

Cambodian University Students' Views of People with Disabilities: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Background: Cambodia has struggled to develop its own welfare and education systems for people with disabilities from religious and historical perspectives. However, since the signing of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Cambodia has been pursuing a policy of developing stronger welfare and education systems for people with disabilities. This study was conducted by interviewing university students, an elite group of people who act as an indispensable force for the future development of the Cambodian nation, to understand the details of their understanding of people with disabilities and their experiences of interaction with people with disabilities.

Methods: Five university students (3 males: 2 females) attending the Royal University of Phnom Penh were interviewed online. The interviews consisted of questions regarding (1) their experiences interacting with people with disabilities, (2) their learning experiences at educational institutions about people with disabilities, (4) their image of people with disabilities, (5) their general knowledge of disabilities, the significance of education related to disabilities, and the significance of social participation for people with disabilities.

Results: Almost all of the interviewees had experience interacting with people with disabilities and had an understanding of the educational significance and the importance of social participation. Their images of people with disabilities all consisted of those living with physical disabilities, and no responses were obtained regarding neurodevelopmental disabilities such as autistic spectrum disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Regarding the causes of disabilities, some students responded about landmines, which traditionally tend to attract attention in Cambodia, while others mentioned traffic accidents, which have been rapidly increasing in Cambodia in recent years.

Conclusion: This study showed that the younger generation of Cambodian university students have a view about people with disabilities based on an international level, rather than being bound by traditional religious and cultural views of the people with disabilities. In the future, it will be necessary to collect more sample and conduct further research.

Introduction

Since signing the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012, Cambodia has set a goal of bringing its domestic disability policies up to the international level [1]. The main goal is the social participation of people with disabilities, and there is an urgent need to improve education and welfare policies for people with disabilities [1]. However, Cambodia has a history of relying on foreign assistance for education and welfare for people with disabilities, partly because it has prioritized its own economic policies [1]. Therefore, Cambodia has struggled to build experts and other human resources to develop education and welfare systems for people with disabilities, and the policy system for people with disabilities is not well developed.

It is expected that the course curricula of higher education and specialized educational institutions in Cambodia will continue to be more developed in the future along with professional training and development. However, there has not been sufficient research on the extent to which Cambodian students entering educational institutions have knowledge of and experience interacting with people with disabilities.

In Cambodia, according to the karmic philosophy of Theravada Buddhism, a common belief that persists suggests idea that people with disabilities are the result of being cursed by the evil karmic

deeds of their previous lives. It is said that the idea that people with disabilities and their families should expect the next life to be more virtuous than the fulfillment of this life is widespread [1]. In other words, the ideology is considered to be the exact opposite of the national goal of enhancing special needs education and welfare policies that work to increase the happiness and fulfillment of people with disabilities persons and their families in this life. In Cambodia, according to the karmic philosophy of Theravada Buddhism, there is a strong belief that disabilities occur due to an individual's past life. The idea that people with disabilities people and their families are to expect and accumulate virtue in the next life rather than in the fulfillment of this life is prevalent [1]. In other words, it is considered an ideology that is incompatible with the national goal of enhancing special needs education and welfare policies that work to increase the happiness and fulfillment of people with disabilities persons and their families in this life.

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In addition, Cambodia is a developing country, and the relative wealth of households is comparatively low. Therefore, time and resource constraints have led to struggles for households to support their family members with disabilities. These factors have also been shown in case studies that people with disabilities people stay at home, which may make their physical disabilities and other circumstances worse [2].

In Cambodia, commonly-held beliefs regarding disabilities and one's karma has led to prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities. This belief is common spread, resulting in stigma and misunderstanding. People with disabilities in Cambodia still do not have sufficient opportunities to go out and receive support, and there are limited in their opportunities for able-bodied people to see disabled people on the streets. Taking into account the special circumstances surrounding the people with disabilities in Cambodia as described above, this study was conducted with elite young people belonging to institutions of higher education who could become future leaders in the development of the nation. Through the interviews, we aimed to understand their knowledge of people with disabilities and their experiences of interacting with them. The significance of this study lies in its novelty; studies and literature on Cambodian people's views and images of people with disabilities are limited. Furthermore, this research method used interviews rather than questionnaire surveys, which allowed both the interviewer and interviewee to confirm each other's perceptions and avoid one-way communication.

Materials & Method

1. Research participants/ interviewees

Five university students in their 20s (3 males: 2 females) attending the Royal University of Phnom Penh within Cambodia.

2. Interview period

November 2022

3. Interview guide

The following eight questions were asked during the interview.

- Q1. Have you ever seen people with disabilities?
- Q2. Have you ever spoken with or played with people with disabilities?
- Q3. Have you ever learned about people with disabilities?
- Q4. What kind of disabilities do you imagine at first when you think about people with disabilities?
- Q5. How do people become disabled?
- Q6. Do you think the severity of the disabilities of people with disabilities have will improve?
- Q7. Do you think they can make money if they receive training or learn how?
- Q8. Do you think people with disabilities can develop their capacities by receiving education?

The items were developed in collaboration with a researcher and a faculty member at the Royal University of Phnom Penh who is an expert in special education. The content of the study focused on understanding university students with a Cambodian upbringing regarding their (1) experience of meeting people with disabilities (Question 1), (2) interaction experience (Question 2), learning experience (Question 3), impression of people with disabilities

(Question 4), knowledge about the causes of disabilities (Question 4), growth potential of people with disabilities (Questions 5, 6 and 8) and potential for social participation (Question 7).

4. Implementation procedure

The interviewees were recruited with the cooperation of faculty members at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, the collaborator of this study. The interviews were conducted on the web using Zoom Pro. An interview guide was posted in Japanese and English for each item, and an interpreter provided oral interpretation in Khmer. The responses to the questions were written by each participant in the chat area of Zoom and translated into Japanese by an interpreter for transmission to the researcher. Whenever the researcher asked additional questions to the entire group or to individual survey participants as necessary, the interpreter translated the questions into Khmer each time. The interpreter was Khmer and fluent in Japanese, having studied abroad in Japan in the field of welfare for people with disabilities. The interpreter also had extensive experience in working with Japanese in joint welfare-related business and research activities.

Results

A total of eight questions were asked according to the interview guide, and the results of the responses are shown in Table 1.

Question 1 asked participants whether they had ever seen people with disabilities. All five students answered that they had seen people with disabilities. Regarding the location, in addition to the countryside and near their homes, Student A stated that he had seen people with disabilities at the Riverside, in front of the Royal Palace of Cambodia. An additional question led to his response that the person in Riverside was a beggar.

Question 2 asked whether they had interacted with people with disabilities. The results showed that all the students responded that they had, with the exception of student D. Students A, B, C, and E had engaged in conversation, and Student E had experiences playing with people with disabilities in addition to conversation. For each student who had interactions, additional questions were asked about the duration of the interaction, the circumstances of the interaction, and what kind of disability the person had. Student A spoke about a friend who was in a car accident in 2015 that left them with a disability in one leg and they live with a cane. Student B talked about an elderly neighbor she had when she went to the countryside, who had a hearing impairment due to age and used sign language to communicate. Student C talked about a conversation he had in elementary school with a friend of his father's who was a victim of a landmine and lived with an artificial leg.

Question 3 asked if they had had the opportunity to learn about people with disabilities in school. Students B and C responded that they had, and these two students were additionally asked when they had the opportunity to learn about people with disabilities. Student B noted that he learned about people with disabilities during his high school social studies class, specifically, about them being treated unfairly and how to prevent discrimination against them. Student C said that, like Student B, he learned about people with disabilities in his social studies class when he was in elementary school.

Question 4 asked what kind of disabilities each of them imagined people with disabilities to have. The results showed that four types of disabilities were mentioned: physical disability, hearing disability, visual disability, and speech disability.

Questions	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	
Q1.	Have you ever seen people with disabilities?	I see them often in front of the Royal palace (and near) the riverside. †	I see them often near the house.	I saw them around where I used to live.	I have seen them where I lived in the countryside.	I saw them when I was riding my automobile.
Q2.	Have you ever spoken with or played with people with disabilities?	I have spoken with them. †	I have spoken with them. †	I spoke to them in elementary school. †	No.	I have spoken and played with them. †
Q3.	Have you ever learned about people with disabilities?	No	Yes †	Yes †	No	No
Q4.	What kind of disabilities do you imagine at first when you think about people with disabilities?	Eye weakness, leg weakness, hearing weakness.	physical impairment, Visual impairment, hearing impairment	Cannot walk, cannot speak.	Cannot walk, cannot hear, cannot see, cannot speak.	Those with immobile legs and hands.
Q5.	How do people become disabled?	Intrinsic	Intrinsic, war †	Accident, intrinsic	Those who were involved in accidents, natural disasters.	Intrinsic, accidents †
Q6.	Do you think the severity of the disabilities people have will improve?	It depends on their sickness	It is rarely the case for these conditions to improve, but they can with wheelchairs and walking sticks.	They can improve if their disabilities are not severe. †	It depends on the disabilities. They can if their disabilities are not severe, cannot if they are severe. †	They can if they go to the rehab schools or centers.
Q7.	Do you think people with disabilities can make money if they receive training or learn how?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Q8.	Do you think people with disabilities can develop their capacities by receiving education?	Yes †	Yes †	Yes †	Yes †	Yes †

Table1: Answers from the interviewees.

†: indicates follow-up questions were asked. These questions were written in the texts.

Question 5 asked about the causes of disabilities. The results showed that congenital factors and acquired factors due to natural disasters, accidents, and wars were commonly held beliefs. When the four students who named congenital disabilities were asked about the specific names of their illnesses, Student B responded hypertension and diabetes, and Student E responded polio.

Question 6 asked whether the severity of disabilities of people with disabilities would improve. Students A, C, and D responded that their disabilities may or may not improve or reduce depending on the type and severity of their disabilities, while students B and E responded that their disabilities improve with tools such as a cane or wheelchair to cover their disabilities.

Question 7 asked whether it is possible for people with disabilities to work and earn money through training. All five students responded that it is possible.

Question 8 asked whether it is possible for people with disabilities to develop their own abilities through education. As a result, all five students responded that they could. Therefore, additional questions were asked about specific education and training content. Students A, B, and E responded that general education can develop their abilities. On the other hand, Student B stated that in order to receive a general education, one would need to learn skills such as sign language and braille, and similarly, Student E stated that specialized training in a

training center would be necessary prior to receiving an education. Student D also raised education in art and technology, while Student C argued that there is no difference between the abilities of able-bodied people and people with disabilities.

Discussion

Due to the Buddhist philosophy of karma that leads to discrimination against people with disabilities as well as economic situations and varying access to transportation, previous studies have reported that there are only a few cases of people with disabilities being seen out and about in Cambodia [2, 3]. However, the results of interview questions 1 and 2 of this study indicate that all of the university students interviewed had seen people with disabilities, and four of the five students (Students A, B, C, and E) had experience interacting with people with disabilities. Students A and C shared their experiences of interacting with landmine victims and those who had acquired physical disabilities due to car accidents.

In Cambodia, landmine victims have historically been the main influence for improving conditions for people with disabilities. This is thought to be due to the strong social connection of the long-standing civil war within Cambodia, and the resulting images of people with

disabilities. The issue of landmine-induced disability is persistent as the main image of disability issues in Cambodia and around the world. On the other hand, coupled with the spread of motorcycles and automobiles in Cambodia, the problem of disabilities occurring mid-life caused by traffic accidents has also been attracting attention as of late. Specifically, the number of people with disabilities suffering from limb loss and the aftereffects of limb disability has been increasing every year [4]. The number of people with disabilities who suffer from limb loss or the aftereffects of physical disability is increasing every year [4]. In the interviews for this study, mainly on questions 4 and 5, all five students mentioned physical disability as the first image of disability that came to mind, and four of the five student responses (students B, C, D, and E) identified war or accidents as the cause of disability.

As noted, Cambodian university students tend to think of people with disabilities as those with acquired physical disabilities due to war or accidents, and it is possible that many of the people with disabilities they encounter in their lives or with whom they have interacted are also people with acquired disabilities. In regards to congenital physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy, the students seemed to have some awareness but have never seen or experienced any interactions. It is necessary to continue to conduct fact-finding surveys in the future to determine how many people with these congenital physical disabilities have actually witnessed or interacted with such people. In addition, no responses were received this time for neurodevelopmental disorders such as communication and attention concentration disorders that do not involve physical disabilities. Thus, there is a need to continue to clarify the reality of understanding, witnessing, and interacting with people with disabilities that do not appear to be disabilities from the outside.

All interviewees responded positively to questions 6, 7, and 8 about the possibility of improving the severity of disabilities of people with disabilities, social participation, and educational significance. Regarding the possibility of improving the severity of disabilities, three of the five respondents (Students A, C, and D) responded that only mild disabilities were capable of being improved, and that severe disability was difficult to improve. Student B also indicated that she perceives the use of tools that cover physical disabilities as an improvement in disability. Future research should also clarify the extent to which this approach to improving the disability itself and the use of equipment and other tools to cover the disability are being adopted in Cambodia.

All students responded affirmatively to the possibility of social participation for people with disabilities, and the significance and importance of education was also reported through additional questions about the type of education is needed for each student. The most common response was about providing a general, status-quo oriented approach to education for people with disabilities and following the practices already in place. As represented by Student C's statement, many interviewees expressed that educational approaches should be the same for both able-bodied and disabled people, although there are some exceptions, as their abilities remain the same.

This suggests that the degree of influence of Buddhist ideas that lead to discrimination against people with disabilities may be gradually changing among the younger generation, although further conclusions will be required through surveys of a larger sample size in the future. Other responses identified the need for art and technology

education (Student D), sign language, and braille education (Student B) in addition to the general education curriculum. These responses suggest that the understanding of the need for special education may be widespread among the generation of university students. This study indicates that some students, such as Student E, show an understanding of the need for collaboration with specialized agencies outside the regular school setting.

Conclusion

This study succeeded in piloting the view of people with disabilities among young Cambodian university students. This study was able to show that university students at Royal University of Phnom Penh, an elite group in Cambodia, have a view of people with disability based on an international framing, rather than being bound by traditional religious and cultural ones. In the future, it will be necessary to conduct further research by collecting a larger sample size.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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