Examining Principal Leadership in Cambodian High Schools: A Case Study Approach

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Abstract: This study examines the characteristics, challenges, and strategies of school leadership in Cambodian high schools, with a focus on leadership in resource-constrained settings. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research investigates how principals in six northwestern provinces implement leadership practices to improve educational outcomes. Data were collected through semi structured interviews with 21 principals and analyzed via thematic analysis. Key findings reveal that visionary approaches, collaborative cultures, data-driven decision-making, and resilience characterize effective leadership. Challenges such as limited resources, variable teacher quality, and insufficient professional development hinder progress. The study contributes to educational leadership theory by highlighting the critical role of tailored leadership development programs and resource management in transforming underperforming schools. Practical implications include recommendations for policymakers to expand leadership training, enhance community engagement, and prioritize funding for underperforming schools. This research offers valuable insights for improving leadership in post conflict and resource-limited educational contexts.

Keywords: *Cambodia, collaborative leadership, data-driven decision-making, educational leadership, visionary leadership.*

Introduction

After the end of the 28-year civil war in 1998, Cambodian upper secondary schools experienced significant growth in the number of institutions and student enrollments over the past two decades. Despite this progress, these schools face limited educational resources and a shortage of qualified principals. As of the 2023-2024 school year, Cambodia hosts 19,341 general education and kindergarten schools, including 8,891 kindergartens, 8,252 primary schools (854 private), 1,341 secondary schools (99 private), and 897 high schools (316 private). The country also boasts 169 higher education institutions, split between 78 public and 91 private entities (Hang, 2024).

Unfortunately, the surge in educational institutions has led to overcrowded classrooms, hindering the adoption of innovative teaching methods and diminishing the quality of education. The education workforce comprises 124,517 staff members, 47.5% of whom are women, with a notable decrease in new educator recruitment from 5,000 to 3,000 annually. Over the last decade, 1,069 educators have transitioned from the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports to other governmental departments, exacerbating staff shortages, with an average of 500 educators leaving annually and approximately 1,286 retiring each year (Meas et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport [MoEYS], 2023).

Significantly, the enrollment rate in Cambodian primary schools more than doubled from 2,477,800 in 2003 to 4,204,471 in 2023--2024. The high school enrollment rate also substantially increased from 24.9% in 2014 to 46.7% in 2024. These

achievements demonstrate the potential for further improvement in the Cambodian education system, particularly in the areas of leadership and educational resources. Since joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1999, Cambodia has enacted several policies to enhance education quality, including Rectangular Strategy Phase 1, the Continuous Professional Development Framework for Teachers, and the School Principal Standard Policy. These initiatives, supported by international donors and development partners, aim to propel Cambodia toward becoming a high- to middle-income country by 2030 and a developed country by 2050 (Bo, 2021; Keng, 2009; MoEYS, 2023; R. Sok, 2024).

Despite growth and strategic initiatives, challenges persist due to resource constraints and the need for qualified school principals, particularly in northwestern Cambodia, a region still recovering from conflict and facing rural access disparities. This research is of utmost importance because it addresses these gaps by exploring turnaround leadership as a critical element in transforming underperforming schools into thriving educational environments. By studying the leadership strategies of school principals in this region, this research aims to uncover effective practices and inform policies that significantly enhance school performance and student outcomes. This study not only contributes to the local understanding of effective educational leadership but also offers insights that can be applied globally, especially in similar post conflict or developing regions.

Literature Review

Scenario of Upper Secondary School Leadership in ASEAN

The educational landscape in the ASEAN region has evolved significantly in recent decades, with increasing recognition of the critical role of school leadership in fostering academic excellence and holistic student development. Upper secondary education (grades 10–12) in ASEAN countries presents a complex and diverse environment shaped by each member state's unique structural, cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors (Gill & Berezina, 2021; Walker & Hallinger, 2016). These challenges are compounded by the shared goal of preparing students for higher education or the workforce, creating a dynamic yet demanding setting. A significant challenge in ASEAN's upper secondary education is balancing university entrance exam preparation with developing critical thinking, creativity, and 21st-century skills. Overcrowding classrooms and resource constraints, including limited funding, infrastructure, and technology access, often hinder instructional effectiveness (Adams et al., 2020; Chheang et al., 2023). Addressing these issues requires school leaders to innovate and foster engaging learning environments despite these limitations.

Recent trends highlight positive shifts in school leadership across ASEAN countries. Many countries have invested in School Leadership Development Programs (SLDPs) to enhance leaders' capabilities in instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, and curriculum management (Nugroho et al., 2021). Additionally, platforms such as the ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting (ASED) promote regional collaboration by facilitating the exchange of best practices (ASEAN, 2022). Technology integration is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for enhancing learning, communication, and resource accessibility. Effective school leaders must leverage technology to improve instructional quality and streamline management (Sylvia, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the necessity of agile and crisis-responsive school leadership. Leaders across ASEAN countries played a crucial role in managing lockdowns, transitioning to remote learning, and ensuring student and staff well-being. In the Philippines, educational leaders implemented flexible learning modalities and online well-being forums to support students and teachers (Parr & Sum, 2021). Similarly, Brunei's school leaders balanced national directives with local needs, demonstrating the value of adaptive leadership. Community engagement emerged as another critical factor during the pandemic. Vietnam's education response, characterized by strong collectivism and collaboration between school leaders and policymakers, exemplified how community involvement enhances educational resilience (Parr & Sum, 2021). These experiences reinforce the importance of fostering strong relationships with students, parents, and stakeholders to improve academic outcomes.

Ongoing professional development remains essential for effective school leadership. Programs such as the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) and INNOTECH's Southeast Asian School Leadership Program (SEA SLP) provide platforms for leaders to share experiences and integrate pandemic-related lessons into regular operations. The Competency Framework for Southeast Asian School Heads identifies five key competency areas: (1) strategic thinking and innovation, (2) managerial leadership, (3) instructional leadership, (4) personal excellence, and (5) stakeholder engagement (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2014). These areas highlight the skills necessary for navigating complex educational landscapes.

The pandemic has also exposed disparities in educational access, particularly in remote and underserved areas. ASEAN school leaders face the ongoing challenge of ensuring equitable access to quality education. Innovative solutions such as technology-enhanced remote learning and targeted resource support are essential for bridging these gaps. In summary, upper secondary school leadership in ASEAN countries requires navigating persistent challenges while embracing innovation, fostering community engagement, prioritizing professional development, and ensuring educational equity. By strengthening leadership capacities, ASEAN countries can better prepare students for the demands of the 21st century and create a more resilient and effective education system.

The Current State of Principals' School Leadership in Cambodia

School leadership in Cambodia is undergoing significant transformation, facing both progress and persistent challenges. According to Rathana (2020), the quality of education in Cambodia heavily depends on the roles and responsibilities of school principals, who play a central role in enhancing teaching and learning. Principals fulfill multiple duties, including managerial, administrative, and instructional leadership, directly impacting student outcomes. Increasing emphasis is placed on instructional leadership, which involves setting high expectations, monitoring teaching and learning, and fostering professional growth among teachers (Rathana, 2020). A significant challenge in Cambodian school leadership is the limited availability of qualified principals who can effectively manage schools and lead instructional improvements. Em (2023) argues that the quality of education is closely tied to the competency of both teachers and school principals. Strong leadership is essential for setting a clear vision, fostering a positive school culture, and driving academic excellence. However, many principals lack the training and support to implement these practices effectively.

Financial constraints further complicate school leadership. Ouk Chhayavy, President of the Cambodian Independent Teachers Association (CITA), highlighted that establishing model-standard schools requires additional funding to support teachers and school operations. She noted that many students must still pay school fees, placing financial pressure on families. She warned that relying on public contributions could exacerbate financial burdens amid ongoing economic challenges (Zelin, 2023). In addition to financial issues, Cambodian educational reforms, as outlined in the 2013 Teacher Policy by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS), aim to improve national education by clearly defining the roles of teachers, principals, and local education authorities. This policy underscores the importance of leadership in enhancing pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies (Rathana, 2020). However, implementation remains inconsistent due to resource constraints and limited capacity among school leaders.

Despite these challenges, several initiatives seek to enhance school leadership in Cambodia. Teacher and leadership upgrading programs aim to improve the qualifications and skills of principals and educational officers, contributing to better school management and instructional leadership. As supported by international organizations, MoEYS has focused on strengthening school leadership and advancing educational reforms (Heng & Sol, 2023). Several positive trends are shaping the future of Cambodian school leadership. First, School Leadership Development Programs (SLDPs) are introduced. These programs equip principals with critical skills in instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, and school management (Keng, 2009). These programs aim to professionalize leadership and address competency gaps. Second, implementing School-Based Management (SBM) in 1998 granted schools greater autonomy in decision-making, particularly in resource management and curriculum adaptation (Shoraku, 2009). This policy highlights the vital role of school leadership in fostering accountability and a sense of ownership within schools.

Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain. A key concern is the limited enforcement of performance evaluation measures. School director positions are often lifetime appointments, with minimal emphasis on continuous assessment and accountability (Bo, 2021). This lack of oversight hinders leadership development and reduces incentives for improvement. Additionally, while SLDPs exist, their accessibility and scope remain limited. More investment is needed to expand these programs and ensure that all school leaders receive comprehensive training and ongoing professional support (S. Sok et al., 2020). Many principals may struggle to adapt to evolving educational demands without such improvements.

Cambodia's education system must address these challenges while capitalizing on emerging opportunities. Strengthening performance evaluation measures will ensure that school leaders are accountable for their impact on educational outcomes. Expanding the reach and effectiveness of SLDPs will equip principals with the necessary skills to navigate complex challenges and drive meaningful improvements in their schools. In conclusion, while school leadership in Cambodia has seen progress through policy reforms and leadership development programs, persistent challenges remain. Addressing financial constraints, improving principal qualifications, and enforcing stronger accountability measures are essential to fostering a more effective school leadership system. By tackling these issues and leveraging ongoing initiatives, Cambodia can enhance educational leadership and improve student outcomes, ensuring a stronger future for its education system.

The Existing Regulations and Policies on School Leadership in Cambodia

In Cambodia, school leadership policies focus on capacity building and operational autonomy for schools and institutions. The ministry has been actively implementing four key measures recommended by the prime minister during the first session of the Council of Ministers for the seventh legislature. These measures aim to improve the quality of education by focusing on strengthening public schools from kindergarten to secondary levels. The four measures are as follows:

− Strengthening school governance.

− The government should examine, adjust, and organize curricula and extracurricular activities to enhance students' knowledge, discipline, ethics, and behavior.

− Students' health should be taken care of through child nutrition programs and school food quality control.

- The participation of parents, guardians, and the community in education should be promoted and encouraged, aligning with the slogan of the state–community partnership.

Additionally, the Ministry has identified four more priorities:

- Digital education.

- Establishing centers of excellence in higher education.

- System building and capacity development.

- Development of physical education and sports.

The Ministry has issued a proclamation on implementing standards for model kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools, along with mechanisms to support and implement these standards to ensure clear and comprehensive implementation. In 2024, 793 schools were selected as target schools to implement these standards; these included 96 kindergartens, 348 primary schools, and 349 secondary schools. The Ministry has promoted the implementation of model schools using mechanisms and resources from both the state budget and the budgets of development partners. They have met with units at the Central Administration and the Department of Education, Youth, and Sports of the Capital and Provinces to review the credit status of the 2024 annual budget to raise funds for model schools, totaling 15,543,200,000 Riels or approximately $3.8 million.

The ministry evaluated and recognized 120 model schools on the basis of the following principles:

- The school had a good principal and a good reputation.

- The school won recognition as a model public service unit in education. High-pass high school diploma exams.

- Participating schools in SEA-PLM and PISA international evaluations with high student scores.

- New generation schools, general and technical high schools, and schools scoring high in standard school assessments.

- The Ministry issued a proclamation recognizing these 120 schools during the Education Congress and encouraged them, along with other schools, to continue improving and fully implementing school standards.

Principles in Cambodia, which are traditionally seen as managers, are increasingly expected to take on leadership roles that directly influence teaching and learning outcomes. However, many school leaders rely on teaching experience rather than formal leadership training. To bridge this gap, efforts are underway to develop shared visions, promote professional development, and enhance school management on the basis of available resources and community support. School leadership is critical in Cambodia's education system, which strives for improvement despite resource limitations and systemic challenges. The government has implemented various regulations and policies to support and guide effective school leadership.

To support school reform, the inspection system of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) has strengthened, equipping teams with model school standards to assess individual schools and implement targeted support. Schools are encouraged to conduct standardized tests monthly, quarterly, and semesterly, with results used to enhance teaching and learning. Additionally, the ministry has begun integrating regional and international test questions to ensure alignment between instruction, assessment, and student outcomes. The ministry also promotes new teaching methods, including project-based learning and technology integration, to improve education quality and develop 21st-century skills, particularly in response to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) requirements. Strategies such as full-day learning have been piloted in 20 primary schools, incorporating additional reading, self-study, sports programs, social work, and Khmer arts and culture, following recommendations from the prime minister. Schools with sufficient resources are encouraged to extend daily instruction from four--to-six hours or 40 hours per week, depending on classroom availability and teacher capacity. Further reforms address teacher and student attendance, discipline enforcement, and establishing study clubs to support struggling learners.

Improving reading and mathematics skills in early grades is a top priority for enhancing education at both the primary and secondary levels. The ministry focused on the following:

- Strengthening reading instruction

- Enhancing mathematics education in primary schools

- Increasing the number of qualified Khmer language teachers for grades 1–3

- Establishing model schools for early-grade reading and math

To achieve these goals, MoEYS collaborates with development partners to implement early-grade reading materials nationwide. First-grade reading programs have been introduced in all primary schools across 22 provinces, with second-level reading rolled out in 19 provinces and third-level reading in Kampong Chhnang. Mathematics instruction has also expanded, with first-grade math programs in eight provinces and second-grade math programs in six provinces. These resources are also incorporated into teacher training at pedagogical schools to ensure sustainability. Recognizing the need for more decisive school leadership, the Cambodian government has introduced policies to standardize leadership qualifications and responsibilities. Sub-Decree No. 73 (2017) outlines the academic requirements, leadership skills, and professional experience needed for school directors and deputy directors (Hang, 2017; MoEYS, 2017a). This framework aims to ensure competency and effectiveness in school leadership roles.

The implementation of School-Based Management (SBM) in 2018 granted schools greater autonomy in resource management, curriculum adaptation, and teacher recruitment (Bo, 2019; MoEYS, 2021; Om et al., 2019). This policy acknowledges the crucial role of school leaders in decision-making and promotes a sense of ownership among educators. Additionally, MoEYS has established six competency standards for school directors:

– Academic qualifications and experience

– Leadership capacities and characteristics

– Critical and innovative thinking

– School leadership and management

– Curriculum, teaching, and learning leadership

– School and community engagement (MoEYS, 2017b)

These standards guide school leaders' recruitment and professional development, ensuring that they are prepared to manage Cambodia's evolving education system effectively. MoEYS recognizes that ongoing professional development is essential for school leaders. School leadership development programs (SLDPs) provide training on instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, and school management (Keng, 2009). However, while SLDPs exist, their accessibility and scope remain limited. Further investment and expansion are needed to ensure that all school leaders receive comprehensive training and continuous support (Chin, 2022; S. Sok et al., 2020). Another key concern is the lack of performance evaluation for school leaders. Research indicates that school director positions in Cambodia are often treated as lifetime appointments, with insufficient mechanisms for accountability and ongoing assessment (Bo, 2021; Kheang, 2011; Khy & Bo, 2020; Om et al., 2019). Strengthening performance-based evaluation systems is essential for promoting effective leadership and ensuring continuous improvement in school management (Cambridge University, 2023; Fullan, 2010).

Cambodia has significantly improved school leadership through policy reforms, leadership training programs, and school-based management initiatives. However, challenges persist, including limited resources, a lack of qualified leaders, and inadequate performance evaluation systems. Strengthening leadership development programs, enforcing accountability measures, and expanding access to training are critical steps toward ensuring that school leaders can effectively navigate challenges and drive educational improvement. By continuously refining policies and investing in leadership capacity, Cambodia can empower school principals to play a transformative role in shaping the future of its education system.

Leadership of School Principals in Cambodia

In recent years, scholarly interest in educational leadership and management has grown across Southeast Asia. While studies have examined this field in China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, research on Cambodia remains limited (Jones & Nagel, 2022; No & Sok, 2022). Cambodian turnaround leadership emphasizes developing a shared vision and enhancing professional development to improve school outcomes. This approach is crucial in a system where principals traditionally serve as managers rather than instructional leaders. The shift toward turnaround leadership seeks to transform schools by fostering environments that prioritize teaching and learning improvements (Om et al., 2019; Sey, 2023). Despite progress, Cambodia's education system still faces significant challenges, including limited resources, large class sizes, and disparities in teacher quality. In this context, turnaround leadership is essential for improving struggling schools.

First, visionary leadership is critical. School leaders must set clear goals for improvement and inspire stakeholders. According to the Ministry of Education, key measures for achieving model-standard schools include strengthening governance, revising curricula, and designing extracurricular activities that enhance students' knowledge, discipline, and ethics. Additionally, the Department of Education Quality Assurance (EQAD) oversees standardized testing, whereas the finance department ensures cost-effective planning (Rathana, 2020). A collaboratively developed vision fosters ownership and engagement among teachers, parents, and students. Second, instructional leadership plays a vital role in turnaround efforts. Effective school leaders focus on curriculum development, innovative teaching practices, and student

learning (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). A strong culture of collaboration and continuous improvement among teachers is necessary. Additionally, principals with high emotional intelligence and strong communication skills can build trust and foster positive relationships within the school community (Paschal et al., 2025).

While Cambodia has made strides in School Leadership Development Programs, further investment is needed. Comprehensive training in instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, and school management is essential (Keng, 2009). Expanding mentorship and peer-learning opportunities can further support principals' professional growth. By equipping school leaders with the necessary skills, Cambodia can effectively address educational challenges and create better opportunities for its students.

Problem Statements

Despite substantial educational reforms and investments in Cambodia, particularly in the post conflict era, high schools in the northwestern regions continue to face significant challenges in improving educational outcomes and institutional performance. One critical factor identified in successful educational transformations worldwide is the role of effective leadership, particularly turnaround leadership, which focuses on radical improvement in contexts of significant underperformance. In northwestern Cambodia, high schools have historically lagged in key performance indicators such as student achievement, graduation rates, and college enrollment. This underperformance is exacerbated by unique regional challenges, including limited resources, rural isolation, and the lingering effects of past conflicts. While there is growing recognition of the importance of school leadership in addressing these issues, there is still a substantial gap in understanding the specific practices, strategies, and challenges of turnaround leadership in this unique context. The research problem centers on the lack of a comprehensive understanding of how school principals in northwestern Cambodia navigate the complexities of educational leadership in low-performing settings. Specifically, there is a need to investigate how these leaders implement turnaround strategies, the challenges they face in transforming their schools, and the support systems necessary for sustaining improvements. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing targeted interventions and policies that support effective leadership and promote educational equity and excellence in the region. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the characteristics, strategies, and experiences of turnaround leadership among high school principals in northwestern Cambodia.

Research Objectives

It was designed for the following objectives:

- To identify the leadership of school principals in Cambodian upper secondary schools
- To investigate the factors that affect leadership in Cambodian high schools
- To examine the principal's role in leadership in provincial schools
- To explore possible recommendations that could contribute to improving leadership in low-performing schools

Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of this study, three questions were developed:

- What are the key characteristics of leadership exhibited by school principals in Cambodian upper secondary schools?
- What factors influence the effectiveness of leadership in upper secondary schools in Cambodia?
- What specific roles do principals play in facilitating leadership in provincial schools in Cambodia?
- What recommendations can be made to enhance leadership in low-performing schools in Cambodia?

Methodology

Study Design

This study utilized a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the characteristics of leadership in upper secondary schools in northeastern Cambodia in detail. The case study technique was chosen for its profoundness, meticulousness, and capacity to offer context-specific observations. This meticulous approach is especially appropriate for examining the intricate phenomena of leadership in distinctive educational environments, instilling confidence in the research process.

Participants

The study surveyed 21 high school principals from various high schools in northeastern Cambodia. The participants were purposefully chosen on the basis of several criteria, including the geographic location of their schools, performance

metrics, and documented efforts to implement turnaround techniques. This included both principals and deputy principals—the selection process aimed to ensure a diverse representation of experiences and circumstances.

Table 1. Interview Participants

Participant Code	Age	Gender	School Location	Work Experiences	Degree
R1	54	M	Battambang	13 years	MPA
R2	52	M	Battambang	8 years	MBA
R3	48	M	Battambang	18 years	B.Sc.
R4	50	M	Battambang	15 years	MPA
R5	45	M	Banteay Meanchey	9 years	BA
R6	38	M	Banteay Meanchey	8 years	B.Sc.
R7	35	M	Banteay Meanchey	5 years	B.Sc.
R8	50	M	Banteay Meanchey	12 years	M.Sc.
R9	54	M	Pursat	14 years	BA
R10	56	M	Pursat	10 years	M. Ed.
R11	42	M	Pursat	18 years	M.Sc.
R12	48	M	Pursat	8 years	BA
R13	36	M	Oddor Meanchey	12 years	BA
R14	39	M	Oddor Meanchey	14 years	B.Sc.
R15	45	M	Oddor Meanchey	17 years	MBA
R16	46	M	Siem Reap	7 years	BA
R17	53	M	Siem Reap	4 years	B.Sc.
R18	49	M	Siem Reap	16 years	BA
R19	52	M	Siem Reap	10 years	B.Sc.
R20	43	M	Pailin	12 years	M.Ed
R21	40	M	Pailin	8 years	MPA

Data Collection

The data are primarily collected through semistructured interviews, which thoroughly examine principals' experiences, perceptions, and leadership practices. The interview guide, created on the basis of the study questions and literature analysis, covers leadership strategies, problems encountered, support systems, and perceived outcomes of turnaround initiatives. Before the interviews, a pilot study was conducted with two school principals not involved in the main study. This pilot study sought to improve and refine the interview questions and techniques. Each interview, which was expected to last 30--60 minutes, was conducted in Khmer, the participants' native language, to ensure their comfort and understanding. Consent letters were obtained from all the participants to audio-record the interviews, which were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The participants were assured that their cultural background and language were respected, which contributed to the sensitivity and depth of the research.

Data Analysis

To ensure intercoder reliability in this study, a systematic process was used to maintain consistency and accuracy in the data analysis. First, a detailed codebook would have been developed, defining each code on the basis of the study's research questions and preliminary themes. Coders undergo calibration sessions to align their understanding, applying the codebook to a small sample of data and refining definitions as needed. Afterward, the coders independently analyzed the data and compared the codes to assess consistency, often calculating intercoder reliability metrics such as percentage agreement of 85% to quantify alignment. These values indicate a high level of agreement between the coders, ensuring the reliability of the coding process. Discrepancies in coding were discussed, and adjustments were made until consensus was achieved. This process enhances the reliability and objectivity of the findings and reinforces the rigor of qualitative analysis by ensuring that coding reflects a shared interpretation across researchers.

This study employed a qualitative methodology, explicitly thematic analysis, to explore the intricacies of leadership in high schools in Cambodia. Thematic analysis, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), is instrumental in psychometric research for the methodical identification and interpretation of significant themes within data sets. This technique played a crucial role in revealing this study's intricate aspects of leadership dynamics. The data analysis proceeded in carefully delineated stages. First, the study team thoroughly and comprehensively analyzed the data by examining the interview transcripts multiple times to achieve complete and thorough understanding. The initial stage was vital in establishing the subsequent analysis of the genuine voices and experiences of the participants. The team subsequently created preliminary coding, assigning keywords or concise phrases to the data that accurately represented the main points of the responses. In the third and fourth steps, there was a repeated process of looking for and examining themes. Initially, specific codes were combined to form more general themes, representing larger patterns in the data. This step was crucial because it converted unprocessed data into organized insights pertinent to turnaround leadership.

Afterward, the team defined and named the themes, ensuring that each was unique and clearly represented a specific facet of leadership. The outcome of this procedure was the creation of an elaborate report, presenting the discoveries in a logical and easily understandable way.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Research and Development Center of the National University of Battambang. Obtaining informed consent from all participants is a priority, ensuring that they fully comprehend the goal of the study, their right to withdraw at any point, and how their data are utilized and safeguarded. The study ensured the preservation of participants' and their schools' confidentiality by using pseudonyms for all distributed findings.

Results

This study explores high school principals' leadership characteristics, challenges, and strategies across six northwestern provinces in Cambodia. Through qualitative insights from interviews with 21 principals, the findings reveal core leadership traits—visionary leadership, collaborative culture, resilience, adaptability, and ethical integrity—that support turnaround initiatives in underperforming schools. Additionally, this section examines the impacts of resource limitations, community involvement, and professional development needs on leadership effectiveness in these schools. Notably, data-driven decision-making and community engagement play pivotal roles in enhancing school outcomes, highlighting school leaders' need for formal training and policy support. Comparative analysis across provinces underscores variations in resource allocation, with regions such as Battambang and Siem Reap demonstrating slightly higher performance because of more robust community support and better access to educational resources. However, the findings suggest that leadership effectiveness remains constrained by large class sizes, limited funding, and a lack of ongoing performance evaluations for principals. These insights inform the recommendations, emphasizing targeted leadership development programs, enhanced community partnerships, and increased funding to address resource gaps. This integrated analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how targeted leadership strategies can transform educational outcomes in challenging environments, particularly within the Cambodian context.

Figure 1. Upper Secondary Schools Across Six Northwestern Provinces of Cambodia

Research Question One: What are the Key Characteristics of Leadership Exhibited by School Principals in Cambodian Upper Secondary Schools?

The findings revealed several key traits, including visionary leadership, leadership styles, data-driven decision-making, a collaborative culture, resilience and adaptability, professional ethics, and support system building, characterizing effective leadership by principals in Cambodian upper secondary schools. These characteristics collectively enable principals to lead practical turnaround efforts and drive substantial improvements in educational outcomes in Cambodia. One of the principals shared the following:

"Leadership is very important to me because it exemplifies the transformative power of leadership in educational settings. It goes beyond administrative functions and includes a strategic and dynamic process for revitalizing underperforming schools. To me, leadership entails several critical aspects, including visionary change, strategic actions, delegation and cooperation, resilience and adaptability, and impact on student outcomes" (R1).

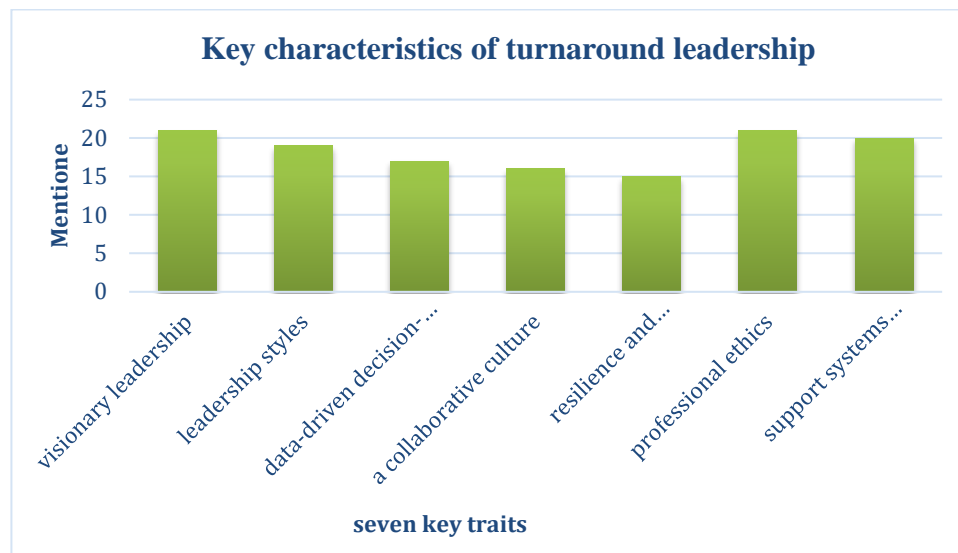**Key characteristics of turnaround leadership**

Figure 2. Seven Key Traits That Contribute to Effective Turnaround Leadership

Furthermore, some principals focus on leadership styles such as instructional and distributed leadership styles that help them manage staff and effectively implement government policies and regulations, especially their schools' internal regulations and policies. One participant explained:

In my opinion, leadership refers to leadership styles that significantly improve a failing organization or situation. A more thorough and urgent approach than simply making minor changes is needed. It aligns with Cambodian model school standards, which focus on five standards: student performance, teaching and learning effectiveness, community participation, operational school management, and institutional accountability" (R 7).

A good school principal combines visionary leadership with strong communication, instructional expertise, empathy, decisiveness, integrity, collaboration, resilience, a focus on student achievement, and a commitment to continuous improvement. These characteristics enable them to create a positive, inclusive, and high-performing school environment that benefits all members of the school community. One participant shared the following:

"On the basis of my experiences and observations, I noted that leadership in school principals on the basis of key indicators includes improved student outcomes, a positive school culture, effective communication, teacher development, data-driven decision making, and strong community engagement" (R11).

Research Question Two: What Factors Influence the Effectiveness of Leadership in Upper Secondary Schools in Cambodia?

Factors affecting leadership in Cambodian high schools include the lack of formal leadership training for principals, traditional managerial views overshadowing leadership roles, and the increasing demands of administrative tasks. Additionally, the need for a shared vision, professional development, and community support also plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of turnaround leadership. The investigation revealed that most participants identified five primary factors that can both hinder and support leadership in Cambodian high schools: limited resources, large class sizes, variable teacher quality, limited performance evaluation, and low teacher salaries. One respondent shared his experience, noting the following:

The primary findings of this research highlight the role of insufficient funding, a lack of infrastructure, and limited access to technology in hindering effective leadership efforts, which impacts the ability to implement necessary changes and provide adequate support for students and teachers. Managing crowded classrooms presents a significant challenge for effective instruction, personalized learning, and fostering individual student engagement. The inconsistent quality of teacher training and preparation can impact the effectiveness of instructional practices and student learning outcomes. The current system treats director positions as lifetime appointments with minimal emphasis on ongoing performance assessment and accountability, hindering effective leadership development and holding leaders accountable for their schools' performance. Insufficient opportunities for ongoing professional development for school leaders can restrict their ability to acquire and practice the necessary skills and knowledge for turnaround leadership.

Table 2. Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Leadership in Cambodia

Code	Factors	Excerpts from Data Sources
LIR	Limited resources	Principals faced challenges to effective leadership due to insufficient funding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to technology (R11).
LCS	Large class sizes	Teachers find it challenging to interact more with one another due to the high number of students. Additionally, providing timely feedback to students has proven difficult (R18).
VTQ	Variable teacher quality	Teachers come from diverse backgrounds in terms of qualifications and experience. Highly skilled and qualified teachers often prefer working in urban areas over rural ones (R4).
FCL	limited performance evaluation,	Teachers find it challenging to implement educational evaluations aligned with lesson plans and curricula, particularly regarding formative and summative assessments, including standardized tests (R16).
EP	**Professional development**	Teachers need to enhance their skills and qualifications by attending short and long-term courses to pursue bachelor's and master's degrees (R21).
LTS	Low teacher salaries.	Most teachers appear dissatisfied with their current salaries and benefits, citing heavy workloads and concerns about maintaining a dignified standard of living (R8).

Moreover, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) launched School Leadership Development Programs (SLDPs) to help school leaders improve their skills in instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, and school management, ultimately improving leadership practices. The School-Based Management (SBM) policy gives schools more autonomy in resource management, curriculum adaptation, and teacher recruitment, allowing leaders to make context-specific decisions and implement innovative approaches. Community engagement, which fosters relationships with parents, community members, and stakeholders, helps create a supportive learning environment, boost parental involvement, and secure additional resources. Additionally, technology can enhance learning, communication, and resource access in high schools, but effective leadership is crucial for ensuring equitable access, addressing digital divides, and thoughtfully integrating technology. By strategically adjusting policies, investing in resources, and providing ongoing leadership development support, Cambodian high schools can empower their leaders to implement turnaround strategies and improve student educational outcomes.

Research Question Three: What specific roles do principals play in facilitating leadership in provincial schools in Cambodia?

In provincial high schools in Cambodia, principals' roles in leadership involve developing and communicating a clear vision, fostering an environment supportive of teaching and learning, promoting professional development, and engaging with the community to improve school outcomes. They are expected to transition from traditional managerial roles to proactive educational leaders. One respondent noted that:

"*As a principal, my main duties are to follow the ministry's directives; especially, model standard school. To attain the status of a standard model school spanning from kindergarten to secondary levels, the ministry has outlined essential measures and indicators. These encompass enhancing school governance, revising and designing curricula and tailoring extracurricular activities to bolster students' knowledge, discipline, ethics and* behaviors" (R19).

The interview results revealed that principals in Cambodian provincial high schools are responsible for turnaround leadership, which aims to improve the performance of struggling schools. Their responsibilities are extensive and include developing and communicating a clear vision for school improvement, cultivating a culture of continuous improvement, monitoring instructional practices, and promoting student-centered learning. Effective principals work closely with teachers, parents, and the community to ensure clear communication, efficient resource management, and the promotion of innovation.

Effective communication connects stakeholders, such as teachers, students, and parents, to the school's vision. When effectively communicated, this vision fosters a sense of collective ownership and commitment to achieving common goals. Goals consistent with this vision are benchmarks for measuring progress and adapting strategies in response to

feedback and data-driven insights. Principals who support evidence-based decision-making assist teachers in their professional development by fostering collaborative environments, providing ongoing feedback, and providing targeted coaching. They actively observe classrooms, analyze student data, and use feedback mechanisms to identify areas for improvement and recognize achievements, all with the overarching goal of improving student learning outcomes while also developing critical thinking skills and academic knowledge.

Strong relationships with stakeholders are essential for involving them in decision-making processes and encouraging shared responsibility for school improvement. Principals build trust and a sense of shared responsibility by regularly informing stakeholders about the school's vision, progress, and challenges. They actively seek community support and resources, demonstrating a proactive approach to resource allocation that prioritizes student learning and school improvement investments. These investments are underpinned by clear policies that ensure everyone's safety and well-being. Principals play an essential role in cultivating an environment that encourages creativity and experimentation. This allows them to experiment with new approaches to improving school performance while inspiring and motivating the community. Principals' success in these multifaceted roles is determined by their ability to demonstrate adept leadership skills across multiple domains, navigate complexities, effectively manage stakeholders, and tailor strategies to their school's unique needs. Principals in Cambodian provincial high schools who effectively carry out these responsibilities can drive positive change, improve school quality, and expand educational opportunities for all students.

Research Question Four: What Recommendations Can Be Made to Increase Leadership in Low-Performing Schools in Cambodia?

Several recommendations should be considered for improving leadership in Cambodia's underperforming upper secondary schools. These include investing in formal leadership training for principals, cultivating a culture that prioritizes educational leadership over traditional management, encouraging the development of a shared vision, expanding professional development opportunities for employees, and strengthening community engagement and support. On the basis of the interviews and school observations, specific recommendations for improving leadership in these schools were provided. By implementing these six recommendations, Cambodian upper secondary schools can significantly improve their leadership practices and overall performance.

Table 3. Recommendations to Enhance Turnaround Leadership

Code	Description	Excerpts from Data Sources
SLD	Strengthening Leadership Development	Principals should undergo formal leadership training and receive ongoing mentorship and support (R15).
IFR	Increasing Funding and Resource Allocation	Ensure schools have adequate funding and essential learning resources (R18).
ERM	Efficient Resource Management	Develop capacity for effective management of resources (R4).
FCL	Fostering Collaborative Leadership	Encourage collaborative leadership and school improvement initiatives (R16).
EP	Exploring Partnerships	Partner with NGOs and private institutions to enhance support and resources (R21).
PSE	Promoting Student Well-Being and Engagement	Focus on initiatives that support student well-being and active engagement (R8).

Most principals suggested expanding the accessibility and scope of School Leadership Development Programs (SLDPs) to reach all upper secondary school leaders, which are not limited by their current reach. Customize SLDP content to address specific challenges such as instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, turnaround strategies, and managing resource limitations within the context of upper secondary education. This tailored approach ensures that leaders have the necessary skills to lead their schools toward improvement effectively. The benefits of continuous mentorship and support should be emphasized through ongoing professional development opportunities and mentorship programs. These initiatives are instrumental in the successful implementation of turnaround strategies, helping school leaders effectively address emerging challenges and navigate complexities. By providing consistent support, leaders can maintain momentum toward school improvement over time, underscoring the importance of continuous learning and adaptation in the education sector.

The importance of efficient resource allocation and management in maximizing the impact of available resources on school improvement efforts should be underlined. By increasing funding for underperforming upper secondary schools

and directing resources toward improvement initiatives, infrastructure development, and the integration of technology, we can ensure that schools have the necessary learning resources. This includes curriculum materials, textbooks, technology equipment, and teaching aids to facilitate effective teaching and learning. The ability of school leaders to efficiently budget and allocate resources is crucial in this process. The role of data-driven decision-making in fostering collaborative leadership and school improvement should be emphasized. By training school leaders and teachers in data analysis, we can promote a culture of data-driven decision-making. This approach allows us to identify areas for improvement, monitor progress, and inform strategic decisions. It also facilitates knowledge sharing and peer learning among school leaders, enabling them to exchange best practices, learn from each other's experiences, and collaboratively develop solutions.

In addition, addressing specific challenges involves implementing comprehensive performance evaluation frameworks for school directors. These frameworks are not limited to accountability; they are about continuous development, ensuring that school leaders are striving for improvement. We also focus on enhancing teacher quality through improved training, recruitment practices, and ongoing professional development opportunities. By managing large class sizes through innovative teaching methods and leveraging technology, we personalize learning experiences. We also explore partnerships with NGOs and private institutions to access additional resources, expertise, and innovative approaches that support school improvement efforts. By promoting student well-being and engagement through the implementation of holistic strategies beyond academics, such as counseling services, extracurricular activities, and nurturing learning environments, we ensure high-quality education. Finally, we tailor turnaround strategies to each upper secondary school's specific needs and context to ensure relevance and effectiveness in achieving improvement goals. One of the respondents noted,

"*Enhancing leadership in low-performing schools in Cambodia requires a comprehensive approach that includes professional development, community engagement, data-driven decision-making, adequate resource allocation, instructional leadership, positive school culture, capacity building, policy support, a focus on student well-being, and rigorous monitoring and evaluation. By addressing these areas, schools can create an environment conducive to significant and sustained improvement, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes for all students*" (R13).

Therefore, implementing these recommendations will allow policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to create a supportive environment where school leaders in Cambodia's low-performing upper-secondary schools can thrive. This can eventually lead to higher academic performance and better student outcomes.

Discussion

The findings revealed that several vital traits characterize Cambodian upper secondary schools, including effective leadership by principals. Visionary leadership involves setting a clear, compelling vision for school improvement and inspiring stakeholders to commit to this shared goal (Chheang et al., 2023; Peck & Reitzug, 2014; S. Sok et al., 2020). Instructional leadership enhances the curriculum and teaching practices to improve student outcomes (Jones & Nagel, 2022). Data-driven decision-making is crucial, as principals use performance data to identify weaknesses and prioritize interventions (Donaher & Wu, 2020; Goleman, 1998; Goleman et al., 2002). A collaborative culture is fostered, promoting teamwork and continuous professional development among teachers (Liu, 2020; Parr & Sum, 2021). Effective communication ensures transparency and builds trust within the school community, whereas resource management maximizes available resources and secures additional support to address gaps. Resilience and adaptability allow principals to navigate challenges and respond proactively to changing circumstances (Dimmock & Tan, 2015; Harris & Chapman, 2002; Kaplan & Norton, 1996). Personal excellence demonstrated through high ethical standards and continuous learning, sets a positive example for staff and students. Finally, building support systems through mentorship and professional development opportunities is essential for sustaining improvements and fostering a supportive work environment. These characteristics collectively enable principals to lead practical turnaround efforts and drive substantial improvements in educational outcomes in Cambodia.

The findings of this study underscore several pivotal leadership qualities that contribute to effective turnaround strategies in underperforming schools across northwestern Cambodia. School principals demonstrate key traits, including visionary leadership, resilience, data-driven decision-making, and collaborative culture, which collectively enable them to navigate the complex educational landscape in a post-conflict region. These qualities are essential for addressing Cambodia's unique challenges, including limited educational resources, rural isolation, and the varied educational backgrounds of teachers and students.

A prominent theme throughout the interviews was the importance of visionary leadership. Principals with a clear, forward-looking approach were able to set transformative goals, inspire teachers, and foster a shared vision for improvement within the school community. The study shows that when principals emphasize collaboration and community engagement, they build a supportive environment that actively contributes to school goals. By involving parents, teachers, and students in decision-making, these principals cultivate a sense of ownership and accountability among stakeholders, which is crucial for sustaining improvements in resource-constrained settings.

The role of data in decision-making is increasingly acknowledged as essential in Cambodia's educational reform efforts. Principals who integrated data-driven strategies reported improved outcomes, as they could identify specific areas for instructional improvement, monitor student performance, and tailor teaching methods to students' needs. Effective principals in the study also exhibited instructional leadership by supporting teachers' professional growth, implementing evidence-based teaching practices, and adapting curricula to meet students' needs. This approach aligns with current educational leadership trends in ASEAN countries, where data utilization and instructional leadership are increasingly emphasized to drive academic achievement (Kulophas & Hallinger, 2023; Leithwood et al., 2020).

However, the study also reveals the significant challenges principals face due to limited resources and large class sizes. Overcrowded classrooms make it difficult for principals and teachers to implement innovative teaching methods and provide individualized attention to students, impacting overall student engagement and learning outcomes. The limited funding in these schools restricts access to essential resources such as textbooks, technology, and training opportunities, underscoring the need for targeted investments from both the government and external partners. The findings suggest that without substantial improvements in funding and resource allocation, the impact of leadership development programs may be constrained.

While professional development opportunities, such as School Leadership Development Programs (SLDPs), are available, the study indicates that many principals still lack formal leadership training tailored to their roles and the specific challenges of rural, resource-limited schools. The lack of structured performance evaluation systems further compounds these challenges, as principals often lack the accountability mechanisms and constructive feedback necessary for continuous improvement. Establishing performance evaluation frameworks and providing ongoing training could support principals in setting realistic goals, improving management skills, and refining their leadership approaches.

In light of these findings, targeted recommendations include expanding leadership development programs to equip principals with skills in instructional leadership, resource management, and community engagement. Establishing partnerships with NGOs and private institutions can supplement funding, offer training, and provide technological resources that support school improvement. Moreover, cultivating a collaborative culture within schools and across communities can amplify the impact of limited resources, as local support strengthens initiatives aimed at enhancing student well-being and learning outcomes.

Conclusion

This study highlights the essential role of effective leadership in transforming underperforming schools in northwestern Cambodia, where limited resources, diverse socioeconomic conditions, and historical challenges demand adaptable and resilient leadership. By analyzing the experiences and strategies of high school principals, several defining characteristics of successful leadership emerge, including visionary approaches, collaborative culture, data-driven decision-making, and resilience. These traits collectively support principals in facilitating turnaround initiatives, promoting professional development among staff, and engaging local communities to improve school performance. The findings underscore the importance of targeted leadership development programs and increased resource allocation to empower principals in these regions. However, the study also reveals persisting challenges, such as the lack of formal training, insufficient performance evaluation frameworks, and resource limitations that impact school outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires a commitment from educational stakeholders to invest in ongoing professional development, policy support, and effective resource management to create an environment conducive to educational excellence. Ultimately, this research provides valuable insights into the leadership practices that can drive meaningful changes in Cambodia's education system. By implementing the recommended strategies, policymakers and educators can enhance school leadership, thus fostering improved educational opportunities and outcomes for students in low-performing schools.

Recommendations

On the basis of our empirical findings and literature review, researchers have provided some recommendations:

School Leaders and Principals

The first step in school improvement is assessing strengths and weaknesses, utilizing data analysis, and gathering stakeholder feedback as essential tools. Setting a clear direction for improvement and establishing measurable goals are critical for guiding effective efforts. Principals should prioritize effective teaching and learning strategies. This includes implementing data-driven instructional practices and personalized learning approaches. Creating a positive and collaborative school environment is indispensable. Turnaround leaders should actively promote innovation, encourage risk-taking among staff, and foster a culture of continuous improvement. Effective communication with teachers, parents, and the community is vital for successful school turnaround efforts. The Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (MoEYS) should develop and implement targeted training programs to equip principals with the necessary skills and strategies for effective school turnaround leadership.

Ministries and Policy Makers

Traditionally, principals have been selected primarily for their teaching experience rather than their leadership skills, resulting in a management-focused rather than vision-oriented approach. To address this, it is recommended that selection criteria be revised to prioritize leadership qualities, ensuring that principals can effectively steer schools toward a clear vision for improvement. Studies indicate significant areas for improvement in subjects such as reading and math. Turnaround leaders should concentrate on enhancing teaching methodologies and fostering greater student engagement to boost academic performance and overall learning outcomes. Equipping teachers with cutting-edge pedagogical techniques is crucial for enhancing classroom instruction. Turnaround principals should prioritize providing ongoing professional development opportunities that enable educators to effectively integrate the latest teaching strategies. Establishing a strong connection between the school and the community is vital for fostering a supportive educational environment. Turnaround leaders can cultivate trust and collaboration with parents and local stakeholders, ensuring their involvement in school initiatives and decision-making processes. Providing mentorship and coaching-experienced leaders can play a pivotal role in mentoring and coaching new principals. This initiative helps individuals transfer valuable leadership skills and knowledge, ensuring continuity in effective school management practices. Creating platforms for principals to share successful turnaround strategies can significantly benefit the school system. By facilitating knowledge exchange and collaboration among school leaders, institutions can adopt proven strategies more widely, leading to improved educational outcomes.

Communalities, Local Authorities, and Development Partners

Ties with local schools should be strengthened by actively participating in parent-teacher associations (PTAs) or school management committees. Show support by volunteering or advocating for improved educational resources. Community awareness of the importance of education should be increased, and better school facilities, higher teacher standards, and enhanced educational opportunities for every child should be advocated. Collaborate closely with schools and local authorities to identify community needs and jointly develop projects that enhance educational outcomes. Encourage a shared sense of responsibility and ownership for local educational initiatives. Education policies that prioritize fair access to high-quality education for all children should be developed and implemented. Allocate resources effectively, especially to schools in low-income areas or those needing extra support. Comprehensive training and professional development opportunities should be provided for school leaders, teachers, and administrative staff. Enhance expertise in educational management, curriculum design, and innovative teaching methods. Robust systems should be established to monitor educational outcomes and ensure accountability. We use data-driven insights to refine decision-making and enhance educational policies and practices. Sustainable financial support should be provided for educational projects and initiatives. Assist schools in disadvantaged communities with infrastructure upgrades, educational materials, and integration of technology. Provide specialized support in teacher training, curriculum development, and educational innovation—Foster partnerships with local institutions to build long-term capacity and ensure sustainability. Work together with communities, local authorities, and educational institutions to develop comprehensive educational programs tailored to local needs. Initiatives are culturally sensitive and align with community aspirations for meaningful impact.

Limitations

This study has many limitations, such as the subjective nature of the qualitative data, the use of self-reported data from just 21 principals in Northwestern Cambodia, and the contextual specificity of the findings, which may restrict their applicability to other contexts. However, a careful study design alleviates these limitations.

Acknowledgment

Ethics statements

This study received ethical approval from the Research and Development Center of the National University of Battambang. All participants provided informed consent, ensuring that they fully understood the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to safeguard their data. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity was upheld throughout the research.

Conflict of interest

The researchers used research ethics provided by the Research and Development Center of the National University of Battambang. In accordance with the ethical standards of the university research committee, all procedures performed in this study involved human participants.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Sam: Conceptualization, design, editing, reviewing, and final writing. Sok: Conceptualization, design, editing, review, and final writing. Tieng: Drafted the manuscript, critically revised the manuscript, and provided technical support. Yoeng: Data acquisition, data analysis, and interpretation. Chiv: Critical revision of the manuscript, administration, and technical support. Thy: Critical revision of the manuscript, administration, and technical support. Saing: Critical revision of the manuscript, administration, and technical support.

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