

LITERATURE REVIEW

CHILDREN'S READING HABITS, INTERNATIONALLY AND IN CAMBODIA



INTRODUCTION

This literature review summarizes key research findings relating to children's reading habits internationally and in Cambodia. It was commissioned by The Asia Foundation's Let's Read program to support the work of Let's Read and other organizations working in the field of children's education and literacy skills development in Cambodia.

The Let's Read program supports children in Asia and the Pacific build strong early reading skills and develop a genuine love of reading, with a particular focus on promoting reading opportunities among children, families, and caregivers outside of formal education settings. This literature review therefore focuses on reading that happens outside of the classroom environment.

The review summarizes key research findings on children's reading habits and preferences, how these are influenced by different factors, and children's access to reading materials in Cambodia. These findings were drawn from a wide array of reports, studies, and surveys produced by academic researchers, governmental bodies, and nonprofit education organizations.

The review also examines the importance of reading for pleasure, the role of parents in developing reading habits, the role of access to reading materials, and what approaches can be taken to encourage students to read more.



THE IMPORTANCE OF READING FOR PLEASURE

International research illustrates the importance of reading for pleasure for children's academic progress, as well as their personal development (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). While children need systematic instruction in the skills of reading to "crack the code" of how letters and sounds relate and to develop strategies for comprehension, reading outside of the classroom is also essential to ensure that students fully develop these skills (Rose, 2006).

The multi-country Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that reading enjoyment is more strongly linked to children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status (Kirsch et al. 2004). Some have argued, therefore, that finding ways to engage students in reading could be an effective approach to address inequalities and social exclusion (Clark & Rumbold, 2006).

Further research is needed to definitively prove a causal link between strong reading habits and the development of reading skills; however, many have theorized that the two are mutually reinforcing. That is, a child who is successful at reading enjoys the process more, and then chooses to do it more often. Reading more often helps to develop their skills creating a virtuous cycle (see for example, Juel, 1988; Baker et al., 2000).

Research in Cambodia also shows that this pattern of correlation between skills and enjoyment exists. One survey of grade 4 to 6 students conducted by World Vision (2016) found a strong positive correlation between the students' self-perception of their reading ability and reading enjoyment. When students rated their reading ability as strong, they were more likely to state that they enjoy reading (2016, p. 32). Room to Read (2015) observed the same pattern when they tested the reading abilities of students in grade 3 to 5 and asked them about their reading habits. They found that children with better reading skills (as demonstrated by their fluency and comprehension) were more likely to read independently, had read more books in their school library and were more motivated to read than those who struggled with reading (2015, p.15).

Unpublished research by World Education (2021a) in Cambodia suggests a possible causal link between reading for pleasure and increased reading skills. In their study, students received a package of 59 reading books and varying levels of encouragement to read, along with a control group who received no treatment. At the beginning of the project students had similar levels of reading habits. By the end of the intervention, they found that students who received the books, and had been reading more frequently, had statistically higher reading skills at the end of the intervention. They also found that of the very small number of students (0.5%) who received books, but had reported not enjoying reading them, said it was because they found them difficult (2021a, p. 22).

BENEFITS OF READING FOR PLEASURE

Clark and Rumbold's (2006) review of the literature found that students who regularly read for pleasure have:



Higher levels of reading skills including comprehension



Greater writing ability



Stronger grasp of grammar



Breadth of vocabulary



Positive attitude toward reading



Higher self-confidence as a reader



More likely to take pleasure in reading later in life



Stronger general knowledge



A greater understanding of other cultures



Increased community participation



A greater insight into human nature and decision-making

THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN SUPPORTING READING

SUPPORTING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

For decades, it was widely believed that the process of learning to read began at school for most children; however, it is now generally recognized that the foundation for this formal instruction begins in early childhood at home (Green & Peterson, 2006). Parents and caregivers can make a massive contribution to their children's education by ensuring they have regular exposure to books from an early age. Reading stories together has been found to be one of the most effective methods to promote young children's literacy skills (Bus et al., 1995; Halle et al., 2003; Dowdall et al., 2020). Amongst other benefits, a regular habit of shared reading can dramatically increase children's exposure to rich and varied vocabulary, supporting their language development. For example, one study estimated that children who grow-up being read stories frequently may start kindergarten having heard around 1.4 million more words than those who are not read to. Furthermore, the language they are exposed to is typically more diverse and complex than everyday speech (Logan et al. 2016). Reading together is particularly beneficial when it is interactive, with the parent asking questions and encouraging the child to talk about the book (Dowdall et al., 2020).

Although they are limited in number, the studies that have been conducted in low- and middle-income countries suggest that

interventions that encourage parents to read with their children can also be effective in these contexts (Dowdall et al., 2020). In addition, a randomized control trial amongst low-income families in Brazil found that interventions can still be impactful amongst parents with low-literacy levels (Mendelsohn, 2020).

Research in Cambodia on parents' roles in their children's reading habits is scarce. However, NGO reports suggest that many parents may not recognize the important contribution they can make to their young children's foundational language skills. A number of studies have found that many parents believe that their children are too young to be talked to or read to. A project endline report from Save the Children (2016) found that parents of younger children (aged under 3) were less likely to engage their child in stimulation activities including playing, singing, and reading books, than parents of older children. They found older children were more likely to be read to, with 61 percent of parents reported reading stories to children aged 3 to 6, compared to only 38 percent reading to children under 3 (Pisani et al., 2016, p.34). A similar attitude was also found amongst some parents in Reimer's (2018) assessment of early childhood provision in the country.

Some writers have pointed to other cultural factors that might explain low levels of parents reading with children. Eng, et al. (2014) suggested that beliefs about fate, specifically that one's achievement in life is predetermined by their innate ability and/or from their past lives, can lead parents to believe that encouraging their children to study is futile (Smith-Hefner, 1999, cited in Eng et al., 2014 p. 576). Eng, et al. found that when parents had stronger beliefs about the role of fate, they were less likely to be involved with their child's education both at home and at school (Eng et al., 2014, p. 588).

However, World Vision's (2016) study with Cambodian students in grade 4 to 6, found that students themselves were aware of the importance of parents' support in learning to read. They often cited their parents as instrumental in helping them to read and write. While teachers were most often named as most important in helping them (72%), mother and father were named closely after (65.5% and 60.6%

respectively). Siblings, friends, and less commonly grandparents, were also named (World Vision, 2016, p. 17). However, the number of children that said someone had to read to them in the past week was smaller at 56.5%. When asked how family members could help them to read better, students said: providing support, attention, and encouragement; regularly spending time teaching them how to read; reading aloud so that students could repeat after them; helping them pronounce difficult words; allowing them more time to study; and by buying them books.

TOO YOUNG TO LEARN?



“I haven’t started teaching my child because I think my child is too young to learn and they haven’t learnt to speak yet [the child was three years old], maybe I can start teaching her when he is 6 years old and has started school”

BUILDING INTEREST IN READING AND STRONG READING HABITS

In addition to supporting the development of their children's academic skills, international research suggests that parents and caregivers can play a role in fostering a love of reading. When parents read more with their children, studies have found those children to be more motivated to read independently later in life (for example, Demir-Lira, 2019). Research in Cambodia has also found similar associations between parents and children reading together and students' frequency of reading. World Vision's survey found that students who had family members who read stories and books aloud to them when younger, and those who were encouraged to read, reported reading a significantly higher number of times per week than those who did not (2016, p. 30). They also found significantly higher reported levels of enjoyment of reading among children who were read to and encouraged to read (2016, p. 31)

READING HABITS AMONGST CAMBODIAN CHILDREN

There are a limited number of studies exploring how often Cambodian children read. The research that has been conducted is by NGOs as part of project evaluations in specific locations rather than as an attempt to be nationally representative. Results are likely to vary between locations, and therefore cannot be interpreted as indicative of all students in the country. Furthermore, when NGOs have been working to promote reading in these areas it can be assumed that the levels of reading might be higher than in other similar areas. Nonetheless, some data from these evaluations and reports are included below to give an indication of some of the patterns that have been reported.

FREQUENCY OF READING

In Room to Read's (2015) study of reading habits amongst children in three countries including Cambodia, they found that around 60 percent of children in all countries "spontaneously mentioned 'reading a storybook' when asked what they like to do in their spare time" (2015, p. 9). They found that 93% of the 600 students surveyed in Cambodia had reported reading independently in the past week. This included 10% who reported reading every day, 40% who said three or four times, 43% who said once or twice. Seven per cent said they had not read any books in the past week (2015, p. 10). It should be noted that these students attended schools where Room to Read had supported with equipping the school libraries, training of teachers and librarians and establishing regular library sessions to promote reading. It is likely that these students had significantly higher access to books than their peers in other schools.

World Vision's (2016) survey of students of grade 4 to 6 was also conducted in their target schools where the organization had been supporting education activities, so again reading levels might be higher than typical in Cambodia. This study found that 82% of students reported "read printed material" as something they do during their leisure time, naming this much more frequently than other activities, including socializing with community or friends (25.7%), doing sport activities (23.7%), and spending time with family (23%) (World Vision, 2015, p. 25). Textbooks were the most common books that students read (96%), followed by storybooks (76%). However, when asked which types of books they liked to read 74% responded with storybooks,

and only 55% responded naming textbooks (2015, p. 26), suggesting that their choice of reading material might be constrained by what is available, and/or that those who read in their leisure time are doing so to support their studies, or for some other reason, rather than for enjoyment. The average number of books other than textbooks reported as read in the past year was 12; however, this average is skewed by a small group of students who read high numbers of books. Nearly half of students (44%) reported reading between 1 and 4 books per year (2016, p. 30).

The World Vision survey also asked students about frequency reading books other than textbooks. They found that 80% of students reported reading between two and five times per week. With four per cent of students reading once per week, and the remaining students reading six or more times per week. 72% of students reported reading less than 60 minutes per week (2016, p. 29).

Project baselines, conducted at the beginning of NGO interventions, might give a more accurate picture of children's typical reading habits in Cambodia. World Education (2021b) found lower levels of reading were reported during their survey of grade 2 students for the project baseline. When students were asked if they had recently read any books at home 23% of students said they had not. All students who said they had read books at home recently were asked what kind of books they had read. One hundred per cent of these students reported reading textbooks, with only seven per cent having read storybooks before the project started.

PREFERENCES ON READING MATERIALS

CHILDREN'S PREFERENCES

A research study in Cambodia conducted for Room to Read in 2011 found three times as many primary grade students said they would prefer a hypothetical fiction title to a hypothetical nonfiction title. Students also reported that the main reason they preferred a book was the presence of attractive physical features, such as font, letter size or the number of words or pages. The second most reported reason was the presence of illustrations. Children stated that they preferred humor and mystery to scary stories (Hoffman et al, 2012).

More recently, World Vision found that the most read genres of books (other than textbooks) amongst grade 4 to 6 students were folk tales, historical fiction, and humor. However, this might reflect the availability of books in the country. When students were asked what topic they liked to read about (within a range of given topics) the top responses children reported were health, sport, science, agriculture, and history.

World Education's unpublished (2021b) research asked children "If you could choose your own storybooks to read at home, what would they be about?" and gave them a selection of pictures representing different topics to choose from. Most chosen were the pictures representing "going to school" (96%), "playground" (93%), and "going to a ceremony" (91%). However, every picture was chosen by at least 80% of children, demonstrating a strong interest in a wide variety of topics amongst the students surveyed (2021b, p.29). This study also demonstrated the importance of books being at the correct level for students. Children were asked about their favorite book and then asked for a reason; 93% said because it was "easy to read/not too many difficult words," while 39% said they liked the pictures or appearance of the book and 28% liked the story (2021b, p. 19).

PARENTS' PREFERENCES

Howell (2016) reported one respondent's comment that parents prefer books with longer text to get value for money. However, there is evidence that this attitude may be changing, or at least might be less prevalent in other areas. Research conducted by The Asia Foundation (2021) found that parents reported choosing books because they are the appropriate reading level for their child, have attractive illustrations and designs, are a good length (generally shorter, with the books they selected ranging from 14-22 pages). Educational value was also reported to be very important amongst parents, with parents appreciating books with "good morals or lessons." This study indicated a demand for dual language books that include both Khmer and English. It also found that amongst the parents who are actively buying books, sets of 10 to 15 books are popular.

Cost was also found to be an influencing factor; during research with parents, they indicated that they were willing to pay \$1.00-2.50 per book. However, the project's work with book distributors suggested that for many parents, books at the higher end of this price point might make cost a barrier (The Asia Foundation 2021, p.11). In World Education's survey of caregivers (2021c), 98% reported that they would purchase books costing 4000 Riels (approximately one dollar in 2021).

World Education's research found that caregivers reported that they would choose similar books as their children, with all categories scoring highly. Books about going to school were also the most popular amongst caregivers (with 97% choosing this option), followed by books about animals (96%) and fairy tales (93%).

CHILDREN'S REASONS FOR READING

In the World Vision study, when asked why they read, the most common response was to gain general knowledge (31.5% of responses), followed by a desire to understand the lessons at school (20.6% of responses), and then for fun or relaxation (17.6% of responses) (2016, p. 32)

This is in line with international literature which suggests that when children choose to read, pleasure or enjoyment may be one of a number of reasons. See the textbox on the right for some other reasons students cite for reading.

A UK Department for Education (2012) review of the literature summarized findings from a number of studies that have explored the reasons why children in British schools choose to read. These included:



GENDER DIFFERENCES IN READING HABITS

The World Vision study in Cambodia found that more girls than boys reported reading during leisure time (2015, p. 25), and that they reported enjoying reading more (2015, p. 31). This is a pattern that is found in many countries throughout the world (OECD, 2010). However, World Vision did not find an association between gender in relation to number of times students reported reading per week, or the number of books read (2016, p. 30) as is also commonly found in other countries.

AGE DIFFERENCES IN READING HABITS

International research suggests that age affects attitudes to reading and reading behavior, with students enjoying reading less and reading less frequently as they get older and move into and through secondary school (for example, Clark & Douglas, 2011). There is not enough research in Cambodia to draw conclusions on this issue, and the studies that do exist about reading habits of different age groups cannot be compared due to differences in methodology and locations. Nonetheless, the evidence from the studies by NGOs cited in previous sections might suggest that although younger children in Cambodia report liking reading, they may be less likely to read at home than older students. However, this could perhaps be related to access, with older students being more likely to access reading materials independently through libraries. The unpublished World Education (2021b) study found that when young children do have access to books, they are much more likely to read frequently. In addition, as noted above, Save the Children's study

in Cambodia suggests that parents are less likely to read with children under 3 (Pisani et al., 2016). It is possible that parents are more likely to encourage and support older students to read compared to their younger peers and that this might influence reading habits.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIFFERENCES IN READING HABITS

Multiple studies in high income countries have found that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds read for enjoyment less often than children from wealthier backgrounds (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Clark & Douglas 2011). They have also found that interventions targeting home literacy practices of disadvantaged groups can effectively increase children's reading skills (Fikrat-Wevers, et al., 2021).

This is another area where the research is limited in Cambodia, though it might be expected that families from more disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to have less access to books at home; anecdotal evidence seems to support this. However, more research in this area would be helpful. The Asia Foundation's research in Mongolia found a counter-intuitive trend, with parents from more economically advantaged backgrounds less likely to read with their children, hypothesizing that this may be due to their responsibilities outside of the home (Koenig et al., 2022)

IMPACT OF PARENTS' CHARACTERISTICS

GENDER OF PARENTS

While this trend might be changing, in many countries, women tend to support children's reading more often than men (see for example, Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Clark and Foster (2005); Højen, et al. 2022). World Education's (2021b) study in Cambodia found the same pattern in Cambodia. 67% of children reported that the "person or people who help/s them to read" is their mother/stepmother, followed by 56% answering their older siblings, 42% answering father/stepfather. Smaller numbers reported grandmother (19%), friends (14%), aunt (11%), grandfather (8%) and uncle (4%). Parents in the project were also interviewed and reported a similar pattern with regards to gender (World Education, 2021c p. 85).

Research in high-income countries has highlighted how parents' reading behaviors impact girls and boys differently. Mullan (2010) found that girls who have mothers that read are more likely to read themselves, while boys who have fathers who read are also more likely to read. Some studies have suggested that fathers might choose books that are more stereotypically masculine, and perhaps as a result that boys are more interested in (Morgan et al., 2009). Others have pointed to the fact that fathers are less commonly involved in shared reading at home as a reason why boys have less interest in reading (Clark, 2012).

PARENTS' LITERACY LEVELS

Research in high-income countries suggests that the relationship between parents' literacy levels and students reading skills and habits is complex, often being influenced by other factors which are difficult to disentangle from other commonly associated factors like poverty. Nonetheless, some studies have found that parents' levels of language and literacy skills have an impact on their children (for example, Benjamin, 1993; Puglisi, et al., 2017).

It is reasonable to speculate that parental literacy rates in Cambodia, which are comparatively lower than other ASEAN member nations, would have a similar relationship to children's reading behaviors. The Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey reports the number of adults in the country who can both read and write a simple message in any language. The survey reports the overall adult literacy rate for 2019/20 was estimated about 82%, at 77% and 87% for women and men respectively (National Institute of Statistics, 2021 p. 57). Given that women are more likely to read with children in their family, their lower literacy rates might have an even stronger impact on children's reading.

There is limited data on this issue in Cambodia, but anecdotal evidence suggests students who have caregivers with limited literacy skills might face additional barriers to developing strong reading habits and skills. In the endline evaluation of Save the Children's First Read project, it was found that parents who were not literate had difficulty engaging with the project activities aimed at increasing reading (Pisani, 2016).

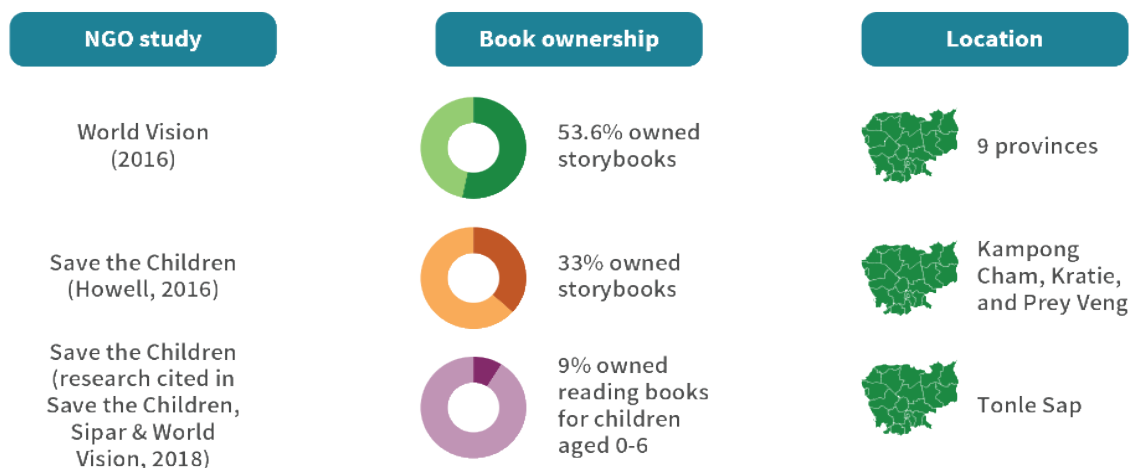
PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS READING

Parents' attitudes towards reading, and their own reading behaviors have been found to shape those of their children. Parents who believe that reading is a source of entertainment or pleasure are more likely to have children who hold positive views about reading than parents who only emphasize the importance of reading skill (e.g. Baker et al. 1995, Sonnenschein et al., 2000; Baker & Scher, 2002). Again, there is limited data about parents' reading habits in Cambodia and how these compare to their children's habits.

ACCESS TO READING MATERIALS

Perhaps unsurprisingly, access to reading materials has been shown to be important in ensuring students read regularly. International research has shown a positive relationship between the estimated number of books in the home and reading attainment (Clark 2011). Children who have books of their own also enjoy reading more.

Again, there are no nationally representative studies about children's access to books in Cambodia, but various reports highlight the scarcity of reading materials in many homes. World Vision's (2016) research found that of the 507 students in grades 4 to 6 (from 39 schools in 9 provinces) that were surveyed, 97.6% reported having at least one textbook at home, while only 53.6% reported having any storybooks. This research also looked at access to books through school libraries and found that while 85% of students attended schools that had libraries, their access was often limited by short opening hours. The rate of students borrowing any books from the library was low with 45.2% reporting to have never borrowed any books, often reporting that they were concerned about losing or damaging the book if they were to bring it home. In some locations, students reported that the teachers did not allow them to borrow books because of the limited number of books in the library.



A study conducted by Save the Children in several locations (46 villages in Kampong Cham, Kratie, and Prey Veng Province) found, on average, 33% of caregivers reported owning storybooks. It should be noted though that 70% of these households had participated in an earlier phase of the Save the Children project which had provided children's books to families so the number would likely be bigger than was previously typical in these areas (Howell et al., 2016).

A different study by Save the Children conducted in 2017 as a baseline for a project with families in the Floating Villages of the Tonle Sap area found that materials there were even more scarce. They found that only nine per cent of households had access to reading books for children aged 0-6. Furthermore, only six per cent had purchased books in the last year, due to both the high cost of children's books and a lack of access to locations that sell age-appropriate reading materials (Save the Children, Sipar and World Vision International Cambodia, 2018).

As noted above, World Education's (2021b) study appears to demonstrate the impact that access to books can have on student reading behaviors in Cambodia. They found that in just 6 months, the number of children reporting to have "not read any books recently" reduced from 23% to less than 2% when families were provided with reading books along with encouragement from project staff to read them. 78% of students read reported reading books daily, or "every few days or more," with a further 20% reading once per week (2021b: p. 14-15).

Even when students do have materials at home, some NGOs have pointed to the limited range of Khmer books available in the country as restricting access. In 2017, World Vision International – Cambodia conducted a market survey of books from 26 publishers, finding that of the books surveyed, none were appropriate for children under three years old. They also found limited numbers of books that were appropriate for children aged 4-6 years old, although noted some specialized publishers/NGOs, such as Sipar, had recently begun to address this issue (Save the Children, Sipar and World Vision International Cambodia, 2018).

ACCESS TO DIGITAL READING MATERIALS

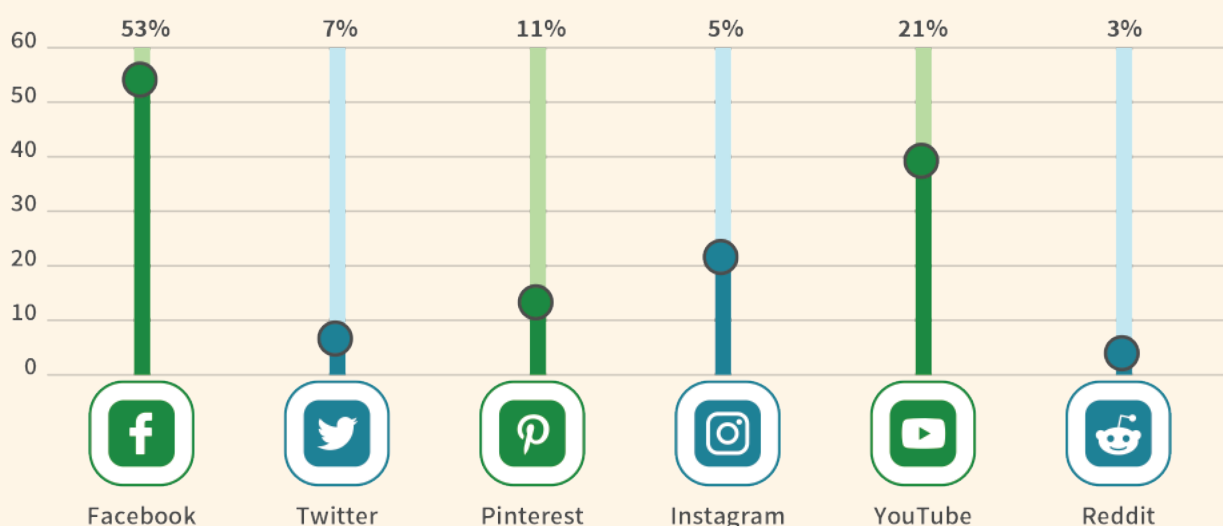
Research on children's access to digital reading materials is even more limited than that of physical books, with no known studies on this topic. However, it is clear that many within Cambodia do have access to the internet. The country is estimated to have between 12 million and 13.44 million internet users, representing between 73% and 79% of the population (Kepios, 2022). However, while an individual may have internet access on their device through their mobile network provider, it is typically not unlimited access and therefore some users might be constrained by the cost of data.

There are 12.6 million active social media users, equating to 101% of the population (this number inevitably includes duplicate accounts) (Kepios, 2022). Almost all (98.9%) of those who use social media access it through mobile devices. Facebook is the most used social media platform, with the estimated potential to reach 93% of the population aged over 13 through its advertising. TikTok has also been growing rapidly in popularity, with the potential to reach 39% of the adult population through advertising on the platform. The three most popular websites in Cambodia are Google, YouTube and Facebook (Kepios, 2022).

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Only 3% of the population aged over 15 have made a purchase online (Kepios, 2022)., making it unlikely that there are large numbers of parents purchasing children’s e-books online. However, a number of websites and apps, alongside The Asia Foundation’s Let’s Read Digital Library, have some free children’s books in Khmer language. It should be noted though, that some of these (for example, Story Weaver and Bloom) do not appear to be marketed at Cambodian parents directly. After Let’s Read (which has over 500 Khmer language titles), the Khmer Library app has the largest number of free Khmer children’s books (over 200) and the Google Play Store indicates that it has been downloaded over 100,000 times. However, there is no publicly available data about how often parents are accessing these or other educational websites or apps.

There is also limited research about parents’ online behavior and trusted sources of information and where they might find educational resources. However, the available data on general internet usage suggests that Facebook and YouTube drive a lot of website traffic. The table below shows the share of web traffic referrals to third party websites via clicks or taps published on different social media platforms. The majority (53%) come from Facebook, with 21% coming from YouTube and then 11% from Pinterest.



Data on YouTube searches in 2021 suggests that parents might be interested in educational content, with “ABC” being the fifth most common search in the country, and “ABC song” the 12th most common (Kepios, 2022).

WHAT COULD HELP STUDENTS READ MORE?

A review of the research by the UK Department for Education (2012) found that the following strategies supported students to develop strong reading habits:



Increasing access to resources and having books of their own



Supporting caregivers to create environments where reading and books are valued



Allowing students to have choice over what they are reading



Using literacy-related rewards for reading might be effective (but incentives that are unrelated to reading have not been shown to increase reading frequency)



Enabling access to libraries

More recently, research has suggested that e-books and audiobooks could be used as strategies to engage reluctant readers, including boys (Picton & Clark, 2015; Best & Clark, 2021).

Some of these recommendations have also been indicated in research in Cambodia. Students in the World Vision (2016) survey were asked about what would make them want to read more. The most common response was if they felt like they enjoyed it more (43%), followed by if the book had pictures (37%) and if the book was easy to read (36%). Other responses were related to access to reading material (specifically mentioned by 16%), as well as small numbers of others who said if the library had the books they were looking for; if they had books at home; if the library was closer; and if reading materials were cheaper. Fourteen per cent said they would be more likely to read if someone was helping them, and approximately six per cent said if there were opportunities to read in groups.

World Education's unpublished research (2021a; 2021b; 2021c) also highlighted the potential for access to reading materials and book ownership as an effective way to increase how often children read for pleasure.

INCENTIVES FOR READING

Incentives for Reading McQuillan (1997), is his review of the research, found despite their popularity schemes that offer incentives to increase reading behavior are not effective. More recent reviews have come to similar conclusions, although there is some evidence to suggest that literacy- targeted rewards such as books or book vouchers may increase reading motivation (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). One small scale study found students who were given “reading passports”, which were stamped when they completed a book, increased enjoyment and time spent reading (Willshaw 2012). However, another study found that the provision of books as incentives only helped to motivate readers who were already interested in reading (Guryan et al., 2016).



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