

STUDY REPORT

Effectiveness of the Life Skills for Equality Project (LSEP)



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Acknowledgement

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The team is grateful to all colleagues at Room to Read-Cambodia and all participants who shared their valuable time and knowledge. This study would not have been possible without their participation and contribution.

Disclaimer

This work is supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, a joint endeavour with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

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List of Acronyms

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GEP	Girl Education Program
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
KAP	Knowledge, Attitude, Practice
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBTQ +	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning persons and all other identities
LSEP	Life Skills for Equality Project
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
RtR	Room to Read
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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Executive Summary



The Life Skills for Equality Project (LSEP), a gender-transformative program¹ implemented by Room to Read (RtR) -Cambodia, has demonstrated promising results in equipping boys with essential life skills and promoting gender equality.



This research study examined LSEP's effectiveness in fostering boys' education engagement, promoting gender-equitable attitudes, values, and behaviours, and assessing its potential for adaptation and scale-up nationally and internationally. A qualitative research design was employed, involving data collection from 13 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and 2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students, parents, teachers, school directors, LSEP facilitators, project staff, and relevant government bodies in Phnom Penh and two LSEP-piloted schools in Banteay Meanchey province.



Although LSEP has demonstrated efficacy in addressing gender norms and improving life skills attainment, its primary objective was not to directly address boys' educational disengagement. While the program may have indirectly fostered study aspiration, the current program components might need to be carefully and intentionally adjusted, and a more comprehensive evaluation should be warranted to ascertain its specific effectiveness and impact on the other aspects of boys' education disengagement, particularly absenteeism and dropout.



The program's current success can be attributed to its carefully designed components and the robust facilitation and support provided by RtR. However, several challenges have hindered its effectiveness, including resource constraints, technical (direct translations and unfamiliar jargon) and sensitive content, limited parental engagement, different student backgrounds (including varying ages, socioeconomic statuses, and primary-level performances) and limited unified solutions in addressing boys' educational disengagement.



While LSEP is recognised as an effective tool for addressing gender issues, its potential to mitigate boys' education disengagement requires a comprehensive approach. This involves considering factors at the national, school, program, parent, and community levels. To effectively address this issue, stakeholders at all levels must first acknowledge the urgency of the program, recognising the need to improve not only academic performance but also students' interest in learning, attendance, and completion rates.

¹ See Annex 1| List of Working Definitions

1. Background of the Study

Prevailing gender norms and expectations can significantly impact learners' educational experiences, achievements, and pathways. This is evidenced by global disparities, with 128 million boys out of school, constituting more than half of the global out-of-school youth population. Boys are more likely to repeat primary grades in 130 countries and to lack an upper secondary education in 73 countries. At the tertiary level, a global gender disparity exists, with only 88 men enrolled for every 100 women (UNESCO, 2022; 2024). Addressing these disparities is crucial for promoting boys' education, achieving gender equality and fulfilling Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5. Research suggests that boys face an increased risk of grade repetition and lower academic attainment, with long-term consequences for both educational and societal gender parity (UNESCO, 2024).

UNESCO (2022) defined boys' disengagement from education as

“ Boys' Disengagement from Education is understood as a gendered phenomenon that partially **stems from norms and concepts of masculinity** within societies. These norms and concepts of masculinity may lead boys and young men consciously or unconsciously to disengage from education. Other **social, economic, and cultural factors, in families, communities and schools**, may also lead to boys' poor engagement with education and contribute to dropout. Disengagement from education can take different forms, such as general **disinterest in education, not participating in classroom activities, being absent from school, not learning for exams, not doing homework or dropping out of school.** ”

In Cambodia, disengagement from educational participation and performance among male students has also been observed. Since 2014, Cambodian girls have not only outnumbered male students in terms of enrolment but have also demonstrated superior academic performance across all general education levels (Chea, Tek, and Nok, 2023). A recent study by Chea et al. 2024 identified a complex interplay of individual, familial, peer, and societal factors that influence boys' academic achievements in upper secondary education. However, further research is necessary to pinpoint the specific factors contributing to this gender gap and to develop targeted strategies to address it.

The Cambodian Education Strategic Plan (2024-2028) underscores national efforts to guarantee equal access and educational opportunity for both boys and girls. Additionally, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) 2025 Partnership Compact for Cambodia anticipates the development of a diagnostic tool specifically focused on identifying barriers to retention, progression, and achievement in secondary education for boys. In recent years, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has also been interested in understanding the root causes of gender-based disparities in academic performance, seeking effective strategies to address boys' underperformance.

In light of this, Room to Read-Cambodia’s “Life Skills for Equality Project (LSEP)” radiates a promising solution.

To enhance the understanding of this LSEP program, the current study examined its effectiveness and potential for adaptation, transfer, scale-up and impact in countries beyond Cambodia. Specifically, the research study will answer the following questions:

- i. To what extent can LSEP keep boys engaged in school and learning and promote gender-equitable attitudes, values, and behaviours? How are such impacts measured?
- ii. What are the key elements of LSEP that keep boys engaged in school and learning while promoting gender-equitable attitudes, values, and behaviours? What enabling factors need to be in place?
- iii. What factors enable or hinder the scaling of such gender-transformative innovation in the education sector?

2. About the Life Skills for Equality Project (LSEP)

2.1 | Program Objectives and Key Stakeholders

LSEP is a two-year gender-transformative² pilot initiative developed and implemented by Room to Read (RtR)-Cambodia. The program aims to equip boys with essential life skills that will enable them to navigate personal and academic challenges effectively. By fostering gender equality awareness and empowering students to challenge harmful stereotypes, the project seeks to create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. The anticipated outcomes of the LSEP include increased understanding and sharing of gender knowledge, enhanced capacity to transform this knowledge into positive action, a more supportive and inclusive environment for decision-making and communication, and the eradication of discrimination, violence, and harassment within schools (Anand, 2023).

As can be seen from Figure 1, there are six groups of key stakeholders involved in implementing LSEP. They are RtR’s project staff/LSEP program officer, RtR facilitators, teachers, school directors, students and their parents. The LSEP program has been overseen by a dedicated LSEP program officer and has been implemented by a team of RtR facilitators and schoolteachers from participating schools. The program officer is responsible for monitoring program implementation and providing coaching to both teachers and facilitators. The facilitators lead the program activities and offer ongoing support to the teachers. The teachers serve as co-facilitators, contributing to program implementation in various capacities. All participants received comprehensive training on gender sensitisation, the boys’ life skills curriculum, and effectiveness pedagogy prior to the program’s commencement.

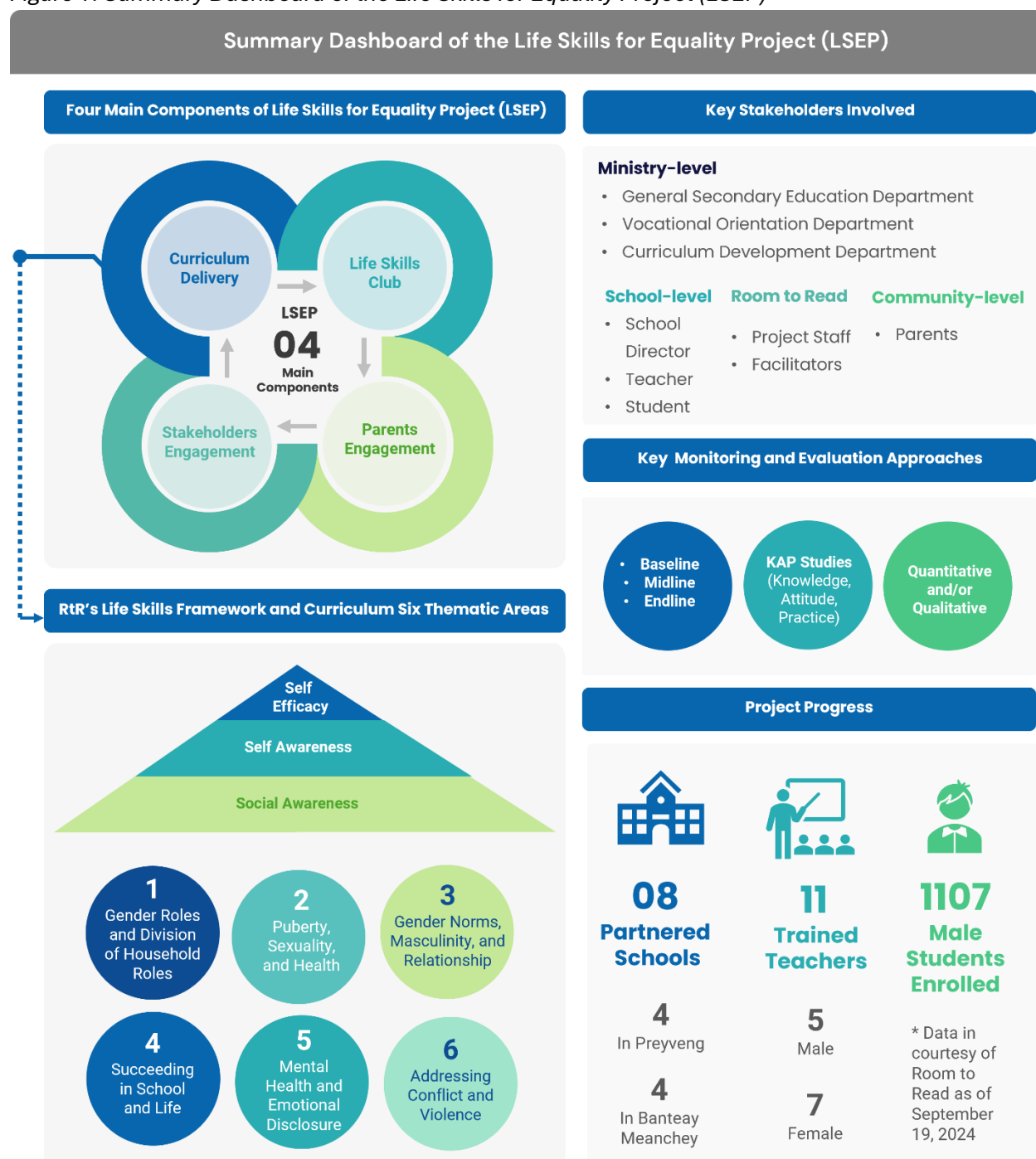
2.2 | Program Design and Components

To inform the development of LSEP, RtR conducted a formative research study to identify the specific challenges boys face and the prevailing gender dynamics that could negatively impact their

² Through specially designed classroom sessions and school events, boys engage with their boy and girl peers to discuss various topics through the lens of gender dynamics, such as health, equality, sexual violence and harassment.

educational outcomes. The internal RtR research recognised the potential for boys to be agents of gender equality while emphasising the need to address the societal and familial burdens that can hinder their educational attainment and personal development. Additionally, the study explored communication dynamics between boys and girls in the learning environment, revealing barriers to effective dialogue and collaboration. To foster open communication, empathy, and respect among students, the LSEP curriculum, based on RtR's Life Skill Framework, was designed for grades 7 and 8 students.

Figure 1. Summary Dashboard of the Life Skills for Equality Project (LSEP)



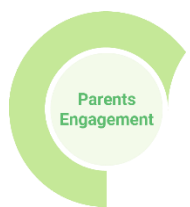
LSEP consists of four key components: curriculum delivery, life skills club, parent engagement, and stakeholder engagement (Figure 1).



Students in grades 7 and 8 participate in a core curriculum of 34 life skills and gender-transformative sessions. These sessions are carefully designed to address various topics, including gender norms, problem-solving, decision-making and succeeding in school and life. To enhance the learning experience and cater to individual interests, partnered schools also have the option to select from eight additional sessions drawn from the government's local life skills curriculum. While most of the sessions are conducted in mixed genders (both boys and girls), some are facilitated for boys (e.g. My Changing Body, Masculinity, etc.)



The Life Skills Club is a voluntary activity that provides a safe space for students to develop and practice critical life skills and knowledge. It provides a supportive environment where students can engage in interactive activities, collaborate with peers, and explore their potential. By participating in the club, students can build confidence and strengthen their interpersonal skills.



LSEP recognises the importance of parental involvement in supporting students' learning and development. To facilitate effective communication and collaboration with parents, the program organises two annual parent meetings: orientation and update meetings. The orientation meeting provides parents with a comprehensive overview of the LSEP project's objectives, the significance of life skills education for their children, and their role in supporting the program. The update meeting serves as a platform for parents to receive information on their child's progress in the LSEP, discuss any concerns, and share their perspectives on the program.



To ensure the successful implementation and sustainability of the pilot program, LSEP fosters effective cooperation with schools, local authorities, and national stakeholders. To achieve this goal, the program conducted various engagement activities, such as project kick-off meetings with the Provincial Office of Education, meetings with relevant MoEYS departments, field visits to schools, and sharing progress reports with key stakeholders. These activities are deemed crucial for advocating for the integration of LSEP elements into the formal education system and promoting broader awareness and support for the program.

2.3 | Program Implementation and Evaluation

LSEP was initially piloted in 2022 in two districts of Banteay Meanchey Province, Cambodia. The program is being implemented in four government schools that are already part of the Girls' Education Program (GEP). In these schools, LSEP sessions are conducted collaboratively by schoolteachers and RtR field facilitators. The sessions include both single-sex and mixed-gender formats (the latter currently being piloted), allowing for interaction with GEP participants. By 2022, the LSEP program was expanded to include two additional schools in Prey Veng province. To augment the core components of the LSEP program, three supplementary elements were also incorporated: a mentoring program for both students and RtR staff, home visits, and ongoing support. The mentoring programs, adapted from the GEP program for girls, guided both students and staff. Home

visits facilitated communication with parents and ensured their active involvement in the LSEP program. Ongoing support, including professional development for teachers, was provided to ensure consistent and effective implementation of the LSEP curriculum.

RtR employs a robust monitoring and evaluation framework for its project implementation. Typically, their team would develop a list of learning agendas or questions to gather insights from the pilot program, informing future improvements and potential expansion. A comprehensive evaluation plan was created to address these questions, encompassing baseline, midline, and end-line assessments. Those evaluations also focus on understanding stakeholder experiences, measuring program outcomes, and analysing the relationships between these factors. Their M&E team has implemented both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the evaluation. Quantitative studies, known as KAP studies, employ surveys to measure knowledge, attitudes, and practice changes. Qualitative studies, conducted internally or externally, provide deeper insights into the experiences of students, teachers, and program staff. This qualitative strand can take the form of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the program's implementation and impact.

3. Methodology

3.1 | Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the effectiveness and potential for scale-up and adaptation of the LSEP program in addressing boys' disengagement from education. It also explored in depth the project's impact on various stakeholders, the underlying factors influencing its efficacy, and points for improvement or adaptation if the program is to be scaled up or implemented in a country other than Cambodia.

3.2 | Data Collection

Sampling: Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants involved in the LSEP program. By engaging and observing stakeholders with differing opinions and attitudes, the researchers constructed a narrative that effectively highlighted the strengths, limitations, and potential of the LSEP intervention. Participants include eight students, one teacher, two school directors, three parents from two LSEP-piloted schools in Banteay Meanchey province, three LSEP project staff, three LSEP facilitators, and one government official in the General Secondary Education Department of MoEYS.

Instruments: Data was collected through three methods: desk review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). In total, we conducted 13 KIIs and 2 FGDs, all in Khmer.

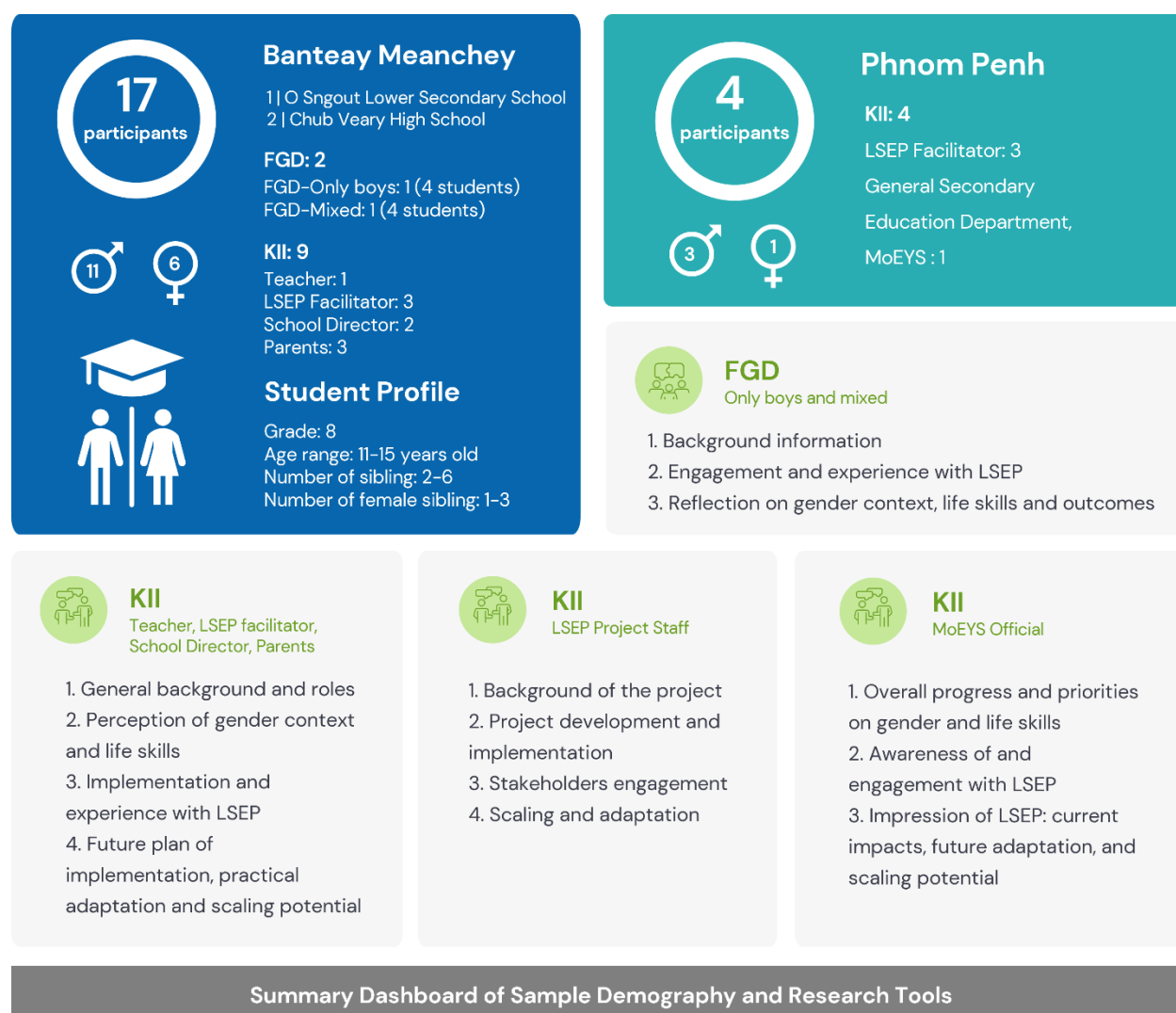
Desk Review: Existing literature, project documents, and relevant policies were reviewed to provide a contextual understanding of the current gender-related context in Cambodia as well as the current progress of the LSEP program.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): 13 KIIs were conducted with key informants, including school directors, LSEP program facilitators, teachers, LSEP project staff, and a representative of the General Secondary Education Department of MoEYS. These interviews mainly explored their perspectives on

the LSEP's implementation, challenges, perceived impacts, and critical considerations for improvement and adaptation before scaling up. Each KII took about 45 minutes to one hour.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Two FGDs were conducted with students to gather their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward the LSEP in two LSEP secondary schools in Banteay Meanchey Province. Student participants in each FGD are students in grade 8 and are beneficiaries of the LSEP project. Each FGD consisted of four students. One FGD was conducted with only male students, while another had mixed male and female students. This was done to capture whether there is any difference in program process and effectiveness when there is a difference in gender combination (a few sessions implemented with having both boys and girls within the same class arrangement). The discussions explored the students' perception and dynamic in the project as well as the project's impact on gender equality and education engagement. Each FGD lasted about 45 minutes.

Figure 2. Summary Dashboard of Sample Demography and Research Tools



3.3 | Data Analysis

To ensure data quality and rigour, a structured fieldnote system was employed to organise and document all interviews and discussions. Post-interview debriefings were conducted among researchers to facilitate immediate analysis and identification of emerging themes. All KIs and FGDs were audio-recorded with participant consent and translated when necessary to enhance the comprehensiveness of the field notes. The research team incorporated both deductive and inductive thematic analysis within NVivo software to systematically identify patterns, themes, and emerging concepts related to the factors influencing LSEP development, implementation, effectiveness, adaptation and potential scale-up.

3.4 | Ethical Considerations

Endorsement and permit to conduct the study were obtained from MoEYS before commencing the data collection. All research participants were informed about the research objectives, their rights to participate or withdraw, and the confidentiality of their data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for participation in the study, and pictures taken during the study.

3.5 | Limitations of the Study and Mitigation Strategies

This study has two main limitations: non-generalizability and recency bias. However, some strategies were also implemented and suggested for future studies to mitigate those issues.

Non-generalizability: Given this study's small-scale, qualitative nature, its generalizability to broader populations or contexts may be limited. The participants were purposefully selected from a specific geographic region, potentially affecting the representativeness of the findings. Consequently, the results may not directly apply to other settings or individuals with different characteristics. To partially mitigate this limitation, we present response frequencies, which indicate that certain observations and opinions were shared by multiple participants, suggesting common experiences. However, these frequencies cannot be used to infer the prevalence of these experiences within the broader population or to compare their relative importance. Future research could enhance generalizability by replicating the study in diverse settings and with more representative samples.

Recency Bias: Another potential limitation is the risk of recency bias, where recent events or experiences may disproportionately influence participants' responses. For example, the students only remembered a few lessons that they had just learned, while teachers only remembered the latest activities that they had implemented in class. This could lead to a skewed understanding of long-term trends or patterns. To address this, researchers wrote a few prompts on the whiteboard or poster to trigger participants' memories and reflections. In the future, researchers could also employ techniques such as time-line interviews or retrospective data collection to capture a broader range of experiences and perspectives.

4. Key Findings

4.1| Perceived Effectiveness of LSEP

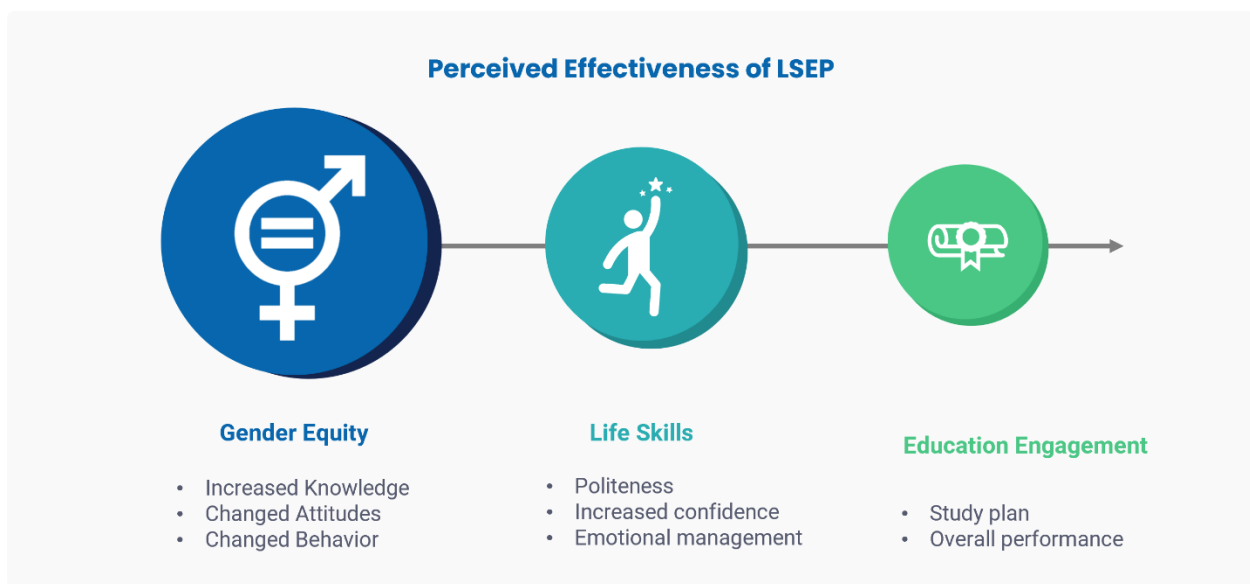


Key findings at a glance:

Although the LSEP project has demonstrated efficacy in addressing gender norms and improving life skills attainment, its primary objective was not to directly address boys' education disengagement. While the program might have indirectly influenced engagement, the current program components might need to be carefully and intentionally adjusted, and a more comprehensive evaluation should be warranted to ascertain its specific effectiveness and impact on this issue.

LSEP is a gender-transformative program that has been observed to bring positive outcomes among male students, notably enhanced gender-equitable aspects, acquisition of essential life skills, and education engagement (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Summary of Perceived Effectiveness of LSEP on Male Students



On Gender-Equitable Aspects

In general, regardless of LSEP, research participants, except some students in the student groups, demonstrated a strong awareness of gender norms-related issues and the associated challenges within their community. Many participants expressed concerns about traditional gender roles, particularly regarding parental preferences and expectations. Parents were often reported to be more protective of their daughters but also expected them to engage in many household chores, while sons were expected to contribute to agricultural activities. Gender norms also influenced educational aspirations, with boys more likely to pursue higher education levels than girls, who were

often pressured into early marriages. Participants observed that even sons studying at higher levels were still expected to support the family to a certain extent, especially in terms of financial contribution. Furthermore, participants observed that gender bias was evident in the classroom, with class monitors often male.

Despite these challenges, participants reported encouraging progress in gender norms and related issues. Traditional gender roles were increasingly being questioned both by boys and girls, as evidenced by the growing recognition of equal opportunities for all genders. This shift was reflected in the improved academic participation of both male and female students, indicating a decline in gender-based discrimination within the educational system. Moreover, school directors, teachers and facilitators observed a positive trend towards greater gender inclusivity in leadership roles in the classroom, with more female students assuming positions of authority, such as class monitors. Interestingly, the study also observed a decline in discriminatory attitudes and misconceptions regarding LGBTQ+ individuals and same-sex marriage, suggesting a growing societal acceptance of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Participants emphasised the need for a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving government agencies, schools, communities, and families to address the remaining challenges. Importantly, they highlighted the crucial role of men in promoting gender equality. By actively challenging harmful gender stereotypes and supporting initiatives that foster gender equality, men can contribute significantly to creating a more just and inclusive society.

Existing evidence from RtR's baseline, midline, and end-line studies (Gandara, 2023; Jeong et al., 2023) demonstrated a significant increase in gender knowledge and attitudes among male students. While initial behavioural changes were limited, it is common for behavioural shifts to follow changes in knowledge and attitudes over time. By the time this study was conducted, LSEP had been reported to foster more comprehensive improvements among boys, not only in terms of gender-equitable knowledge and attitudes but also in their behaviour. Boys who participated in LSEP demonstrated a marked **improvement in their understanding of traditional gender norms and gender-based inequalities**. They were able to articulate the harmful effects of these norms and identify instances of discrimination in their school, home, and community. For example, they recognised that household chores are not solely the responsibility of women and that menstruation is a natural biological process that should not be stigmatised. LSEP also contributed to a **positive shift in boys' attitudes** toward gender-based inequalities. The programme participants expressed a greater sense of empathy and respect for girls and women. They were more likely to challenge discriminatory remarks and behaviour among their peers and advocate for gender equality. The most significant impact of LSEP was observed in the **behavioural changes** exhibited by boys. Boys see positive changes in how they behave, but more reportedly in their interaction with female peers and some gender norms. They were more likely to assist their female classmates and challenge gender-based

stereotypes. They were also more willing to participate in household chores and to support their mothers and sisters.

“ [...] They (male students) used to think that house chores were their mother’s job, not theirs, so they wouldn’t do them. Now, they help their mothers do house chores. We also followed up with their families during the home visit. We asked them how their sons’ behaviours were now. They told us that they were surprised to see a lot of changes in their son. Now, they wash dishes after eating, wash their own clothes, and don’t leave their clothes around like before. ” – Facilitator, Male

Interestingly, these positive changes were also highlighted and experienced by other stakeholders, including teachers, school directors of participating schools, and the students' parents. Participating teachers and school directors acknowledged the changes in their perception, understanding, and practices on gender-equitable values after receiving training from RtR and being involved in implementing LSEP. They recognised the importance of such knowledge and showed their support in continuing the program. Likewise, parents, especially those who attended LSEP parent meetings, valued these sessions as transformative experiences, gaining valuable insights into their sons’ education and actively participating in similar learning activities. These were captured well in the following excerpts:

“ I have never known about gender before. I didn't understand it clearly. However, I understood this lesson after I received three days training. I rarely did housework before such as cooking, but I changed, and I'm no longer divide those tasks after I studied. I almost do all the household chores and let my wife relax. ” – Teacher, Male

“ Parents usually divided their roles and responsibilities based on wife and husband duties but after learning about gender at the meeting, they understand more about it. [...] They always said, “men should not cry”. I explain to them that as a human regardless of gender, all have tears. What if you try to stop us from crying, how would we feel? Then, many male parents realised that they could also cry. Before, they (father figure) were afraid that people would say that they were cowards for crying because they are the head of the family. Now, they know that when they face a problem, they can discuss it with their partners. [...] ” – Facilitator, Female

On Life Skills

Beyond the reported advancement in gender equality’s knowledge, attitude and behaviour, teachers and facilitators have observed a marked transformation in boys’ understanding and application of various aspects of the life skills curriculum. Notably, boys have exhibited increased proficiency in applying life skills related to time management and demonstrated improved social skills, characterised by greater courtesy and consideration towards others. Furthermore, the program has

fostered enhanced confidence in boys' ability to lead group discussions, study clubs, and meaningfully participate in community initiatives.

“ In the past, I'm very shy to even raise my hand to answer the teacher's questions. Now, I'm so confident in sharing my answer. I also lead a few study clubs and group discussions. I took turns discussing. [...] I learn to set up my daily study schedule. What time I should do or complete what etc. ” – Student, Male

A particularly encouraging finding is the boys' heightened ability to navigate conflict and violence in a constructive manner. They have developed a more critical perspective through which to analyse challenging situations, leading to more effective conflict resolution strategies. Additionally, the study revealed that boys have made sound progress in managing their emotions, demonstrating increased self-awareness and emotional regulation. Besides this, they also stated that they now know how to save money better and do not spend recklessly.

“ [...] A boy told me that “I finally know it, teacher. When I'm angry, I ride my bike to seek fresh air in other place and don't create an argument”. Then, I asked his parents. They confirmed that their son is different now. When he's angry, he would rather ride his bike to somewhere first. When he came back, he seemed to be less tensed. ” – Facilitator, Female

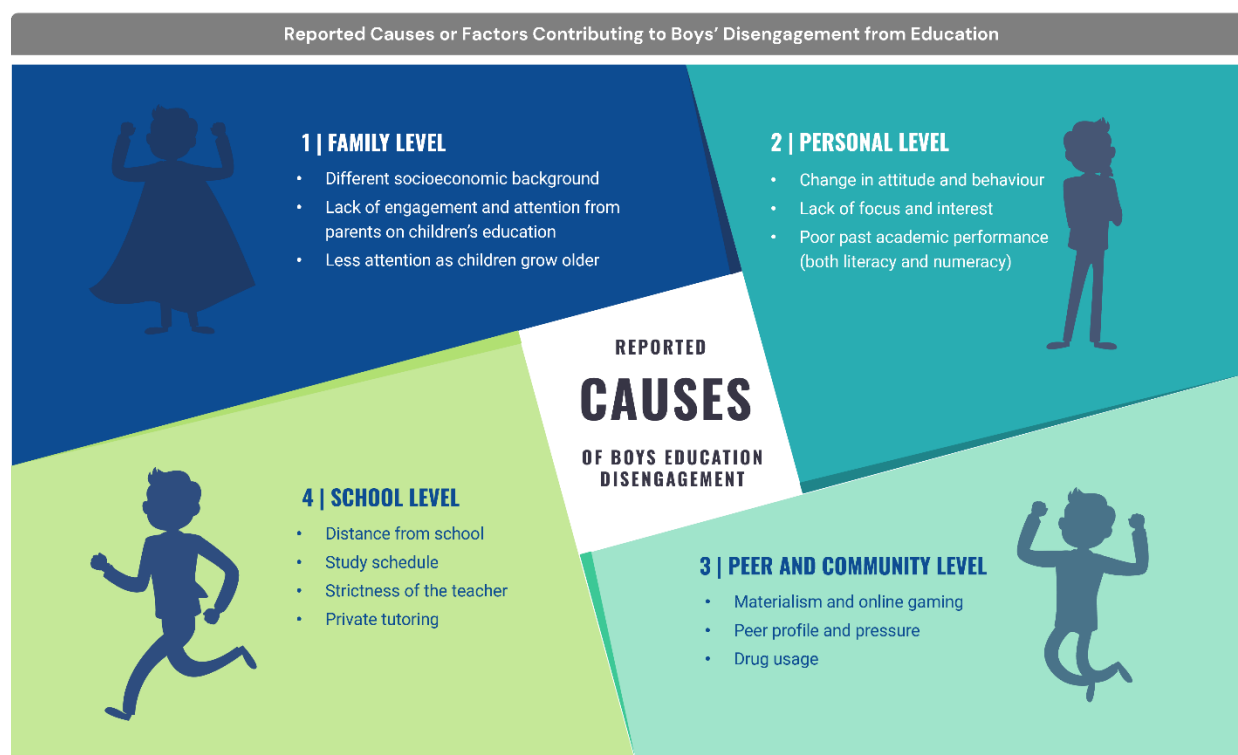
On Education Engagement

In general, all interviewees unanimously observed that boys demonstrate lower levels of educational engagement and achievement than girls. They exhibit decreased interest in education, resulting in higher absenteeism and dropout rates. This suggests a need to investigate the factors contributing to boys' lagging performance and to implement strategies to promote more significant equality in education.

To a certain extent, the LSEP program has been reported to demonstrate some potential in promoting boys' educational engagement, fostering a more sustained and goal-oriented approach to learning. Through different life skills curriculum content, it has provided participants with valuable insights into their future aspirations, enabling them to make informed decisions about their educational pathways. Moreover, some male students have experienced academic improvements, which are reflected in higher grades in their performance after learning how to make a study plan or initiating and participating in different study clubs with their peers. The program's effectiveness in fostering sustained engagement is further evidenced by the high interest among participants in continuing their involvement in LSEP, albeit as a separate subject format from the focal subjects like Khmer, Math or Science. This suggests a positive perception of LSEP's contribution to boys' overall learning experience despite the lack of specific measures to investigate its impact on addressing education disengagement.

Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the primary objective of LSEP was not to directly address boys' education disengagement. While it has shown positive results in enhancing boys' educational engagement, all participants acknowledged that the program's impact on addressing chronic issues such as absenteeism and dropout rates has been more limited. For example, despite the positive changes observed, there remains a significant dropout rate of approximately 10-15% during the program's implementation. This study further explored the underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon. Four primary categories of factors were identified. They are family, personal, peer, community, and school levels (Figure 4). These factors interact in complex ways to influence boys' educational experiences and outcomes. Insights from RtR's M&E data are also closely aligned with our study's identified factors. These factors are in order of influence, with the strongest factors presented first.

Figure 4. Reported Causes or Factors Contributing to Boys' Disengagement from Education



1 | Family Level

Family socioeconomic status emerged as a significant factor influencing boys' disengagement from education. In families with limited resources, boys were often compelled to participate in economic activities, such as migrating to Thailand to support their families or simply moving along with their parents, as there would be no relatives in their hometown anymore. This economic necessity often took precedence over their education. Conversely, boys from more affluent families faced a different set of challenges. Parents in these families were frequently preoccupied with business activities and often resorted to providing smartphones as a form of attention, but they actually neglected the potential negative consequences of the given smartphone and their sons' educational needs and performance. Despite these contrasting circumstances, both types of families were reported to exhibit a tendency to prioritise their

daughters' education over their sons'. Furthermore, there were reported instances of violence within some families, which created a hostile environment that limited boys' access to education.

2 | Personal Level

As boys matured, their attitudes and behaviours evolved, contributing to their disengagement from education. Most interviewed participants observed that there seemed to be a decline in focus and interest in studies, particularly as boys entered secondary education. Some students were unfamiliar with the transition to a two-shift school schedule at the secondary level and found adjusting to that quite tricky. Additionally, boys with a history of poor academic performance at the primary level (both literacy and numeracy) were more likely to experience a loss of motivation and confidence. They could not catch up with either the new learning content or their peers, further hindering their educational progress. Interestingly, a few participants also revealed that some boys indeed disengaged from general education, but they decided to take up training for a specific vocational skill for it allows them to generate income faster or open and/or support their family business directly.

3 | Peer and Community Level

Negative influence from peers and the broader community played a significant role in boys' disengagement. The prevalence of materialism and consumerism within the community can divert boys' attention from education and create unrealistic expectations. All participants also underscored that excessive gaming and exposure to harmful content online could exacerbate a dip in both boys' academic performance and behaviour. Furthermore, peer pressure and the desire to conform to harmful masculinities and social norms can lead to drug use and other risky actions.

4 | School Level

School-related factors also contributed to boys' education disengagement. The distance between schools and students' homes can pose logistical challenges, making it difficult for students to attend classes regularly and in a timely manner. Strict teaching methods and a lack of teacher support can create a hostile learning environment, discouraging students from participating actively. Additionally, the presence of private tutoring within schools can create a competitive atmosphere and barriers that can be overwhelming for some students, leading to a loss of motivation and self-esteem. This is a significant concern for a family that cannot afford private tutoring fees for their sons.

Existing Mitigation Strategies

Besides LSEP, the study also identified a range of strategies currently employed in the research site to address the issue of boys' disengagement from education. At the classroom level, teachers frequently monitor attendance, including noting absent students' names and maintaining detailed study records. When absenteeism becomes persistent, schools often send parents letters informing them of their child's attendance and academic performance. In more severe cases, home visits may be conducted to directly engage with families and address any underlying issues contributing to their child's disengagement.

Both schools have increasingly adopted social media groups to foster stronger parent-teacher partnerships. These online platforms, such as Facebook Messenger and Telegram, provide a convenient means for parents and teachers to communicate, share information, and address student education concerns. At the same time, many schools have implemented policies banning

smartphones on campus to mitigate the distractions posed by technology, creating a more conducive and focused learning environment.

Recognising the economic barriers that can hinder boys' access to education, schools have implemented initiatives such as providing scholarships to students in need. These financial supports can help alleviate the burden on families and enable boys to continue their studies to a certain extent. Furthermore, coordination with subnational authorities has been crucial in ensuring the widespread implementation of these strategies. By working together, schools and local governments can leverage their resources and expertise to address the complex issue of boys' disengagement on a broader scale.

4.2 | Enabling and Hindering Factors of Current LSEP's Effectiveness and Potential Scale-Up



Key findings at a glance:

The current LSEP program's effectiveness is due to its well-designed components and strong support from RtR. However, challenges such as resource constraints, technical content, limited parental engagement, and a unified approach in addressing boys' education disengagement have hindered the expansion of its current effectiveness and potential scale-up.

Enabling Factors

The current LSEP program's effectiveness can be attributed to a confluence of factors centred around its carefully designed components and the robust facilitation and support provided by RtR (Figure 5-Left panel).

The **LSEP curriculum**, with its emphasis on gender equality, life skills and academic success, resonated strongly with participants. The program's incorporation of **diverse, engaging activities** further contributed to its appeal (Figure 6). Beyond classroom interaction, **home visits** served as a bridge between the program and the home environment, fostering parental involvement and support. Moreover, the **ongoing engagement of parents and partner schools** strengthened the program's reach and impact, creating a more comprehensive support network for participants.

The success of LSEP was also contingent upon the quality of its **facilitation and support from RtR**. The LSEP's facilitators' passion, commitment, and expertise were instrumental in creating a positive and supportive learning environment. Their ability to connect with students on a personal level and foster a sense of belonging was particularly valuable. The training provided to teachers equipped them with the necessary skills to effectively deliver the LSEP curriculum and support students' learning, ensuring consistency and quality across different program sites. Furthermore, the ongoing support and guidance from RtR were essential in ensuring the program's quality and sustainability.

RtR's role in providing technical assistance, monitoring program implementation, and evaluating outcomes was critical in identifying areas for improvement and ensuring the program's effectiveness.

“ I was selected by the school director to join the training. After I joined, I realized that the lessons are very good. I would regret it if I didn't learn it. I changed myself a lot when I joined. ” – Teacher, Male

Figure 5. Key Factors Enabling and Hindering the Effectiveness and Potential Scale-Up of LSEP

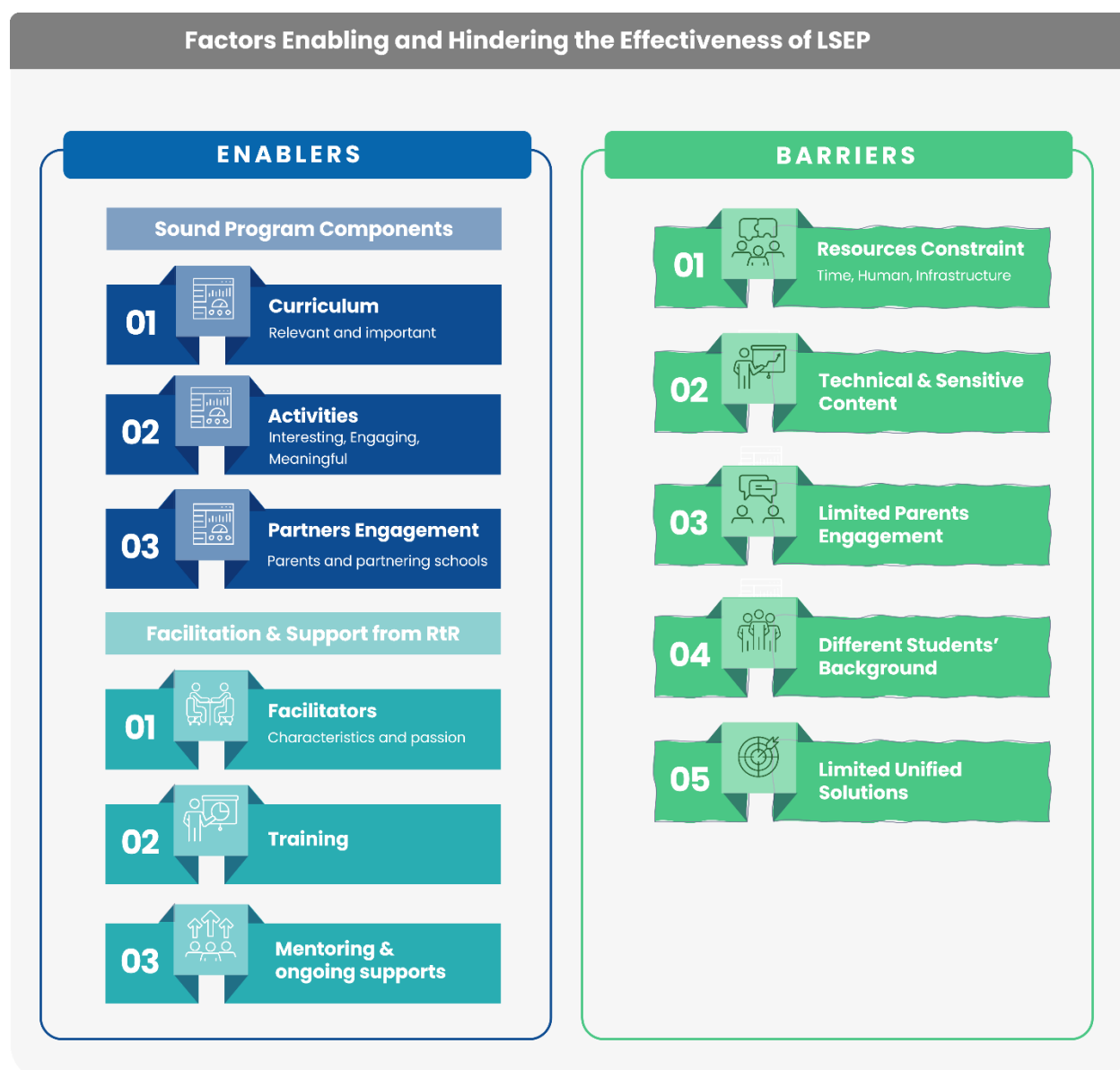
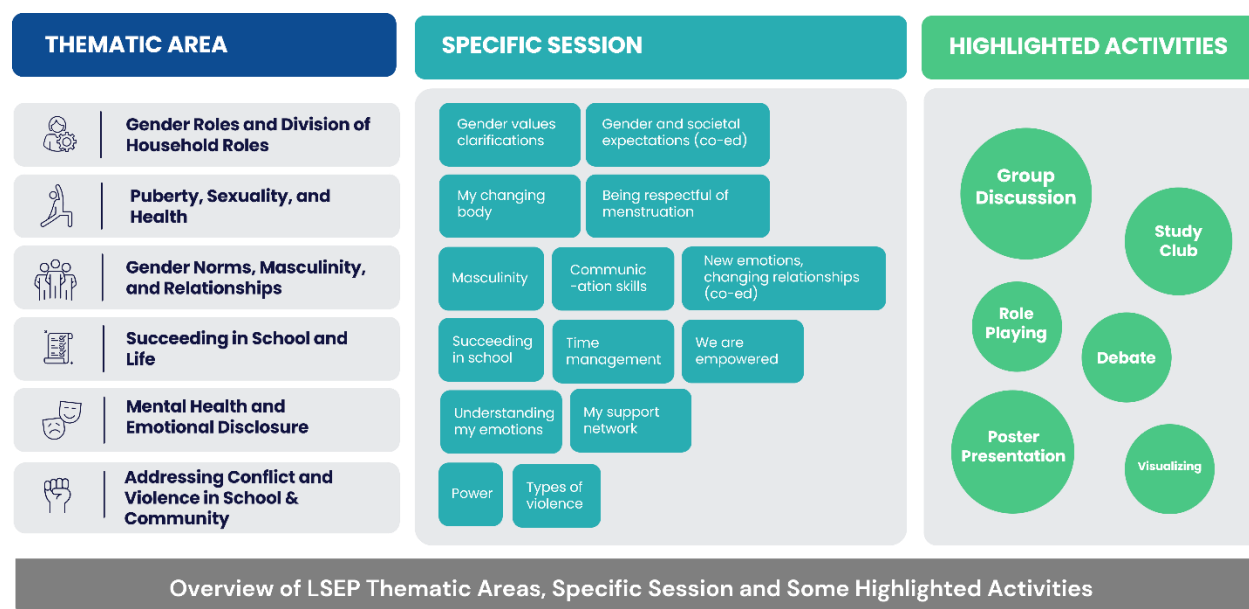


Figure 6. Overview of LSEP Thematic Areas, Specific Sessions and Some Highlighted Activities



Hindering Factors

While LSEP has demonstrated positive outcomes, several factors have constrained its effectiveness and potential scale-up to help address the issue of boys' disengagement from education (Figure 5- Right panel). **Resource constraints** have posed significant challenges for the program, and they have taken the form of time, human resources, and the infrastructure needed to deliver the LSEP curriculum. The limited duration of the program has hindered the assessment of long-term impacts and the measurement of sustained changes in participants' behaviours. Insufficient in-class time has made exploring and reinforcing key concepts difficult. A shortage of qualified facilitators and resistance or backlash from some official teachers to teach LSEP in addition to their main subject areas have constrained the program's reach and sustainability. In certain instances, facilitators were responsible for teaching seven to eight classes independently, which they found quite challenging and overwhelming if there was no additional support from their peers from time to time. While some teachers expressed willingness to co-facilitate LSEP, they identified the need for more time and mentorship to prepare and adapt to new facilitating approaches.

“ [...] 20 lessons aren't much. There is also a study club. It's possible to teach a lesson per week. However, teachers have to teach two hours per week for two lessons which is too much (considering they need to teach their main subject). An hour per week is appropriate. ” – Teacher, Male

Additionally, inadequate infrastructure, such as crowded classrooms and limited resources for future activities implementation, has created challenges in providing comfortable and conducive learning environments for all participants. Participants mentioned the need to either allocate one specific class or take about 10 to 15 minutes out of their limited class time just to move out desks and tables to prepare LSEP activities.

“ There are usually a lot of students per class (up to 50). If the teacher/facilitator has 45 or 60 minutes, they already spent about 15 minutes moving the desks outside the classroom or getting students into groups and getting ready for the discussion. [...] Some sessions or topics cannot be finished in one session as planned but need to extend to another session. ” – School Director, Male

“ [...] Because all teachers here are busy. I and my colleague here need to facilitate seven to eight class individually. We sometimes also help each other if it's getting overwhelming. ” – Facilitator, Female

The program's content has also presented difficulties. Some LSEP **concepts and terminologies**, adopted from a global context, may not have been fully applicable or relevant to the local cultural context, making them challenging for participants and facilitators to understand and implement. The program's emphasis and terminologies on gender equality and challenging traditional gender roles may have been particularly difficult for some participants to grasp and comprehend. When inquired which sessions students preferred most and least, topics related to school and life received the most positive response, while puberty and some gender equality aspects received neutral responses.

Parental engagement has been another factor limiting the program's impact. **Limited understanding or motivation among some parents** may have hindered their ability to actively engage in the program and support their children's learning. Participants reported instances where parents avoided meetings due to misunderstandings about their children's behaviour or a perceived decline in the need for parental involvement as their sons progressed through higher grades.

“ If we invited 50 parents, only about 25 parents would have come to the meeting at school. Some already migrated to Thailand or other provinces for works while others misunderstood the intentions of the meeting. [...] They are more than welcome, however, if we visit them at home directly. ” – Facilitator, Male

The **ineffective inclusion of diverse backgrounds of participants**, including variations in age, behaviour, foundational skills and socioeconomic status, have also presented challenges in implementing the LSEP program. Facilitators and teachers must adapt their approaches to address the unique learning needs of younger or older students and accommodate students with active or passive behaviours. Students with weaker foundational skills may require additional support and resources to succeed. Socioeconomic factors can influence students' access to resources, motivation, and educational opportunities, potentially affecting their participation and engagement in LSEP. Among these, economic hardship can create stress and anxiety, negatively impacting motivation and academic focus.

Finally, the study revealed **a need for a more unified approach to address boys' educational disengagement**. While there is a general recognition of the issue, a more concerted effort is required

to prioritise and address the specific challenges of absenteeism and dropout. This will necessitate a collaborative effort between the government, development partners, and program implementers to align priorities and strategies.

On Project Scale-Up



Key findings at a glance:

While LSEP is recognised as an effective tool for addressing gender issues, its potential to mitigate boys' education disengagement requires a comprehensive approach. This involves considering factors at the national, school, program, parent, and community levels. To effectively address this issue, it is crucial that stakeholders at all levels recognise the importance of improving both academic performance and students' engagement in learning. This includes increasing attendance and completion rates.

All study participants acknowledged both the positive outcomes of LSEP and the persistent challenges hindering its effective implementation. Prior to considering scaling up the program, either maintaining the program focuses on gender equality and life skills or extending to addressing the issue of boys' education disengagement, it is essential to address existing barriers and carefully evaluate factors at the national, school, program, parents and community levels. These factors are also applicable if LSEP is to be considered for scaling up in other countries besides Cambodia.



National Level:

- It is crucial that stakeholders at all levels recognise the importance of improving both academic performance and students' engagement in learning. This includes increasing attendance and completion rates.
- Based on this, a more unified approach to address boys' educational disengagement should be designed.
- Consider offering official certificates from MoEYS or attributing scores to the subject based on program attendance could motivate students to participate.



School Level:

- All subject teachers should receive life skills training techniques to integrate these skills into their instruction. Ongoing reflection and professional learning communities should be continued to support teachers' development and practice.

- School directors should assign committed and capable teachers to LSEP and provide them with the necessary time and resources to adjust their curriculum and teaching practices.
- Schools should allocate a designated space for students to learn life skills. Alternatively, schools can arrange more life skills sessions to accommodate a varied number of students and available class sizes and number.



Program Level:

- The curriculum should be further contextualised and simplified to ensure its relevance and accessibility to a wider range of participants.
- The program should be implemented up to grade 12 to ensure sustained impact and address the needs of older students.
- Consider piloting a full-scale co-ed curriculum that could promote gender-equitable attitudes and experiences and assess its impacts on the current single-sex environment.
- The current LSEP programme only monitored boys. Both boys and girls should be included in monitoring and evaluation.



Parents and Community Level:

- Actively participate in the LSEP program whether through participation in the Parent Meetings or other mechanisms from school.
- Monitor and support children's learning and behaviour.

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Annexe 1 | List of Working Definitions

Boys' disengagement from education	is understood as a gendered phenomenon that partially stems from norms and concepts of masculinity within societies. These norms and concepts of masculinity may lead boys and young men consciously or unconsciously to disengage from education. Other social, economic and cultural factors, in families, communities and schools, may also lead to boys' poor engagement with education and contribute to dropout (UNESCO, 2022). Disengagement from education can take different forms, such as general disinterest in education, not participating in classroom activities, being absent from school, not learning for exams, not doing homework or dropping out of school.
Gender equality in education	is understood to mean that the right to education of all learners is respected equally. All learners are given equal access to learning opportunities, resources and protections, and all learners benefit equally from and are treated equally in education (UNESCO, 2022).
Gender equality through education	refers to education's key role in addressing the wider issue of gender equality. Educational institutions can promote new attitudes and patterns of belief, transforming the way people think about traditional gender roles and helping to build long-term sustainable change. And achieving equal outcomes for female, male and non-binary learners can help to empower all people to create better lives (UNESCO, 2019).
Gender norms	are understood as ideas about how men and women should behave: the expectations and standards that are set for each gender in different societies, cultures and communities. People internalise these 'rules' at an early age, in the beginning of a cycle of gender socialisation and stereotyping that continues for the rest of their lives. Gender norms thus not only become individuals' expectations of others, but also of themselves (UNICEF et al., 2019). The socialisation process happening within educational institutions often replicates that of broader society and reproduces social and gender norms (Stromquist, 2007).
Gender-transformative approaches	entail addressing the underlying causes of gender inequalities. It includes policies and initiatives which not only address the different needs, aspirations, capacities and contributions of girls, boys, women and men, but also challenge existing and discriminatory policies and practices, creating radical change (UNESCO, 2018). A gender-transformative approach to education is one that encompasses policy, programming and interventions to create opportunities to actively challenge gender norms and wider inequalities. This includes engaging with gender equality through curricular and teaching reforms (UNESCO, 2022).

Harmful and restrictive masculinities	are linked to hegemonic gender norms assigned as ‘masculine’, which are constructed in opposition to subordinated or marginalised femininities and masculinities (UNESCO, 2014). Such ideas and practices of masculinity are harmful to girls and women as they uphold men’s privilege over women, but also to boys and men, who are subjected to restrictive representations of manhood (WHO, 2019). Hegemonic masculine gender norms contributing to harmful and restrictive masculinities are for example taking risks, being strong, not seeking help, feeling entitled, and exerting power or dominance over women (WHO, 2019). Harmful and restrictive masculinities create barriers to boys’ engagement in education, as gendered norms and expectations impact boys’ motivation and desire to learn. In many contexts, school activities and certain subjects are considered at odds with expressions of masculinity, making education unpopular with boys (UNESCO, 2022).
Masculinities	are socially constructed, produced and reproduced. Masculinities can refer to identities, social norms and power dynamics. Examples of hegemonic masculinity can include being a ‘provider’ or ‘protector’ (identities), being aggressive or not showing emotion (social norms) or the subordination of women and girls and men who do not conform to dominant gender norms (power dynamics). Yet, masculinities are plural and, at times, contradictory, they are variable and can change across time and space, within societies and through life. Often, we come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of ‘others’ – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women. (UNESCO, 2022; Ragonese et al., 2019; Kimmel et al., 2004).
Positive masculinities	emphasise the constructive aspects of masculinities and are a direct response to harmful and restrictive male gender norms, which view men and boys as potential perpetrators and aggressors and focuses solely on how they can harm themselves and others. Positive masculinities assume that men are able to redefine hegemonic and prevailing norms in ways that are more in line with egalitarian values and more conducive to health and well-being; these may include, for example, committed fatherhood and partnership, forms of caring and intimacy, and forms of courage and autonomy (UNESCO, 2014).
Scaling	includes many activities that are focused on deepening or expanding an impact. Scaling can be horizontal, vertical or compound. Horizontal scaling refers to scaling pathway focused on increasing the breadth of coverage of an intervention, expanding from one geographic area to another or to additional beneficiaries. Also called scaling out, replication, or diffusion. Vertical scaling refers to a scaling pathway focused on integrating key aspects of an initiative into broader government systems at national or subnational levels and mainstreaming delivery into normal operations. Also called scaling up or mainstreaming. Compound scaling refers to a scaling pathway focused on diversifying and expanding the types of activities or areas of engagement undertaken in an innovation or by an organisation. Also called grafting or functional scaling (Brookings, 2024).

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