
eye. I imagine this is from years of toiling with the constant rotation of planting and harvesting
required by the family’s rice fields.

On both sides of the road many women make a living by weaving baskets. They sit on the
cement or dirt floors just outside of their huts and prepare reeds for the transformation from plant
to baskets. Wood fires ensure that a constant pot of rice is kept warm. The smell from this wood
burning hangs in the air, particularly in the section of the village behind the school. Chickens
peck. Roosters call. It is a life that is simple but requires constant work. I am reminded time and
time again of the closeness of families and villagers. No one speaks ill of another. There is
concern, not just for the family’s children, but for the children of the entire village. In this place
the African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” is not simply a phrase or book title, it is
lived. I think back to the lesson of Miss Rattana’s baby.

This section of the Cambodian Village Portrait Album contains a collage of four families
who sat with me to share their lives, views on education and literacy, and their hopes for their
children. These people were a sample of convenience. They happened to be home when we
passed by their house. When my translator introduced me, they readily agreed to talk with me
and even for me to record them. No one refused. These are the villagers I interviewed formally,
but there were many other casual conversations I engaged in, throughout Cambodia, which led
me to conclude that these people are representative of many in the country. They are people who
struggle to make a living out of the simplicity of their circumstances. They are the farmers,
basket weavers, and construction workers who have great dreams for a future they may never live to see. But they support education as it is their belief that school holds the key to a brighter life for all. There was no talk of getting wealthy or buying a nicer home. These people picture a place with a healthier population, a cleaner environment, and opportunities for more children to learn. This is not a competitive place rather it is a place where people paint a portrait of a cooperative future so that all might find happiness.

The Weaving Grandmother

On the same side of the road as the school, nestled under the overhanging fruit and leafy trees, sits a tiny home that can barely be seen from the path. Here a toothless older woman sat, legs folded underneath her, in front of her two-room, dark residence where gaps in the boards allowed what little sun there was on this side of the village into the furniture-free areas. One room holds sleeping mats and the other has a wooden platform for sitting or eating. Most living seemed to take place on the outside of this home. Pots and pans hang on the porch-like area where the grandmother strips her pile of rattan in preparation for weaving.

This woman talks of her wishes for her young grandson who stands near-by with a cadre of friends. She tells me that the boy’s father, her son, was “always escaping from school” but she knows her grandson is different and that he stays and “does not escape.” She speaks highly of her support for the school but when I ask her if she had recently visited the school she shakes her head and says, “No I am too busy here.” She says she admires the work of the faculty and hopes her grandson will be a teacher or doctor. But she says she cannot help him as she cannot read or write well enough, and she must work constantly so that the family can buy food and clothing. There is no time for anything else.

She describes her struggle to get enough plant material for weaving and clucks her tongue about the dispute with Thailand. She launches into a long statement about the problem and ends
by concluding that this is troublesome for the village as baskets cannot be sold to the dwindling number of tourists in the disputed area, creating further limitations to the already strained income stream of the villagers. This international incident has local implications.

A few village boys attend high school in the near-by town and because of them and some men who are able to occasionally use an Internet Café to read news, global events are freely shared in the village. This is a form of literacy that hearkens back in time to the days of the village criers in the U.S. The grandmother tells me she is happy these males can read and will share news with others, who in turn tell neighbors and friends of events. This is an illustration of oral communication on the village level. As if to demonstrate the usefulness of this oral literacy, the “weaving grandmother” tells me about the new U.S. president. She describes his skin color and the idea that he brings hope along with a new U.S. policy. Some men have told her about the changes they hope he will bring. Phrases such as “new friendships” are used.

When I ask this woman about other sources of news such as newspapers or magazines she says they do not have any in the house and that she would not be able to read them anyway. Without looking up from her stripping task, this grandmother nods toward a schoolbook the child had brought home from the morning session. My translator picks it up to expose a burned science and social studies text. Because the bottom half of the pages are curled with the remnants of an accidental burning, it would be impossible to read the totality of text. She tells me that the child’s father, her son, put the book too close to the fire. She continues by saying there are no books in the house and that her grandson never brings home a library book, only a schoolbook. She says he cannot read or write the Khmer Language yet as he is only in the second grade. I confirm the absence of calendars and other alternative literacy sources as the woman talks again of her support for the school and its teachers and of her hope that her grandson along with the other boys, who peek around the corner of the house, will be educated. This woman is of the
generation of people who lived through the Khmer Rouge. She does not equate education with the negative. She embraces it.

During our conversation, this woman never stopped stripping her rattan. Her head remained focused on her task, her fingers moving in the deft never-ending rhythm of her stripping task as she answered my questions and then lectured about the difficulties of finding her needed material. Just as the teachers struggle with lack of supplies, here provisions are also a problem.

The Sad Woman

Further down the path, in a dark area under large trees is the home of a struggling young wife and mother. As we approach she grabs an oversized shirt from a basket of crumpled, faded clothing and slips it over her naked daughter’s head. The girl, about two years old, never leaves her mother’s side during my visit. She stares at me with her big eyes, and I am never able to coax a smile onto her expressionless face. This woman seems to carry a heavy burden. Her face droops with exhaustion. She speaks in a monotone, focusing on the need for her daughter to fold her legs so I cannot see the bottoms of her feet, which is disrespectful in this and many other Asian cultures. This woman’s home lacks the friendly family-oriented luster of others I’ve visited. It is not merely simple, it is in disrepair. Garbage is piled all around. Old cooking pots are scattered. The boards of the home show wide gaps. She tells me that life is hard as her husband lost a leg in a landmine accident, and she has no education. She must depend on basket weaving to support her family but now it is difficult as she only receives one dollar for forty baskets. The political situation at the border is well known as it impacts the price of baskets. She values the oral literacy that helps her receive this news.
I look around and see no reading or writing material anywhere in the home. She does not display, as so many young mothers do, any torn pages from the popular Cambodian fashion magazines. There is nothing here at all.

The woman is polite and seems happy to have visitors. She invites me to sit but not before she has brushed off a rickety wooden bench for me. This young mother’s eyes cry out despair as she tells me about the problems her son has in school. She says she has been called many times to his classroom because this second grader does not speak. She says he has urinated on the classroom floor and refuses to ask permission to leave the room. She believes the teacher is very kind and wants to help but has no idea how to assist this boy. The young mother sighs, giving me the feeling she is desperately seeking answers. She continues her pleading description of this problem by telling of going to the classroom and peeking through the open window to observe her son. This just confirms what the teacher has said and what she already knows to be true. He does not speak in class.

She never calls her child by name and tells me “the boy” sometimes whisper reads his homework while lying on his mat at night; but her husband, who can read, says he is not saying the words correctly. She wipes the air with her hand and offers the conclusion that she worries what he will do as he grows. There is no “dream” talk here or hope for this child. She seems resigned to his fate of illiteracy.

But this changes when she turns to her daughter and strokes her hair. She speaks with the first hint of hope I have heard since sitting with her, speaking of her wish that at least this child will be able to read and write. She says she hopes this child will “say the words in the class.” I had been conditioned to believe that education for girls was not always valued in developing countries. But this woman, like so many others, has literacy dreams for her daughter.
I ask this mother if, given the opportunity, she would like to share fashion magazines with her neighbors. It is a practice I learned about from another villager. I wonder if she would enjoy looking at the pictures as I know seeing her mother holding reading material would be an important model for the little girl. But this mother seems uninterested and barely replies to my question other than to shrug her shoulders and stroke her daughter’s hair. I inquire as to her interest in attending evening classes at the school if these were ever offered, but again she seems nonchalant and says she must work and take care of her family. This woman seems resigned to her hard life.

As we talked, the sound of chickens was all around. I felt little feet racing over and around my feet as they circled the area in a constant scurry to nowhere. Chickens of all sizes overran the house area to the point where I nearly stepped on a bird that couldn’t have been more than a few days old. I had to constantly look at my flip-flops to be sure I didn’t move them in the wrong direction and accidently step on a chick. This interview time was a banquet for my senses: the remembrance of the feel and sight of that chicken carpet and the sound of the pernicious pecking. But as in all homes on this side of the road, it was the intense smell and taste of the wood fire that I still feel when I resurrect these memories. Food being cooked over an open fire used to bring joyous memories of family barbeques for me, but its taste is so inculcated in my being that it is the overwhelming sensory memory of my time here. Even now many months later, my lungs struggle to dismiss the taste as I write.

As I got up to leave, I noticed this woman eyeing my camera. I ask if she would like to have her picture taken. She nods excitedly and carefully places the little girl on her lap. I take a digital photo and show it to her. She is filled with delight. I was pleased to see the joy this simple pleasure brought to her and explained that I could take a short video of her and the girl. She asks for me to be a part of the little movie so my translator obliges and holds the camera in front of us
as we sit still, not really knowing what to do for this video; but we laugh as we watch the resulting images on the small screen of my camera. She thanks me over and over again. I left feeling relieved that I could bring this small joy into her life.

The Husband and Wife with Strong Educational Beliefs

The other part of this village is a patchwork of open rice fields and farms where eggplant and string beans are grown. A few concrete two-story houses are interspersed with palm thatched wooden huts and stilted homes. One of these boarded homes displays an open shed filled with mounds of woven baskets and bags. My translator tells me that the man who lives here brings these handicrafts to the border for sale but because of the temple dispute, he can no longer sell them at this location. He now works on a near-by construction project. When we visit this family of four, the man has just returned home from his labors and is caked with mud, but he welcomes us and sends his young son off in search of bottled water, a rarity in most of these homes that depend on a hand well or small ponds for this necessity. His wife, wearing what Westerners would call yellow pajamas, searches for a cloth to wipe the outdoor table. Her attire is a common sight in Cambodia.

As we settle in at the table, the second grade boy tells me that he remembers my visit last year and mentions that he is happy I have returned. He can even sing a few bars of the color song I often sing with groups of children which he entices me to join him in, much to the delight of his parents. I am surprised he remembers this.

The father is very anxious to tell me about current global events and relates the recent news of the Air France crash. He says he speaks to other men about this and sees pictures in newspapers that some bring to the construction site. He is also able to watch some news on the family’s television set which receives limited programming such as Cambodian music and dancing. Thinking of the words on a karaoke machine, I ask about text being offered on the
screen as singers are performing, but the two adults shake their heads and say this is not offered. I look at the children and ask if any children’s shows are available but am again answered with a shake of the head.

During this discussion, the man asks me where I am from and when he hears “the United States,” he begins to tell me about President Obama. I can’t discern if he is anxious to show me all he knows or if he thinks I am unaware of the new leader’s characteristics. President Obama’s skin color is emphasized to me as are the size of his ears and short hair. The man tells me that he and others are very happy that Barack Obama is the president. I smile thinking back to my qualitative research methods class where the importance of making connections was discussed. During this key chit-chat introduction I have learned valuable information about literacy. This family is interested in and has access to news of world events.

A discussion of the border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand follows and the translator and this man share similar views, as do most Cambodians I have talked with regarding this issue. They talk of how Thailand is trying to exert influence again over Cambodia and they hope Thailand does not win. I wait patiently for this discussion to come to an end and point out the blue polish on the four year-old girl’s nails. She shyly presses into her mother’s side but her older brother says a few words, she relents and proudly shows me her hands. I “ooh and ah” over the polish which endears me to her, and she shows me her ring, hair clip, blouse, and sandals, likely to elicit my exaggerated reaction to the beauty of these items.

When the men finish their political discussion and my translator returns to the task of helping me, the mother tells me that her daughter can already read and write a few words of Khmer. She helps the child at night, often using the books that her son carries home from the school. She shakes her head when I ask if he reads library books saying, “He has read them all.”
I ask about her literacy practices and she describes an informal practice of sharing magazines. I term this an “informal lending library” as the periodicals are passed from woman to woman on this side of the road. The woman has no idea where these magazines come from, but she reports that she is happy to receive one and always passes it to a neighbor when she is finished with it. These are magazines containing photos and descriptions of fashion trends along with new ideas about recipes. Sometimes she may even find a magazine with articles about children’s health. She says she enjoys reading these stories. This female-driven practice fascinates me. I marvel not just at the resourcefulness of these women but at this illustration of the “it takes a village” maxim.

When I inquire about this couple’s education I am told they each graduated from eighth grade, an accomplishment when they were of school age. The father tells me that he attended the Apsara School when he was a child. He tells me that this school had a coconut [leaf] roof and few rooms when he attended. The wife went to a school in a near-by village in a similar kind of school. When I ask them to compare the difference in the education they received and the experiences of their son, I am impressed with the complete description this couple is able to provide. They begin by talking about the lack of books when they were students. All they had was “one writing notebook.” There were no textbooks and teachers merely told the class about different subjects and hoped the students would write this information in their composition books. They feel that not only are there textbooks now but that the teachers use a greater variety of teaching techniques. There is not as much lecture by the teacher. Blackboards and whiteboards allow teachers and students to write sentences and math problems for all to see. Some teachers ask children to write on slates so that all students must work at the same time rather than waiting for their turn, a practice Miss Phalen uses. Children can read books orally and bring them home. Teachers even try to use examples from the village to help students understand.
The couple has great hope for the future of their children and others in the village. They want their son and daughter to do something to help the Cambodian people and talk of the many issues in the country such as poverty, health, and clean water. It is their hope that the children who are being educated now at the Apsara School will be a source of pride for the village and will assist in solving the difficulties the country faces. There was hope that all children would succeed in making Cambodia a more developed country.

This family appeared to be the most articulate family I interviewed regarding education. It was a helpful conversation as it gave me a firsthand account of what the Apsara School was like for a student about fifteen years ago. The family also had some interesting literacy habits that I had not encountered prior to meeting them. The richness of the women’s lending library and of the man’s information from formal literacy, the newspapers, and informal literacy, conversations with fellow workers, were helpful answers to my questions regarding literacy practices in the village. Additionally, they were the first villagers I spoke with who owned a television.

As I left, they presented me with several baskets from their home. Now, when I look at them and finger the tightly woven reeds that together form this perfect treasure, the memories of the close interactions of this village come flooding back to me. My eyes often follow an individual reed and I think of the individuals who together share and work in harmony. They are all connected, like a tapestry.

This husband and wife were so anxious to help me learn more about their beloved village that they asked their young son to guide us to another home. He smiled broadly, sang a few bars of my color song, and motioned us along. We were on our way.
The Woman Who Displayed Fashion Pictures

This little boy eagerly skipped in front of us as we walked along the dusty, pot-holed path past a pig farm, sidestepping a wandering rooster, and avoiding a dog with a curled tail that joined our single file line. The boy motioned us to move along the narrowing trail as it framed a bright green rice field, and then he pointed a few feet ahead to a tiny board hut with a single opening that served as a door. On one side of the palm-thatched home was an outhouse whose door hung precariously on a hinge revealing the squat hole and a bevy of insects enjoying the contents. In a three-sided tiny building on the other side of the hut sat two small girls balancing plastic bowls on their laps as they scooped rice with their hands into their mouths. The two sat on either side of a wood fire which was the heating source for the metal pot of rice. I inwardly gasped as no adult seemed to be around to watch these two preschoolers who sat too near the burning flame for my taste. The boy had told my translator he would find their mother. He raced down the path. I peeked through the opening into the one room hut and saw a sewing machine operated by a foot pedal and about fifteen pictures of lovely Cambodian women modeling colorful clothes. My assumption that this mother was a seamstress was later confirmed during my conversation with her. I walked around the house, keeping my eye on the little girls who never stopped eating and barely acknowledged my presence. Muddy water pooled in a stagnant brown canal on one side of the house. My translator saw this and pointed to a hand-pump well which he tried to pull, anxious to see if this family had access to cleaner water than the brown mud. He used several methods and then shook his head and said, “It’s broken.” The lack of water bottles confirmed what we suspect; this family depends on the muddy water.

In a few minutes the mother rides up on a big rusty bicycle, smiling broadly. The girls do not move as she leans her bike against the house and grabs a rag to wipe the outdoor platform off for us to use as we talk. She says she is happy to have guests and had been visiting at a
neighbor’s home when we arrived. I ask about her pictures which people have given her from fashion magazines. But when I ask about reading these magazines, she giggles and says she really doesn’t read well despite attending school for many years. She says that she does not encourage her son to take out books from the library. She wants him to “do the work the teacher wants him to do.” She seems to view literacy as only happening within the walls of the classroom with the government-issued textbooks.

Like the previous family, this household has a small battery-run television set that allows them to watch the limited programming received in this village. I was surprised to hear this, given the modesty of the home and wondered why this family had made the choice to spend what was obviously limited money on this type of purchase, but I felt this question might embarrass the woman and did not ask it.

Without being prompted, this mother launches into a long soliloquy about the importance of education. She describes her lectures to her children about the necessity of listening to the teachers and always doing what is asked of them in school. She has a son who is attending school now. She details how she sits with him, on this platform under the single fluorescent bulb which is powered by a battery, so that he does his homework. She says she really can’t help him much, but she sits by him so that he will do it and understand. She thinks this is important. She intends to do the same thing when her daughters reach school age. Her words then become less specific and take on a generalized “hope for the future” tone. She wants her children to be doctors or teachers so “they can help the people of my country.” She knows this is a poor nation with many needs and wants her son and daughters to join the other children in the area to “make a better future.”

This sentiment is in keeping with the hopes I have heard from other villagers. It is these people and others like them who send their precious off-spring to Miss Phalen, putting in her
hands their dreams for not just their children’s success, but the desire that the country will have a better future because of what she is able to accomplish. Parents here, and in other areas of Cambodia I have visited, often speak not just about their individual children as having a responsibility to bring the country from despair to hope but they see all children as holding the key to a brighter future. There was no talk about keeping children home to work the fields or to provide daycare for younger siblings. Instead their words support education and the local school. They want country-wide opportunities for reading and writing. But they struggle. Newspapers and magazines are expensive relative to their income, especially now with the economic downturn which they attribute to the dispute with Thailand regarding the temple at the border. Yet, these are seeds of rich literacy. These are rooted in the communal atmosphere of the people. One side of the road shares magazines, with no formal system, just the trust that they will be passed along. News from looking at newspapers or splurging on Internet time is passed from person to person. But, there is no evidence of books in these homes other than the government issued textbooks.

Pages from the Training Album

The narrow dirt alleyway cut through carts selling various sundries and past small wooden huts where strings of laundry waved as our tuk-tuk bumped the road to the pedagogy school. As we jostled along, sleeping dogs raised their heads to eye on our intentions. The sights and smells of the town gave way to an odor that was fresh. No longer did rotting garbage or scooter exhaust fill my nose and lungs. I didn’t need to look around to know that nature was in now in abundance. Before long the ill-kept roadway opened onto a large pastoral campus where a multitude of yellow and maroon buildings sat shaded by fern-like trees. My translator explained that students spend two years here, many living on this campus as they cannot afford
rooms in the town. The distance between their rural villages and this spot prohibited a daily commute.

Pictures from the Buddhist Educational Program

Voices from a loud speaker greeted us. This was a special assembly to advance the Buddhism Educational Program, of which Miss Phalen was and is a part. The program uses Buddhist values to instill a peaceful awareness of a cooperative society. It seeks to educate students, teachers, and others “who will listen.”

We headed toward an open air gathering where students in their light blue shirts and navy blue pants or skirts sat, legs neatly folded under them. Other Western visitors along with elderly Cambodian people sat on red plastic chairs. Shoes lined the perimeter of the gathering. Saffron and orange clad monks along with various school officials sat on chairs in the stage area. Several young monks walked around snapping photos with digital cameras. Occasionally, a school administrator would pull out a cell phone to chat or text. As the morning continued, various speakers implored the group of students to do their best so that their families, friends, and future students would be proud of them. Students were told that their future profession was important to further develop Cambodia, and they were encouraged to always be patient with students so they do not become angry people.

Speaker after speaker talked of the importance of kindness and encouragement in both the classroom and in a teacher’s personal life. Students were told to think about those who had seen to it they had received a good education before they acted in an improper way. In various ways these future teachers were told that they must exhibit high moral character in all facets of life. This included being honest with their students, refraining from a show of anger, and improving oneself via lifelong learning.
When the speeches finally ended, selected students stood to read poems they had penned. Poems contained apologies for the writer’s past wrongs and spoke of the determination to lead a better life. The voices of young men and women rang through the crowd as they shared their words. Of course, I could not understand this poetry but was told by my translator that the ideas were beautifully expressed in a lovely rhyming fashion. After these readings, a monk issued a general forgiveness and encouraged the students that all was “okay” and they should not think about these troubles anymore.

Apologies for lack of knowledge, the inability to do ones best, or for poor behavior were common throughout my time in Cambodia. My translator apologized in advance for the possibility he may not translate something correctly. He always apologized when we finished for the day for any difficulties his lack of English may have caused me. Incidentally, I never found any difficulties with his language skills. Teachers, including Miss Phalen always wanted to know what they should be doing to improve themselves and often apologized for any poor teaching. After attending this ceremony I understood more fully that these apologies were connected to Buddhism and were a part of the religious upbringing of the people, particularly those who live in rural areas. Additionally, the ceremony helped me to understand that personal success was not a common thought exchanged among the Cambodia teachers I interviewed. I learned that when I asked teachers to describe their successes, I often received replies indicating their students were successful. They did not want to take credit. When I changed the question to discuss specific techniques I had observed in classrooms such as applause for correct answers, teachers were more likely to accept credit for the technique being helpful to learners.

A Picture of a Pedagogy Training Class

Later, I observed what was described to me as a typical classroom in the pedagogy school. Students spend two years both attending classes here and teaching for a few months in a
near-by primary school. Courses consist of Khmer language and literature, math, social studies, and science along with psychology. Upon graduation the choice teaching assignments are given to the top students. These are usually posts in the city but may include a job at the pedagogy school. Teachers who graduate near the bottom of their class are sent to the more rural areas. This is a familiar picture to me as often the poorest schools in the U.S. employ the more inexperienced teachers. I consider this as I watch the young male teacher enter his classroom of future teachers. When I ask where he taught primary school, I am told he spent a year in a city school before coming to teach at the pedagogy school. I think back to comments I have heard throughout the years from university students in the U.S. who question why they should learn about teaching from instructors who have spent little or no time in classrooms. I had no explanation for these students concerns. I agreed with them. This is, apparently, a practice in other parts of the world, too.

As I enter the room, this teacher turns on the overhead fan and lights. A bulletin board lining the back wall sports three dimensional paper geometric shapes. Underneath, a bookcase of various government-issued textbooks lines the wall. About thirty students sit on the usual benches with notebooks out on the tables. There is an atmosphere of friendliness in the room as the teacher easily interacts with his students. Laughter is common as are celebratory applauding for correct answers to the many questions and comments by students.

The class is discussing “the advantages and disadvantages” of rural schools. This comparison is a frequent one in Cambodian schools. A T-shaped diagram is written on the front board and the teacher fills it in as students offer thoughts. During this particular discussion, no contributions are made about positive aspects of rural schools. Students have much to offer regarding the problems, notably lack of materials and the inability of many children to learn the
required lessons. I do not hear any solutions offered for these issues only the acknowledgment that these are problems.

Soon the teacher leads the class into a discussion of math methodology. He asks several problem solving questions using local town names and actual distances. All questions are content-based. I do not see any discussion or suggestions of how these types of problems might be taught. This observation is not unique to Cambodia as I have been encouraged to teach content rather than methodology in the past. It is a request I have struggled with and is likely an explanation of what Miss Phalen meant when she said she had to write lesson plans that showed she knew the material.

As I leave I walk past other classrooms and pause to ask what is being taught. My translator does his job. His explanations indicate all are learning content rather than methodology. I think about the methodology classes I teach. I feel pressure to be sure all my students understand phonics, are able to use homophones correctly, and are able to point out an affricate. The Praxis Test influences U.S. methods classes. Recent experiences have shown me that content knowledge rather than the art of teaching permeates U.S. university education curriculum. Content or methodology? Curriculum or Instruction? The world seems to be struggling. On the way back to town I consider how some teachers, like Miss Phalen and several of my own university students seem to “get” the art of teaching. My years of experience tell me this is the key to improving education. I nod my head as I remember the title of my own reading method professor’s book: *The Art of Teaching Reading: A Language and Self-Concept Approach* (Dunne, 1972). Can we change training institutions enough to equate the art of teaching with subject-area content knowledge?

The idea of the art of literacy overtakes my thoughts as the tuk-tuk bounces down the dirt road and back into the city. This is an area I had not expected to consider as much as I have, even
as I write this chapter. I think back to my first doctoral class when my professor, Dr. James Wandersee, asked our group to write a paragraph responding to the question: Is teaching an art or a science? I had been clear. Teaching is an art. In Cambodia, in Miss Phalen’s classroom, the art of teaching is on display. She knows how to connect and interact with children. She is a model of the artistry that cannot be captured with vast knowledge of content, public policy and test scores. She is the portrait of good teaching.

As I consider all of this, a sign catches my eye. It is the children’s hospital where I have been told a child from one of the schools supported by my gatekeeper’s foundation lies with a head injury. A car hit him as he stood outside his school, waiting for his class to begin. His teacher brought him here. He has had to undergo surgery for the injury but “is in good spirits.” I cannot visit him as foreigners are not allowed in the hospital. But I send good wishes his way and hope that the problem of traffic can be solved near his school. I wanted to buy him a book for my gatekeeper to deliver to him, but as the next chapter will show, this desire is often a futile one in Cambodia.
CHAPTER 5: PORTRAITS OF LITERACY

“The students love to read the books. But we do not have enough books. We do not have many books with colorful pictures and good stories.” Miss Phalen

Walking Through the Literacy Gallery

Before walking into the literacy gallery, I first revisit my initial questions. I had posed queries such as: What is the professional literacy life of a female Cambodian primary school teacher in the post Pol Pot era? What are the various forces that shape this woman’s life as she strives to build literacy in a small village? How is literacy defined? How is it exhibited? How do Cambodian teachers develop literacy? What values does this teacher place on various forms of literacy? The portraits of the previous chapter addressed these questions and even looked closely at how villagers viewed education and literacy. In this chapter I delve deeper into the literacy component of this study, looking at teacher descriptions of literacy building and literacy needs. Additionally, I consider: Are alternate forms of literacy apparent? Are community forms of literacy apparent? If so, does this teacher use this to encourage her students to participate in community-literacy building? As I have previously stated, the word literacy never translated well; and as a result, I offered examples so that teachers and villagers might understand I wanted to learn about various reading, writing, speaking and listening opportunities that promote literacy. While this worked well in many instances, as a researcher I learned to rely on observation and formulating questions as I encountered new situations in order to better understand literacy practices. In retrospect, some of my questions now seem almost trite. Of course Miss Phalen says she values literacy. She knows it will be a powerful tool for her students as they work to improve this country, but she does not have the materials to support the way she would like to teach. And just as in the U.S., how literacy is developed varies with the skills of the teacher. Many teachers use recitation and lecture to develop reading and writing skills. Even
when speaking and listening are classified as literacy practices, the massive amount of time spent on recitation of exact words may not necessarily be classified as speaking since it is often not student-generated speech but rather is an antiphonal repetition of memorized words, not unlike the way many young children, in all parts of the world, learn songs. Other skilled teachers such as Miss Phalen do not rely just on choral response. They use cooperative learning activities and pair students to read and write along with motivating children to achieve literacy by using positive celebrations and teacher proximity.

As the previous chapter illustrates there is no doubt that lack of material is an obstacle to literacy in Cambodia. Teachers and villagers spoke of the paucity of books and even simple supplies such as paper and pencils. While literacy was a word that was not easily understood, some lived the totality of the concept. They spoke of sharing information and magazines and of knowing people who used Internet cafés. One man, the only villager I found who spoke English, told me he scrapes together money to use the Internet in the near-by town. He explained that he is an “Obama Supporter” and had opened a Facebook account so he could join groups that support Obama. It is an alternative literacy that he values. When I returned home, I found he had “friended’ me on Facebook.

In this section I weave together portraits of literacy. I begin by describing the musings of a focus group of teachers who described literacy in their professional world. They are the ways in which Miss Phalen and others see and use literacy. I offer portraits of alternative literacies and discuss the barriers, including deeply ingrained attitudes about texts along with my experiences trying to purchase books. These are portraits that illustrate the problems Cambodia faces as it strives to achieve a literate and educated population. Within these struggles are the chimes of hope as the final picture in this chapter illustrates.
How Do Cambodian Teachers View and Develop Literacy?

Another portrait emerges from a discussion I had with a small group of teachers. Near the end of my time in Cambodia my gatekeeper arranged for me to talk with a focus group of teachers from various rural schools. Miss Phalen was part of this group of 19 teachers. I asked the teachers to describe their school libraries, available reading material, and teaching techniques as they related to literacy development.

A male teacher who also serves as a principal of his school spoke up immediately. He talked of the library cabinets he kept locked as he did not have a person to serve as a librarian at the school. He was afraid the limited number of books would be destroyed or stolen. My gatekeeper was puzzled and then visibly distressed about this situation and asked why the teachers did not merely bring their classes to the library and stay with the children as they read. Their discussion volleyed back and forth as he adamantly talked of his inability to assign a teacher to act as the librarian. Finally teachers from other schools, including Miss Phalen, joined in the discussion and with great detail and vigor told of how they could use the library without needing someone to watch the books all the time. He finally relented and said the teachers could bring the children to the library. The few teachers from his school seemed happy with this outcome. The discussion was a helpful one as it revealed attitudes about books and literacy. To most of the teachers, the books needed to be opened to be useful, but this principal felt a need to protect the materials.

Another rather contentious debate took place in this focus group as teachers from a different school described their library. They said they had well over one hundred books but they were all in English. The gatekeeper, who had helped obtain this collection, was shocked. She was under the impression that the school had received Khmer language books. But when I looked at the list, there were titles such as If You Gave a Mouse a Cookie (Numeroff, 1985) and
Clifford the Big Red Dog (Bridwell, 1984). The teachers said that children enjoyed looking at the pictures in these new books but never read them as they “could not even say an English letter.” The problem relating to these library books was never resolved when I was in Cambodia. I wondered why pictures were not cut from the books to use as needed visuals, but the concern regarding preserving the material superseded their value as necessary educational tools.

This group of teachers equated books with literacy. Of course, they expressed a desire for more books. They described in great detail the types of books they wished to have: books with colorful pictures, books that tell stories, books with interesting covers, and books printed on quality paper so they will not get ruined. Teachers reported children’s propensity to read books with exciting stories and meaningful characters. Of course, they said, the books had to be written in Khmer. These are the books that are not readily available in the Cambodian schools I visited. The libraries are popular as the next section will show but are not well stocked.

As we discussed teaching techniques, a few female teachers described using group work and student presentation to help with understanding of concepts. These female teachers use what I know to be best practices: group work and oral presentations. This same oral literacy technique was not embraced by the male teachers in the group. They dismissed the desire of the female teachers to improve teaching methods and instead offered excuses for trying new ideas. They talked of the need to “get through the textbooks” and agreed with one another that they had too much material to cover and did “not have time for this pedagogy.” This was in contrast to the women who eagerly shared personal forays into new techniques.

Discussions with this group provided an interesting tapestry of varied literacy practices that I will return to in the final chapter. Aside from the data gleaned from their descriptions, it was fascinating to observe the interactions between the teachers. Just as during the social events, there was easy banter back and forth. There was no hesitation about criticizing the practices of
even one who might be considered a supervisor. To my surprise, female teachers often joked with males in administrative positions as they told them how to better use the library or instructed them in the importance of varied teaching techniques. But always the discussion focused on techniques or materials. I did not discern criticism of a person.

How Does Miss Phalen Encourage Her Students to Participate in Literacy?

The room bearing the sign, “library,” is purported by the headmaster and my gatekeeper to be the most popular room in the school. According to the headmaster “all classes must spend one hour per week in the library.” This school, unlike many others I visited, has one teacher assigned as a part-time librarian. When asked to describe her duties she says, “I check out books and keep them straight.” But very few children seem to have taken the books. One fifth grade girl’s comments are representative of the sentiments of others, “I have read all the books in the library again and again.” In the focus group of teachers, I heard “Children want the colorful books. The ones with bright pictures. They want to read stories. They like to read about Khmer legends.” But there are few of these books here. The cement-walled room is divided into parts, separated by a line-up of shelving and a cabinet bearing the logo of Room to Read, an organization dedicated to providing books to children in developing nations. The doors of this metal, waist-high cabinet swing open revealing tattered paperback books, most with faded writing often of various colors. No one seems to be able to adequately explain why the font changes hue, even in mid-sentence. The only viable explanation given to me seems to be that this color change will keep children interested. I suspect the printer cartridge merely ran out of the delegated color. There are some drawings in the books, all line sketches that match the color of the printed words. About 75 books, many of them the same copy of one book, sit on these shelves. They are all written in Khmer.
On the next open metal shelf are piles of books, all in English. These are old books, generally from the U.S. that have been destined for the discard pile in a school or community library. One book about sea turtles catches my eye. It was a companion book to an old Open Court series. The English words are no longer visible. They have been covered with homemade Khmer text, glued by hand onto the pages. The colorful pictures of sea turtles digging holes, laying eggs, and of babies making their treacherous journey to the open waters of the ocean are there for the young reader to enjoy. Someone has taken the time to translate, to type, and to patiently glue. No one seems to know who did this or when it was done. But it seems an effective strategy to integrate Khmer text with Western books featuring colorful and appealing graphics. When I observed the only class that used the library during the time I was there, several children chose this book to read indicating that the teachers’ beliefs are correct. The colorful books are appealing and needed.

A third book area displays a few piles of magazines and paperback books with only Khmer text. The librarian tells me “These are pedagogy books for the teachers.” They look new and unused.

A few wooden tables with adult-sized chairs pulled up to them along with the same rough hewn benches hug the back cement wall. In front of the row of books are two bamboo mats and two more wooden chairs along with a red plastic chair, the type someone in the U.S. might buy as cheap patio furniture. This is the library; the room which so many tell me is the most popular place in the school.

Not surprising to me, the only class I observed making a library visit was Miss Phalen’s fifth grade group. She had talked of her desire and deep commitment to developing a love of reading, and she practiced this. As I scuffled along the dusty schoolyard to the few salmon-colored steps that led to the library, I heard the dull hum I had come to associate with first grade
classes in the U.S. Most primary teachers know children are incapable of reading to themselves until they have mastered that magical primary reading stage. But this fifth grade group had that same hum. Miss Phalen explained that some of these children read at a high level, leading to future research questions: Were these children really reading at a high level? What does a high level mean in Cambodia? How might the teaching strategies influence oral and silent reading tendencies?

As I entered the room I saw children everywhere: huddled two to an adult chair, grouped at the tables, or sitting elbow to elbow on the bamboo mat. Everyone was reading and Miss Phalen did her usual waltz through the room, pausing to bend over a duo of boys to give a word or to listen to a lone girl as she rapidly recited the words on a page. The numerical descriptors of the previous sentence were deliberately chosen to reflect my observations. Boys always read in pairs or groups of three, while girls unfailingly read alone. In an attempt to better understand this gender phenomenon, I sat near a group of boys and watched as one read and the others echoed him. If the reader faltered, one of the other boys attempted to fill in the word, but more often a hand was raised and Miss Phalen was quickly there offering the solution to the mystery word. I did my elementary-teacher “duck walk” around the children who sat with their legs folded on the floor. The girls, on the other hand, read with more confidence and slightly louder. When I sat next to a girl she might briefly glance at me, but always returned to reading confidently and with rapidity. I cannot identify their reading as fluency as the text seemed to be read with speed but with little attention to phrasing or with inflection. I asked Miss Phalen about this and was told the children had been reading the same books year after year. It seems they were just saying the all too familiar words. She said it didn’t seem to bother the girls that they read the same words time and after time. She thought this might be less exciting for the boys. Perhaps that is why they read in pairs, but I found it interesting that the girls read with such aplomb while the boys seemed to
be less sure of themselves. I considered the female play during recess. These girls take the opportunity to read, write, and speak. Their added self-instruction time gives them valuable literacy practice.

Miss Phalen later explained that this was a typical day in the library for her fifth graders. She says the girls like to read to themselves and the boys often have a hard time with some of the words so if they sit in pairs or groups of three, they can help one another. She does not assign these groupings. She says that the same books are read over and over again with the Khmer legend books being the most popular. She and the translator agree that this may be because they are stories.

I was never with Miss Phalen when her first graders visited the library so I asked her to describe a typical hour in the library with these beginning readers. I could readily picture the scene as it is one that is familiar to many primary school teachers in the U.S. She invites the children to sit on the floor. She sits on a chair in front of them and reads a book to the class. She may point out any drawing there might be on a page and asks the class to imagine what the words on the page might say. As she reads the page orally, she stops to ask children, “Who remembers well?” She described other questions such as asking about characters’ intentions or lessons learned. Her description shows an ability to encourage children to comprehend literature on more than a literal level. She could not define for me the reasons why she asked these critical thinking questions, merely saying that she wanted her class to “think clearly” about all that happens in a story. Additionally, the discussion is a good example of student-generated oral literacy at work. Teachers in the U.S. often use picture or story “walks” to prepare their emerging readers to comprehend a book or story. Miss Phalen’s questions are indicative of this common practice that prepares young readers to effectively engage with text. Despite her excellent teaching, it became apparent that because of the limited number of books, by the time a
child is in sixth grade, he or she may have heard or read all the books many times. While rereading a favorite book is not a negative practice, the lack of a variety and a paucity of interesting books is a problem. As my interviews with villagers confirmed, children are not necessarily eager to take these dull looking paperback books home.

What Are the Barriers to Literacy in Cambodia?

As I return to my original research questions, I realize that one key question emerged and was answered during my time in Cambodia: What are the barriers to literacy development in Cambodia? While Miss Phalen never described issues with policies or responsibilities, she and her colleagues talked often about lack of material. I discovered this is not simply a matter that can be easily solved with money. Other obstacles must be considered. The following portraits illustrate two serious barriers to literacy.

Where Are the Books?

It is the vivid and perhaps stark photos of my excursion to a remote village school that have come to serve as my symbol for Cambodia’s multi-leveled struggle for literacy. A first look at this gallery shows my journey to this remote outpost begins on Lake Tonle Sap, the unique freshwater lake that not only serves as a major source of precious food for the Cambodian population, but is also a United Nations Biosphere Reserve. I was visiting here with a group of people from the U.S. government.

The tranquility of the lake is dotted with equally serene snapshots of lone men, topped with traditional pointed bamboo hats, poling their wooden boats through these waters. The breeze brings relief from the oppressive heat and humidity of the land, but more importantly, despite the roar of the engine, there is something graceful about the journey. It is more than a peaceful trip on a lake; it is an excursion to what seems like a different era. Those who pole their boats along, appear superseded in time, a time that is placid and exotic. No one looking at my
actual photographs could easily identify them as having been taken in the 21st century. Even as I breathe in now, the thought of Tonle Sap fills me with spiritual peace.

This time and space passage through what seems to be a museum painting was shattered when the boat pulled to a pathway leading up a steep bank, flanked by shards of old glass bottles and paper wrappers. No one heard the thuds of the twenty-something year old women landing on the boat, but they were suddenly there, selling their onion-thin notebooks “for the school students.” Each of us seemed to have an assigned partner who sidled up and stayed, shoulder to shoulder, with the silently assigned target. The women repeated a litany of English phrases: “Where are you from? How many children do you have? Will you help the schoolchildren?” When I attempted to better understand the situation and ask questions in return, I was greeted with a blank stare which quickly melted into a forced smile and the high-pitched rerun of the same questions. It was apparent the woman appointed to me did not understand English; she had been trained to repeat phrases. In a post “Slum Dog Millionaire” world, my suspicions were aroused. Who was directing these females?

Some members of my group purchased piles of these notebooks, but I refrained. I wanted to see the school and the children. What might be really needed?

The group trudged in the oppressive heat down a sandy by-way where high stilted huts stood staring down. In the wet season one could climb into a small boat from the front entrance of these three-sided boarded shanties, but it was just the beginning of the rainy months. Today the row of these Cambodian-style “skyscrapers” seemed somehow imposing, adding to the discomfort those in the group felt about the constant barrage from the women who attempted to pull at our heartstrings.

Finally the dusty road curved up a small hill. To the left was a tiny, once white, concrete building that served as the school. As is usual in Cambodia, the roughhewn tables and benches
held an overabundance of children, all wearing faded white blouses or shirts and the trademark navy blue trousers or skirts. On the well-used board was a line of Khmer words. A male teacher in his twenties stood in front of the class, barely nodding when we entered. The group of Westerners lined up in the front of the classroom as the children rose from the benches, hands “saluted” in the traditional Cambodian greeting. As the teacher told them to be seated, I began to walk up and down the aisles and among the children. No table sported a government-issued text.

As I neared the back of the tiny room, I kneeled near a group of three girls scrunched together on a bench. One girl had a few dog-eared pictures of well-dressed males and females, likely clipped from a magazine. The trio whispered and passed these to one another. But it was the narrow cubby, carved into their tables that I wanted to see. Stuffed into these holes were piles of the thin notebooks, the same ones the hoard of women tried to sell us to “help the children of the school.”

While my Western colleagues continued to stand in front of the room and wave at the children as the translator/guide talked, I smiled and indicated I wished to see these notebooks. One young girl purposively brushed against my blonde hair and shyly smiled as she reached in and brought out the pile. Not one word was written on the blank pages of the notebooks. Another girl produced her pile. A few pencil drawings graced the thin papers, but that was all. I smiled across the aisle and nodded to a group of boys whose cubbies did not contain a textbook either. Their piles of notebooks were blank. I exchanged smiles, and much to their delight, communicated with a few Khmer phrases and quietly sang an English song about colors while I pointed to items of red, blue, yellow, etc. on my skirt and my own notebook. As I tiptoed through the room, I noted no one had a textbook. I knew the government paid for and issued these books based on the school enrollment figures. Where were they?

Before long, the guide was shuffling the group from the crowded room and onto the grounds of the Buddhist Wat (temple) that stood at the top of the hill. The slight breeze may have
brought a welcome relief from the heat and odor of the enclosed classroom, but I could not leave that cramped room behind. I had far too many questions. I knew visitors were being cajoled into thinking they were helping children by purchasing these notebooks, but they were not being used. No one even wrote in them. Not one line was copied from the board nor was any student-generated composition produced. But perhaps more importantly, what had happened to the textbooks? Where were the literacy materials?

As the others stood around relishing the relatively cool breeze, I took the guide aside and asked if there was a school library. He pointed. I left the group and headed back down the hill to the area that served as both the headmaster’s office and the library. In this dismally dark and heat-drenched cubby of a room, amidst the piles of old rice bags, were two shelves. One of the shelves held a disheveled pile of grubby paperback English books, the remnants of a stamp indicated they had been discarded from a U.S. library. Not one book was in Khmer. This portrait is part of a metaphor that so effectively portrays the struggles for literacy in rural Cambodia. Agencies give gifts to schools that may not be needed and are often not used.

The contents of the opposite shelf contained the other component of Cambodia’s literacy struggle. Here, in the last month of the Cambodian school year, sat in shrink-wrapped plastic, piles of brand new textbooks. In front of this shelf was a small stack of colorful and informative Khmer language child-friendly posters about the fish, birds, amphibians, plants, and ecology of the Tonle Sap area. No poster bore the telltale marks of having been displayed in the classroom. In fact, a thin film of dust covered the first poster in the stack. Why were these posters and textbooks not being used in the classroom? I turned to the guide who translated my question to the headmaster. The answer was unabashedly straightforward and truthful: “they might get ruined.”
Doing Business in Cambodia

While this next portrait was not originally planned as part of my research, it emerged as an opportunity to highlight an important barrier to literacy in Cambodia. Participants at an environmental conference had donated money for children’s books for the Apsara School. I was charged with purchasing these books and set out in a tuk-tuk along the city streets. My translator and I passed three-sided stores that were open to shoppers showing their piles of goods ranging from shelves of knock-off luggage bearing Prada labels to artifacts where Angkor Wat was etched onto anything capable of bearing this image. The smell of motorbike exhaust, rotting garbage, and a smell I can only identify as taking me back to my days as a child at the state fair engulfed not only my nose but also my lungs and stomach. Finally the tuk-tuk swerved to a stop in front of a shop where two teenagers squatted in front eating a rice dish from a glass bowl. Rolled up posters sat in dirty cardboard boxes near the shop’s entrance and a television blared from behind the counter where a woman sat, slurping soup. We walked past a shelf where magazines were piled next to a row of paperback books. Nearby sat more piles of the same books, indicating that while this crowded store had a great number of books, the variety is limited. My translator and I began paging through these paperbacks that contained the same variation of font as the books in the Apsara library. Colors changed from black to green to blue without any indication as to why this occurred. Line drawings appeared on occasional pages. The translator observed that these were the same books that were in the school library. We were ultimately able to find about ten titles that the library did not have. These Khmer books were priced at about two dollars each. However, I was aware that some organizations and countries have published more engaging Khmer language books for children so we set off in search of these titles.
A tuk-tuk ride took us down another narrow dusty lane past concrete two-story buildings that are homes for many non-profit organizations from throughout the world. Signs advertise help for women, sustainable development assistance, or small business loans. A multitude of NGOs serve the population from within the walls that line the dirt road. We pulled up beside a brown concrete building that serves as distribution spot for school library books. As we walked through the metal gate, we were immediately greeted by a terrier-type dog with severely matted brown hair that limped from the open-air house but collapsed onto the cement porch before reaching us. Familiar with the terrier group, I was not as fearful of this lazy creature as I was of the village dogs.

A woman greeted us and quickly escorted us to a small foyer-type area where we sat on a polished wooden bench to wait. A FAX machine buzzed and the clicking of a computer could be heard coming from one of the two offices. Glass bookcases revealed a few shelves of new children’s books, all written in English. The woman brought out a list of available books, but I quickly saw that these were all written in English. We waited and waited until a tray bearing two glasses of water was placed on the table in front of us. While I was hesitant to drink this water as I did not know if it was poured from a bottle, I thought back to the book, *Three Cups of Tea* (Mortenson & Relin, 2006). I could already see that it may be difficult to obtain the colorful Khmer books that I hoped to purchase so I took a few sips. Perhaps this would help the process along. We waited for over an hour until finally the girl received a call on her cell phone. She then walked into the back of the house and returned carrying a large pile of shiny paperbacks.

My translator and I paged through the pile and grew more excited by the moment. Not only did the books have engaging colorful pictures, but they were written by Khmer authors and offered both Khmer and English text so that someone may be able to use these books to teach themselves English. The titles reflect a Cambodian child’s world: stories set in rice fields, in
villages, and those that deal with health and environmental concerns. As we waited, we delighted in reading all forty books and found many helpful concepts presented in story form. The right of a child to attend school is illustrated as are the positive impacts a child may have to lessen global climate change or ways a child may help fellow villagers to access clean water. These lessons are told through the actions of the child or animal characters. Stories tell of how children and families might prevent and deal with health concerns such as bird flu. Recent history such as the trauma of the Pol Pot regime is told through the narratives. The connection between literacy and access to proper medical care is a theme. Additionally, books contain many references to the idea of helping others which is reminiscent of what I heard at the Buddhist Educational Program at the pedagogy school and reinforced by teachers and villagers.

While I was excited about the Cambodian authors, bright pictures, and narrative format of these books, we were initially unable to figure out how to actually get these books by either buying them or making a donation to this organization. I left money for these books in the hands of the translator who called and visited this building in an attempt to put these books in young hands. This went on for three months. I finally received an email from Cambodia with a picture attached. Smiling children were holding these books, finally!

One possible reason these well-written, nicely illustrated books are difficult to obtain can be seen in the practices around temples and other tourist attractions. Many guidebooks are sold by boys and girls who stand by these monuments and museums in Cambodia. They surround cars and buses, even making it difficult for tourists to exit the vehicle. Chatter such as “Mister, buy my book” is a common refrain. I often marveled at the low prices of these books until I was told that this is indicative of a problem relating to book availability in the country. The lack of stringent copyright laws means Khmer authors may make little money on their intellectual property. Books can simply be reprinted with no payment going to the author.
But another reason is cultural. It has to do with being patient and building trust among partners. The tenacity of the translator and his willingness to converse with the caretakers of the books was the reason for his eventual success in delivering them to the library at the Apsara School. This practice of patience must always be considered when doing business in Cambodia.

Role Models?

While the previous portraits regarding limited access to and availability of books and libraries illustrate one of the issues with literacy in Cambodia, another factor must also be considered: the impact of few role models. Rural residents do not have either the economic or educational means to model the importance and benefits of reading and writing. Even a skilled teacher like Miss Phalen does not read regularly nor does she avail herself of the pedagogy material in the school library. Few parents or grandparents possess reading material, with the exception of the magazine lending library. The impact positive role models have on a child’s motivation to read is well known. The lack of such models in Cambodia must negatively impact reading development.

Are Alternate Literacy Practices Apparent?

While this discussion of book availability is important to understanding literacy issues in Cambodia, there are a number of alternative literacies that are also key to a total picture of literacy. These range from cell phones to the notes that many shopkeepers take in order to account for their business transactions. These various literacies weave together the literacy tapestry that is Cambodia today.

Just as in the U.S., cell phones are common on the streets of Cambodian towns and cities. Not every villager has a cell phone, but there are some residents who do own such phones and charge them using a small battery. Miss Phalen is one of these people. While these are used
primarily for speaking and oral communication literacies, there are attempts, such as the one previously described, at using texting as a writing and reading literacy.

Dress-making and other sewing endeavors are widespread occupations for women in Cambodia. A personal experience with a young woman and her mother who sold me silk showed that these women took care to record material sold along with date and time of the transaction. A group of female dressmakers carefully measured me and wrote specific instructions in their school-like notebooks for my outfits. These women sat in a tight-knit group within the “Old Market” near the displays of fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit. They giggled and chattered away but were precise with both their numbers and dress details. A few fashion magazines sat near the sewing machines but when I asked if they read the magazines I was told, “We just like to look at the pictures.”

Other shopkeepers and those who own street cafes use note-taking as literacy. Many of the menus listed the Khmer dishes but also included photos of the dish. I never determined the reason for this but assumed they may have been designed for non-Khmer speaking tourists or for local people who could not read. Either way, they did offer a unique learning opportunity for reading.

Televisions are sought-after items in Cambodia. In the village, they seem to be more desirable than computers. These can be rich sources of alternative literacy. A few stations, available in some areas, offer programming in languages other than Khmer. The added subtitles allow a viewer to follow the dialogue by reading Khmer. Additionally, televisions can, and often do, become karaoke machines where the singer belts out the words as they appear along the bottom of the screen. When I spoke with people about literacy opportunities, this was not mentioned, but when I inquired as to whether reading the words of a song during an evening of karaoke could be considered literacy, a participant always replied in the affirmative.
While as a researcher, I identified karaoke as an alternate literacy form, it was a tuk-tuk driver who identified a community form of alternate literacy: notices that were nailed onto trees lining the road between the school and the town. Single pages of white paper hung limply from the bark. The driver explained to me that these were often notices about employment opportunities, especially for construction projects. When I asked if he believed these “help wanted” notices were effective, he explained it was his belief that the people who would want and need these jobs may not be able to read so he thought they were not useful. But I began to notice so many of them that I began to wonder why anyone would bother to put them up if they were not helpful in attracting workers. I never saw anyone standing in front of a tree reading one of these notices. These written versions of community literacy did not seem to be embraced by the population.

I feel the most endearing alternate literacy and educational practice is the teacher role-playing engaged in by many of the young girls during break time at the Apsara School. As a former first grade teacher and one who loved to “play teacher” as a child, I appreciate the high form of flattery this practice illustrates. But it is more than flattery. This is an opportunity for review and for deeper thought about and internalization of the concepts covered in each lesson. These girls rehearse this content time after time and ask one another questions about the material, similar to U.S. lessons that require children to retell a story. Even the formulation of these questions and answers causes critical analysis of the material. For example, one day Miss Phalen taught her class about mosquitoes, and the girls then asked one another many questions including delving into further examples of how to alleviate mosquito infestation. They came up with answers not necessarily provided in class. This may be one explanation why so many girls are listed as top students: Their play allows for greater memorization and understanding of the curricula while most of the boys ran and shouted in the schoolyard.
An alternative literacy that does not seem to be used in classrooms involves wording on items such as soap wrappers. Use of environmental print is a favorite homework task for young children in the U.S. but could be an even more important literacy opportunity in Cambodia because of the lack of published age-appropriate material. No one spoke of this type of community literacy.

A School Practice “Morphs” to Concern

The lack of books may not necessarily be surprising in a developing nation but a situation at the Apsara School is surprising and caused me to carefully consider the impact gifts from foreign donors could have on Cambodian school practices. One morning when the tuk-tuk deposited me at the front gate of the school, the principal greeted me with an invitation to view one of the required activities he had instituted in the last year. The school had received the gift of a DVD player, television, and about seventeen DVDs from a foreign donor. The result was a new requirement that each class spend one hour per week watching television, which is the playing of a DVD. This means that even if one DVD is viewed per week, the number of weeks in a school year would result in the same DVD being viewed many times. Later I was told that only about ten of the DVDs worked, making this requirement even more repetitive.

As I walked across the schoolyard to the one room with electricity, the principal’s office, where the DVDs could be viewed, I considered the benefits of the programming content. Perhaps I was imagining engaging educational programming and conjured up a picture of edutainment at its best that would hopefully fill a gap in Cambodian literacy needs. I was not prepared for what I saw and was swept back in time to my own son’s preschool years when he begged for anything having to do with the Mighty Morphin Power Ranger characters. And here they made their appearance again at the Apsara School, swinging at cheesy monsters and hiding behind what had always seemed to be rocks made of paper.
Children squished together on adult chairs or sat shoulder to shoulder on the floor, eyes glued to the television. I didn’t have to hide my disgust as no one bothered with me. Even the teacher didn’t acknowledge my presence as I took a seat. She was too busy following the antics of the red, blue, green, and yellow rangers. I settled in to watch the children view the DVD. They laughed together and cried out together when the rangers fought. This went on and on. There were few notes to take as the class reacted in unison to the antics on the screen. I did not need to watch individuals as the reactions were collective.

When this show ended, there was no discussion. The teacher did not ask about the plot or characters. Another program was simply played. This was a Japanese cartoon I had never seen. The stage fighting of the Power Rangers was gone and these characters screamed, punched, and stabbed. Even during this violent cartoon no one showed any desire to turn from the screen. I finally left for a classroom where learning was happening. The principal walked with me and with obvious pride said this was a very popular requirement with the children.

Later I asked to see the other DVDs, perhaps hoping I had stumbled upon an outlier and that the rest of the collection had more educational value. But all DVD covers reflected cartoons of a violent nature or were pirated copies of Disney movies. Valuable classroom time was used for this “entertainment.” The question of why a gift would come with so little discussion about ways to appropriately use it perplexes me. This DVD snapshot is indicative of the considerations donors and donor organizations should make when considering ways to help individual schools.

A Hopeful Literacy

In contrast to the DVD snapshot, I close this literacy gallery with a more hopeful portrait. Previously I referred to a post “Slum Dog Millionaire” world. This world comes to life on the city streets each evening as the tourists who come to see one of the “1000 Places to See Before You Die,” Angkor Wat, descend on the bars and restaurants of the city to drink away the dust.
and heat of the day. One street, Bar Street, is overwhelmingly popular with those who hail from a variety countries. Those from South Korea to Australia to Ireland along with a small mix of visitors from the United States and Russia are represented. On this walking street, eating establishments melt into one another. The picture menus that are displayed on stands in front of the outdoor tables announce the same foods ranging from snake to lasagna. One is never quite sure where one restaurant ends and the other begins. Guidebooks warn of the children who stand near seated restaurant patrons, almost touching an arm, as they mumble phrases, “Help me go to school, buy my postcards mister. Buy the book so my sister can get well.” The voices are monotone and the looks heart-wrenching. Even a slight indication that one is reaching for a wallet results in a hoard of children, eager to become a winner of the prized dollar. Seasoned travelers ignore these pleas, not even saying, “No thank you” for these children are pawns in the ruse of adults who use their youth to prey upon the pity of the unsuspecting. A dollar slipped to such a child laborer may foreclose that child’s future educational opportunities.

But one evening as I poked away at my chicken fried rice, I witnessed an amazing display of literacy at work. I looked in the direction of two young boys with dirt-stained faces and ragged shirts. They stood with books and postcards in hand under a poster whose English words advertised restaurant food. For a moment it seemed they had forgotten their street assignments and were swallowed up in another world: a world of literacy. One young urchin pointed to the Latin-based letters on the sign and clearly recited them, “I, t, a l, i, a, n.” The other child dutifully repeated each word. It was as if I was watching Miss Phalen teach. The boys were lost in learning; the first boy was patient and clear. The second, the learner, was fascinated and diligent. I never learned the mystery of where this child had learned the names of the letters. I never knew anything about these boys other than what I have observed, reflected upon, and written. For just as suddenly as they appeared, they disappeared. But it was an amazing display
of caring and teaching of another on the streets, in the heart of a place where children are pawns of the greedy and needy. Like an apparition, the brief scene haunts my thoughts. It was brief and it was fleeting; but it was literacy apparent in an unlikely place and in an unlikely way.
CHAPTER 7: ENVISIONING THE POSSIBILITIES: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Not only has the search for good schools been absolutist in quality, it has also been encumbered by the negative tones of social science inquiry – the tendency for researchers to uncover malignancies rather than health…It is almost as if there is a cynical, complaining edge to much of social science investigation that begins by asking what is missing, wrong, or incomplete, rather than asking what is happening, or even what is good. (Lightfoot, 1983, p. 313)

Introduction: The Lesson of the Russian Painting

In my living room is a seemingly abstract, colorful painting created by a Russian artist. Several years ago, before a trip overseas, I had given my husband specific instructions as to the colors and style of painting I wanted for our new home. As he walked through the crowds of a distant land, he spotted the swirls of blues and greens I had requested. Later he told of holding the painting close as he studied the colors and brush strokes, finally gratified that this purchase would please me. It wasn’t until he put it on our mantle and stepped several feet back that he saw the true nature of the painting: a woman steadies herself on a small boat grasping a sail, her hair blowing in the breeze of blue. She wears nothing. While this is a rich source of good-natured teasing in our household, it illustrates a key point as I leave the gallery that is rural Cambodia. It is necessary to look at the totality.

Summary

From my table in Starbucks, I take that step back and look at Miss Phalen, her efforts, her school, and her struggles to bring literacy to her students. Yet, even as I write the word, struggles, I hesitate. For given Lightfoot’s eloquent quote that opens this chapter, I recognize my own tendency to fall into the pit of negativity. I redirect my own thinking to begin with what is working. And the portraits painted in the previous chapters illustrate there is much to celebrate when we consider the totality of Miss Phalen’s classroom. I advocate for solutions that are appropriate based on this research. I offer positive ideas and recommendations, especially for
U.S. government agencies and NGOs working to build a better Cambodia. I have had many informal conversations with those who work in these organizations and have been repeatedly asked for ideas. In early October 2009, officials at the U.S. State Department asked me to give a briefing about this research and my recommendations. Specific policies and recommendations need to be formulated for engaging the population along the Mekong River. As the U.S. continues cooperative work with partner countries in the region, specific environmental, economic, health and educational programs are needed. U.S. officials recognize the need for programs that emanate from qualitative research such as this as they strive to understand the needs of this post-genocidal society. My suggestions come from the perspective that embodied my research, one teacher seeking to understand another. Additionally, I offer thoughts on the urgent need for further research. But first I begin with a proactive, positive perspective.

Miss Phalen and the Dream That Never Ends

As a first grade teacher the “look on the sunny side” dictum guided my classroom days. I always tried to find the good in every child and build on his or her strengths. As the data from my interviews and discussions with Cambodian teachers illustrate, most faculty are acutely aware that lack of material is a serious deficiency in their classrooms. This concern pervades discussions of education in Cambodia even in the one classroom I visited in the pedagogy school. Lack of materials is a huge obstacle that impacts instruction. But rather than focus on this negative aspect, let me address the positive components of what I observed in Cambodia; and there is much that is positive in Miss Phalen’s room.

Because of the lively discussion that ensued among my doctoral committee members as I attempted to explain why Miss Phalen was both a unique and a typical case, I return to that statement which I later maintained depended on your perspective and background knowledge. For one who merely looks at photos of smiling Cambodian primary teachers and crowded
classrooms, she may be a typical case. She, like others in rural Cambodia, must work hard. She arrives in her classroom just before 7:00 am, teaches for four hours, goes home for lunch which she must prepare, and returns for another four hours of classes. This is repeated six days a week in scorching heat and torrential monsoons. In her “spare” time Miss Phalen and others must visit the market on a daily basis, cook food, write lesson plans, and do daily chores amidst the backdrop of living in a developing nation. She does not have access to the luxuries Westerners take for granted that make life easier. The lack of electricity means she must shop every day. It means she does her work beneath a battery operated dim light. This is the usual and the expected in rural areas. But this research examined not just the hours she works and under what conditions, but it also focused on her pedagogy, classroom activities, and the environment she creates and fosters. So, conversely, for those who hold a magnifying glass to her classroom and peer into neighboring rooms, her energy, enthusiasm, and willingness to try a variety of activities makes her a unique case. I have held that magnifying glass to Miss Phalen’s classroom, along with observing and interviewing her colleagues, and the data tell me that Miss Phalen represents a unique case. While this statement may seem to belong in the methods chapter, I place it here, in my final chapter. It was not possible to reach this conclusion until my data gathering and analysis was complete. I had to consider her complete portrait within the complex mural of Cambodia. Her positive attitude and boundless energy are among the reasons I draw this conclusion.

Miss Phalen’s physical appearance is an accurate indicator of her actions in the classroom. Her wide smile is constantly on display as she sweeps her small body in and around aisles of children, stopping to clap and cheer or to encircle a struggling learner with her arms as she asks questions to move the child into the zone of proximal development. Her instruction is punctuated with positive reinforcement, immediate feedback, and engagement that draws
children into the joy of participating, even in a class of 45 students. Her movement around the room ensures that little hands do not play with balloons, dolls, or tiny lizards.

She is creative; her instruction shifts as she sees the need to avoid boredom and meet children’s needs. She quickly pairs students to read or discuss; or she divides the class into cooperative learning groups, maximizing instructional time. This not only allows more children’s voices to be heard, but she asks questions of these groups that go beyond literal recall to enter the critical thinking arena. She probes; she pushes. As these groups finish their discussions and assignments, Miss Phalen invites representatives to share the work of the group, dignifying student responses but also encouraging active listening for all participants. This is verbal literacy and at times, the results are even read from a child-written paper.

While Miss Phalen may not model personal adult reading to her students, she both encourages and demonstrates literacy practices by reading children’s books to her students and with her students during library time. Although she does not define her requests for children to write captions on pictures as literacy, the results are a rich source of reading and writing development, perfectly conveying the reciprocal relationships of these two language processes. To watch Miss Phalen is to know the phrase “the art of teaching” can be brought to life, even in the midst of a deficit of materials. Her dream is for her students to love reading and writing, and her art makes this a possibility.

Literacy, the Field of Hope

To look on the “sunny side” of literacy, I begin and end with the thriving magazine lending library among the village women. This is more than a helpful source of information about fashion, recipes, and health for these women. When mothers read, children see literacy in action, a powerful demonstration. It is then a common sight that is expected and valued in the home. This sharing library benefits both mothers and their children. But there is more to do when
it comes to literacy in Cambodia. As the previous chapters have illustrated, there are limitations with literacy opportunities in the rural areas. For literacy development to be truly realized in rural Cambodia, such literacy events cannot be left to happenstance.

Data gathered at the Tonle Sap school revealed that books are judged by their covers: They must be kept clean and tidy, so much so that they are not used. There is a dearth of Khmer language books and the few that are available are either unappealing to children or are difficult to obtain, even when one has money to buy them. Literacy educators know the power access to books has on reading and writing development. For Cambodian children to achieve literacy, books must be used. Will they get dirty? Yes, of course. But the alternative is not acceptable. Children must have opportunities to access books if they are to become truly literate. The solution is that simple.

Very few other literacy opportunities exist. One explanation is that as the global community travels along the information super expressway, the Khmer alphabet has been neglected by the producers of cell phones and most computer keyboards. This, along with limited electricity in villages and the high cost of connecting to the Internet, means that computers are not a viable literacy option. Even more traditional forms of community literacy such as the signage on trees, which would seem to contain valuable information, do not seem to be used on a regular basis by local residents. With this in mind, I now consider the question so many have asked when listening to me talk about Cambodia, “What can and should be done?”

Recommendations

I turn first to Freire for guidance as I consider my recommendations for in-country programs. I thank Miss Phalen for guiding me as I formulated these suggestions, for in a Freirian viewpoint and inclusionary stance, I must begin with her as she is the local. Thus, I offer suggestions for using Miss Phalen’s abilities and the within-country abilities to improve
education. In keeping with Freire I look at the realities of literacy within the village and use these as a key component of this discussion. This is especially important as I have heard many suggestions from Westerners regarding strategies for improving Cambodian schools and instruction. It is these suggestions that I address first.

“Of Course Not”

Well-meaning people have shared ideas with me that range from putting laptop computers in every Cambodian school to collecting and redistributing the old “Hooked on Phonics” tapes that Americans might be storing in garages. This spectrum illustrates the importance of research such as this that describes the current situation for a teacher and her school. Anyone who has read the previous two chapters will likely say, “Of course not.” This phrase is a variation of Lightfoot’s (1983) phrase, “Of course,” as she describes the necessary reactions of readers to Portraiture.

It is clear that computers are not the sole solution to rural Cambodia’s educational development for many reasons, the most practical being lack of electricity. How would these computers be powered? Even if batteries and solar chargers were used, there are few teachers who know how to operate a computer effectively not to mention limitations related to the Khmer language and software. While a computer connected society may be in Cambodia’s future especially in urban areas, looking at computers as the optimal way to assist schools is not feasible yet. Going back to Freire’s stance of looking to the local population for a starting place would indicate that few, if any teachers spoke of a desire for computers. They described the need for colorful pictures and posters to assist them as they taught. One teacher said, “If I am trying to teach children to read the word, elephant, think of how much easier it would be if I could hold up a picture of an elephant.” I return to Lightfoot’s phrase, “Of course” (1983).
On the other end of the spectrum is the idea of discarded English phonics tapes. Again, the reader will likely say, “Of course not.” Cambodian children do not speak English. What good would these tapes do? This well-meaning suggestion illustrates several assumptions, none of which take into account the necessity of addressing local needs of communities, much less individuals.

Additionally, the use of the donated television, DVD player, and DVDs is an example of a well-meaning gift that was given with little instruction as to how to best use such technology. These types of donations combined with certain ideas of “outsiders” do not serve the rural Cambodian population. The necessity that local people should be involved in all projects designed to assist a population can be seen in these “Of course not” projects put forth by Westerners. I advise those who offer such suggestions to “step back” and look at the realities of a primary school classroom such as Miss Phalen’s room.

Teacher Sharing

“Of course” there are Cambodian teachers who utilize meaningful and varied activities to encourage interest in and development of literacy. As Lightfoot (1983) points out, it is necessary to look for the positive in a system. Miss Phalen embodies the positive in education. She is one of those teachers who uses teacher proximity, encourages children, works with those who do not readily understand concepts, varies her presentation style, and uses child-friendly body language. Her use of varied teaching strategies such as cooperative learning groups is helpful in alleviating student boredom. But interviews and casual conversations with Miss Phalen indicate she, like the other teachers I spoke with, focuses on the materials she does not have rather than looking at the positive points of her teaching skills. While after spending days in her hot, crowded classroom that is devoid of the abundance of material found in U.S. classrooms, I remained impressed with her constant energy and enthusiasm.
While I know her words regarding lack of teaching supplies are true and an impediment to teaching effectively, there are many positive attributes that she brings to the classroom. Rather than striving to bring technology to rural areas, perhaps NGOs and other organizations should identify skilled teachers such as Miss Phalen to model the art of teaching and serve as teacher mentors or trainers. A vibrant teacher observation and training program would help teachers share workable strategies. As part of a local sharing program a teacher, such as Mr. Manith, who designed a hands-on aquatic plant project for his students, could encourage others to use locally available materials and village sites, an idea reminiscent of John Dewey (2001). Experience with Cambodian teachers tells me that a facilitator would need to ensure discussions stayed focused on the positive steps and strategies that are used with students to avoid the trap of talking about the negative points, the needed materials, and shortcomings of the system.

Teacher Placement

The issue of “good” teachers going to the most desirable areas is not an issue unique to Cambodia. Inner cities and extreme rural areas in the United States struggle with finding highly qualified and successful teachers. However, this placement issue seems to be built into the Cambodian educational system as the most successful pedagogy school graduates are given choice assignments. If we are to assume that success at the pedagogy school equates to good teaching, Cambodia might consider higher teacher salaries or incentives for those who are willing to serve in rural villages. This would encourage some high-ranking graduates to choose teaching assignments in these areas. Even the incentive pay of an extra dollar seems to be enough to encourage people to take on administrative responsibilities suggesting that even a small bonus might entice talented teachers to accept and retain rural appointments.
Opportunities to Access to Literacy

The use of books should be discussed in such teacher workshops. The shelves full of government-issued textbooks in the Tonle Sap school are troubling. This issue needs to be addressed in any teacher training and at the governmental level. While I realize that books are precious commodities, the rationale for not distributing the books should be explored and addressed immediately. Directives, in the form of mandates, need to be given to teachers so that the possibility of book destruction will not prevent books from getting into the hands of children. Additionally, teachers could be encouraged to cut pictures from unsuitable English language books. This might provide some of the needed visuals for classroom experiences. These relatively simple solutions could be implemented immediately within many Cambodian schools.

The difficulty in obtaining colorful Khmer language books for children is a serious issue in Cambodia. The NGOs that already operate in the country should prioritize and streamline procedures for getting their books into schools. Better communication between school representatives might insure libraries get the correct and needed books. The issue of copyright is not unique to Cambodia nor is it easily solved. I know various officials are aware of the problem and are working to solve this difficult issue.

In a developing nation like Cambodia, the value of a good education is usually promoted as the path to acquiring a good job. This can be a complex relationship. Sometimes higher paying jobs are either not available or do not really require higher education. This may be where government programs and policies could help support graduates from schools and assist with career counseling and placement. Small sustainable projects may provide valuable opportunities for high school graduates who may want to remain in rural areas or are anxious to return to villages and assist their communities. An additional consideration is one that is often raised as developing nations strive to achieve a more educated population: What jobs will these educated
people hold? When I was in Cambodia, this question was asked again and again by CNN correspondents as they covered the Iranian election results. International reporters made the point that many of these newly educated and politically involved young men and women did not have jobs that adequately used their new knowledge. Discussions with my gatekeeper and others revealed this is a concern in Cambodia as well.

Additionally, the influence of China needs to be considered, especially as the U.S. develops and implements a broader Mekong River policy. Chinese companies are beginning to offer colorful Chinese folktale books written in Khmer. Even this seemingly small inroad into literacy should be considered by U.S. officials as they allocate monies for the region and attempt to develop cooperative partnerships with the country.

One of these partnerships that may provide meaningful employment for educated women and help the U.S. positively contribute to Cambodian needs may be accomplished by expanding the informal women’s lending library for magazines. Educated females may be sent to villages to interview women about their practices, ranging from recipes to childcare. This information would form the basis for pamphlets and magazines to become part of village lending libraries. This would lead to meaningful employment for both educated women and for those local women who are currently working to weave a living wage from the seemingly defunct or unprofitable basket industry. Women who are involved in such “libraries” could share their experiences as they help near-by villagers to establish similar programs.

A joint Cambodian/U.S. program of mobile libraries should be created. Books printed in Khmer could be taken from village to village by tuk-tuk drivers. This would assure these drivers have steady employment which is a concern to many of these men. Villagers who have received training could act as librarians and keep records of book lending. This would assure steady
employment for many and deliver a continual stream of children’s books, women’s magazines, agricultural pamphlets, and news of current events to villages.

An additional observation leads to another consideration regarding local employment opportunities. Earlier I described a sea turtle book which contained a hand-created translation pasted over the English text. This practice could not only provide meaningful employment for any villagers who read and write English and Khmer but would assist literacy growth. High school graduates who are fluent in English could be employed to translate books or even to write new material for primary students. This would not just add to needed literacy material but would model the value of literacy for others in the village who might be exposed to those employed in such positions.

One valuable component of research such as this involves the details (Geertz, 1973). The thought of children fingering the balloons and then blowing them up, often surreptitiously in classrooms, reminded me of a key philosophy of mine: Don’t fight them, join them. The balloons are there, so put them to use. Cambodian companies could employ educated citizens to print phrases, health alerts, excerpts from folk tales, or even stories local children have written onto balloons. The words would be visible as the balloons are blown up. This may be one way the boys in the schoolyards could review lessons as they hit and chase balloons during recess. Children or villagers could then be encouraged to pick up balloon fragments and recycle them into works of art or artifacts to sell at the local market, much like the popular bags constructed from soda cans or food wrappers.

The Cambodian government can be supportive of literacy, in all its forms. A program that creates opportunities for alternate forms of literacy in rural areas needs to be considered and soon. The two boys who stood on the streets of the city intent on reading a menu showed that opportunities for literacy can and will be embraced. These could be developed in different ways.
from public displays of colorful posters for children using Khmer letters to the delivery and use of Khmer text books so that they are given to all students. For the most part, these opportunities should be free, available in remote areas, compelling for children, and written in the Khmer language.

Organizations should seek opportunities to promote literacy in media outlets including children’s educational programming, public bulletin boards, radio programming, web sites and as many forms of communication as possible, such as text messaging on mobile phones. At the same time, a viable school philanthropy program needs to be developed. A program to promote informed tourism should be considered to eliminate “academic begging” operations run by adults who use children to get tourists to buy notebooks for students in classrooms. This needs to be integrated with Cambodia’s emerging Tourist Guide Service training, especially those in the region of Angkor Wat. An alternative way for tourists to support schools should be established to eliminate this practice and still give interested tourists an opportunity to contribute money in a meaningful way.

The Kingdom of Cambodia will face challenges in integrating all of the societal, economic, and political aspects to enhancing literacy in this country. It will require efforts from teachers like Miss Phalen, but also partnerships among parents, administrators, NGOs, development agencies, infrastructure-related planners (electricity), and technology experts. Transforming rice fields to libraries and campuses will require a holistic approach and vision. If only a fraction of the energy, dedication, and commitment I found in one teacher working everyday to change her country’s future is applied to this task, it will be success.

Suggestions for Further Research

As the first chapter delineates, there are limitations to this research. I have conducted an in-depth study of one teacher in one school in one area of Cambodia. Expanding this sample may
yield different results. Further research that looks at other teachers in other schools may yield different descriptions. Of course, one will always find a spectrum of teaching methods; therefore, studying a greater number of teachers would be an important next step.

Study the Boys!

I found that one of the most interesting components of this study was the abundance of females as “top students.” Examining the reasons for this would be helpful as teachers could then adapt their teaching methods to better help boys. Experienced primary teachers reading this research are likely nodding their heads and saying, “Of course.” Our anecdotal “evidence” tells us that whole class teaching using recitation is not appealing to most boys. But there is research to be done in this area. Cambodia is a ripe field for experimental study given that most teaching is currently group response instruction. Different teaching styles could be tried to determine which ones might yield better results with not only boys but with all children.

Literacy Practices

Studies that look at literacy across Cambodia are needed. Research examining literacy practices in cities such as Phnom Penh may point to ways Cambodia is becoming a more literate society. Any number of in-depth studies from describing the literacy practices to looking at how people engaged in professions ranging from tourism to healthcare could add to both an understanding of literacy in Cambodia and may help guide educational development in the country.

Specific research is needed as it relates to skill development in classrooms. The hum in the library, even when higher level students read, leads to questions such as: Were these children really reading at a high level? What does a high level mean in Cambodia? How might the teaching strategies influence oral and silent reading tendencies? These questions are fertile ground for continued educational research.
Additionally, better understanding obstacles to literacy in Cambodia, such as describing copyright issues and any attempts to alleviate these problems along with developing a better understanding regarding barriers to technology such as lack of electricity, training, and the high Internet cost, especially in urban areas are important steps in overcoming literacy firewalls. Studies such as these could involve interviews with Cambodian legal experts along with phenomenological studies examining the experiences of people with various NGOs that attempt to share Khmer-language books with schools and children. This type of research may aid in enhancing workable practices and in reforming barriers to book acquisition.

While those of us who have spent years in elementary classrooms may have negative views about television viewing habits, studies that consider how educational programming impacts the school readiness of Cambodian children could be helpful as the country develops into a more technological society. Assessing the value of various programs would be an important step in helping guide decisions about the use of television as an educational tool.

“Once You Go Your Heart Calls You Back”

The title of this subsection was a comment a Westerner shared with me. She had been returning to Cambodia for years. The country and its people had become a part of her soul. This is the way it is with Cambodia. Many come here and say the same thing. Of course, there are some who do not. Some can’t stand the heat and humidity. Some are appalled by the living conditions. But others are touched; no, this requires a stronger word. We are pulled, somewhere deep in our mitochondria, to this place. I must keep the baskets that villagers’ loving hands wove for me on my desk. I must display the children’s drawings of the bomb that now rings as a call to begin their school day. I must do these things because Cambodia is ingrained in me. It is the land of hope. It is the land where a teacher smiles and claps and dances through the aisles of her crowded classroom despite her low pay and her myriad of subsistence necessities.
This research has forever changed me. I will never again be able to accept the excuses of U.S. teachers for uninspired teaching. I will never again be able to accept my own excuses for marginal teaching. I can never again look at “good teaching” the same way. For I have been shown the portrait of hope painted by one woman, Miss Phalen, that by all rights, should be a landscape of despair. This portrait gives hope to all who are struggling to create a new and literate Cambodia. It is detailed, complex, and colorful, but it is not complete. It is a vibrant work of human art and spirit in progress painted on a canvas of genocide, poverty, and hardship. In Miss Phalen we can see the care, compassion, and dedication to the children who are Cambodia’s future, and we can better understand the next brush strokes needed to paint a brighter future for the Kingdom of Cambodia, its survivors, and its children.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: THE SONG BEFORE THE KHMER ROUGE

Measures of self:
I was fifteen
I was just a little boy
I was born in a small village
I was the youngest
I was educated
I could read, write, and think

Measures of family:
I was proud of my family
I was proud of my roots
I loved my sister
I was three years old when my father died
I thought of my grandfather as my father
I respected him
I can still see the laughing faces of my friends and family
I remember the smell of rice cooking

Measures of a happy, normal childhood:
I can still remember
I loved those happy times
I would splash
I would yell
I would run
I would start a game of soccer
I would play hopscotch
I would play volleyball
I have happy memories of my family
I got away with a lot
I had a favorite water buffalo
I took it to the fields
I knew nothing about politics
I knew nothing about material richness

Measures of Cambodian beauty:
I knew Cambodia was a beautiful place
I close my eyes and see blue skies and flowers
I remember the rice fields
I remember the beautiful trees

Measures of hope for the future:
I was joyful the war had ended
I wanted peace at any price
Lines that do not fit with any of the thematic measures:
I was afraid of who I was
APPENDIX B: THE SONG DURING THE KHMER ROUGE

Measures of fear:
I was scared they could hear my thoughts
I was fearful
I feared the suffering of death
I was fourteen years old when the army came into Phnom Penh
I couldn’t believe what was happening
I could walk and drop dead
I remember the day the soldiers came for me
I was angry
I was thinking to my self that I never wanted to be a soldier
I broke some rules
I was afraid

Measures of want/need:
I was always hungry
I woke up hungry
I went to sleep dirty and hungry
I had depended on her
I was tired
I was hungry
I wandered around
I begged
I never went back to our hut
I slept outside
I crawled into the hut of another
I was depressed
I didn’t see my family for twenty years
I didn’t see my village for twenty years
I became very sick
I had no food
I had no place to go
I didn’t know where Thailand was
I traveled at night
I wanted to stay with him [brother]
I was lonely
I cried when he left

Measures of abuse:
I continued working
I had to go away “to school”
I spent many hours working in the rice fields
I was disciplined a lot of the time
I learned to say “I admit it”
I did this even when the statements were not true
I walked and walked
I was asked to carry grenades
I was carrying bombs
I went back and got more bombs

**Measures of sorrow and helplessness:**
I was sad
I cried
I saw my grandfather lose faith
I saw my brothers beat to death
I wanted to commit suicide
I tried to appear timid
I saw men with hands tied behind their backs
I saw soldiers cut off the men’s heads
I could do nothing
I followed
I watched as my brothers were forced to dig a hole
I watched as soldiers held guns to their heads
I remember one soldier saying we will save our bullets
I was afraid she was dying
I wanted to die, too
I and my sister remained [only]
I think this was the hardest time
I could do nothing
I got up and brought my sister the last cup of water
I said, “I have no rice to give you”
I didn’t know why I didn’t die, too
I didn’t want to live
I noticed my mother looking sad
I never been far from my village
I remember feeling bad
I knew nothing about what the Khmer Rouge were teaching

**Lines that do not fit with any of the thematic measures:**
I was called to join a meeting
I was my mother’s favorite child
I wasn’t afraid to go
I was proud of this
I was amazed by the city
I just wanted to be smart and do well
I was a small kid
I recognized one of my older brothers
APPENDIX C: THE SONG AFTER THE KHMER ROUGE

Measures of escape:
I wanted freedom
I decided to escape
I traveled
I left the camp with my friend
I felt I had to return to Phnom Penh
I snuck across the border
I was asked by the relief agencies if I wanted to go to France or America
I chose America

Measures of renewal:
I was crying with joy
I joined a group of corpse-like bodies dancing freely
I felt my spirit and soul return to my body
I was human
I entered my old neighborhood
I brought food
I stayed with some Buddhist monks
I shaved my head
I took a trip to Cambodia
I saw my parents
I learned two brothers and one sister are still alive

Measures of confusion:
I was crying with sorrow
I stood on Cambodian soil feeling I no longer belonged
I knew my life was changed forever
I lived with a Thai family

Measures of memory:
I was eighteen
I was reminded
I was lucky
I was spared pain
I saw the pain of others that suffered
I saw bodies
I saw blood
I saw death
I saw mothers without children
I saw kids who like me were alone
I heard chilling stories
I lost my childhood
I will never be able to feel the peace
I will never be able to see my dead brothers and sisters
Lines that do not fit with any of the thematic measures:
I had a bad accident
I returned to the camp
APPENDIX E: INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

1. Describe primary education in your school.

2. Describe some of the successes you have had as a teacher.

3. What are some of the concerns you have as a classroom teacher?

4. How do you define literacy?

5. How do you help your students to develop literacy?

6. Are there ways other than textbooks and other types of books that help you to teach reading and writing? Tell me about them.

7. What are some of the challenges you face as you teach your students to read and write?

8. What are some of the ways the Ministry of Education helps you to develop literacy? How do you feel about these policies?

9. What could be done that would help you to develop student literacy more effectively?

10. How would you describe the community around the school?
VITA

Kathy Smith discovered her passion for connecting people, students, and schools more than 30 years ago when she was a student at Northern Michigan University in her hometown of Marquette, Michigan. Kathy has experienced sitting at makeshift desks and tables from the highest school near Mount Everest Base Camp to floating schools of the seasonally flooded Tonle Sap in the low lying Mekong region. As a classroom teacher of more than 20 years, she has held small hands, wiped tears, sung and danced, and consoled at funerals. She believes that teachers are more than educators and that tomorrow’s world will be better if even only one teacher reaches out to help another.

Today Kathy lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with her husband and three West Highland White Terriers where she is an instructor at Towson University. The couple has two children, Jennifer and Andrew. Jennifer continues the family tradition and serves as a counselor at a community college in North Carolina. Andrew is a student at the University of St. Andrew’s in Scotland where he studies religion and anthropology.