

Review of the Professional Standards for School Principals in Cambodia: Functions and Content Analysis

Sovath Seng* 

Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan

Abstract

This article explores Cambodia's Professional Standards for School Principals (PSSP), focusing on functions and content in fulfilling principals' roles and responsibilities during the ongoing educational reforms. The official PSSP, along with relevant supporting documents from the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) of Cambodia, were analyzed. The documents' priority actions, strategies, and objectives were carefully examined using content analysis. The findings showed that the standards' functions and contents were crucial in supporting and guiding principals' professional roles and responsibilities, ensuring alignment with international and regional standards. However, the standards expressed rigid functions and content, reflecting concerns over local practices under the decentralization reform. Additionally, the standards outlined principals' roles and responsibilities across the five leadership competencies—personal excellence, strategic thinking and change management, managerial leadership, leading learning and teaching and community-based engagement—but some roles have expanded in response to ongoing developments and requirement in education, particularly growing socio-political affairs, integrating digital technology in school system, teaching and learning activities, and increasing external stakeholder engagement. This study illuminated the alignment of standards, policies, and principals' obligations, fostering discussions on improving educational standards in Cambodia and elsewhere. However, this study is solely

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*E-mail: seng.sovath@moeys.gov.kh



based on documents, survey reports, and research articles lacking various triangulation data from stakeholders. Further research should expand the scope of the study on the implementation of the standards and principals' practices and challenges at school levels by using scientific methods.

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Introduction

School principals play a significant role in influencing student achievement by shaping the school environment, promoting a favorable climate, and leading the teaching and learning processes, even though they do not directly deliver classroom instruction (Coelli & Green, 2012; Gurr, 2015; Leigh Sanzo et al., 2011; Leithwood, 2006). Specifically, principals influentially introduce new curricula and teaching techniques such as student-centeredness, and problem-based learning (Sreypouv, 2022). Similarly, principals using instructional leadership style primarily improve the school culture and working conditions for teachers and staff (Cruickshank, 2017). When teachers of the 21st century require high skill and competence different from those of the 20th century, then principals need to be aware and equip themselves with relevant 21st-century skills to guide teachers toward the teaching and learning for 21st-century education (Mthanti & Msiza, 2023). Fast societal changes, including demographic shifts, technology advancements, teachers' working conditions, social unrest, and



worldwide pandemics, drive the evolution of the principal's responsibilities (Davis Jr & Nixon, 2024).

Many countries worldwide, the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, African countries Japan, Russia, China as well as ASEAN (the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam...), have introduced principal standards recognizing the criticality of their roles and responsibilities for high performance impacting student achievement (AITSL, 2014; DoE, 2020a; NBPEA, 2015; DoBE, 2014; JASEA, 2009; Fedorchuk, 2019; MOE, 2013; Innotech, 2015)

In the Cambodian context, known as one of the post-new war countries which faced several challenges in education (Kheang et al., 2018), the pursuit of educational quality was impeded by the catastrophic events of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), which inflicted significant damage on educational infrastructure and resulted in the deaths of several educators (Dy, 2013; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003). The 2014-2018 Education Strategic Plan identified two major issues: poor learning achievement and unequal access to education (MoEYS, 2014b). These intertwined challenges affect various levels of education and implement such stakeholders, teachers, and school principals. Therefore, the Professional Standard for School Principals (PSSP), initiated by the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS), to ensure qualified principals for effective school leadership in response to the regional and global educational contexts (MoEYS, 2017). The PSSP reflects core school leadership competencies such as instructional leadership, managerial leadership, and stakeholder engagement, which are consistent with international principal standards as aforementioned above.

However, standards for principals often lead principals to lose direction in performance, add extra unnecessary roles, or encounter



overlapping legal responsibilities (Mommers et al., 2024); for example, some principals find themselves “doing work that was not part of their job description” (Ogina, 2017, p. 160). More specifically in Cambodia, at the school level, principals seemed to lose the direction for school development and change management, unable to ensure adequate school operation influenced by internal and external factors, and unable to lead the school in line with the local and international education development trend, due to unclear terms of reference for principals outlining relevant standard roles and responsibilities (Om, 2019; Jones and Nagel, 2022). Recently, there was a lack of analyzing and reviewing the relativeness of principal standards and principals’ professional roles and responsibilities (Jones & Nagel, 2022; Kheang et al., 2018; Om et al., 2019; Seng, 2022).

Therefore, this study is to explore the functions and content of PSSP and how they support and guide principals’ roles and responsibilities for high performance. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the functions of PSSP and how do they support the principals’ roles and responsibilities?
2. What is the content of PSSP and how does it guide the principals’ roles and responsibilities in practice?

The current policy review has significant implications in identifying how the PSSP tailored roles and responsibilities in educational reform. Reviewing the educational policies, specifically the PSSP, significantly highlighted the key competencies that are necessary for principal performance related directly to effective school leadership. A full understanding of the principal standard is essential to support the effectiveness of principals which influence student achievement. This



study will become a part of evidence reflecting the support of principal standards to principal roles and responsibilities in the situation of change in education in Cambodia.

Literature Review

Functions of standards for school principals

The significance of standards for school principals has been recognized as a strategy to enhance the effectiveness of their professional preparation and development (Ingvarson et al., 2006) and to improve performance management, thereby contributing to the quality of education (UNESCO, 2010). Moreover, depending on the intended objectives, professional standards for principals can play crucial roles (Dinham et al., 2013). However, the purposes of the development of these standards vary across countries. The use of standards might be a discrepancy, relatively depending on how the standards were developed. Recently, two distinct models have been identified: external regulated and self-driven (Pont, 2013). The externally regulated model reflects the need for authorities and systems to regulate the principals' work, while the self-driven model focuses partly on the professional development of principals themselves.

Central governments do not always define the standards for principals. By reviewing the standards for principals in some countries, professional or academic associations take the lead, proposing standards through discussions with various stakeholders, which are then adopted by educational authorities. For example, in the United States, Japan, Thailand, and Australia, professional associations of principals, teachers, and academic institutions have spearheaded the consultation process for developing standards (AITSL, 2014; JASEA, 2009; NBPEA, 2015; TC, 2013). Conversely, in

countries like the United Kingdom, the Philippines, China, Vietnam, Russia, and South Africa, the ministries of education have initiated the development of standards, leading consultations among stakeholders before approving and implementing them (DoBE, 2014; DoE, 2020a, 2020b; Fedorchuk, 2019; MOE, 2013; MoET, 2018). Based on the reviewed standards, the functions varied depending on political, social, and cultural contexts in each country; for example, the standards for principals in China emphasized the essential political function in school policy decisions (MOE, 2013; Liu et al. 2017). In this respect, Dinham et al. (2013) reflected that standards were politically influenced by national initiatives and supportive funds politically influenced standards. While top-down approach standards ensure a consistent framework and uniformity aligning to national educational goals or requirements, some engagements were overlooked from local context requirements. Conversely, the bottom-up approach standard paid much attention to individuals or local needs and diminished broad-based standards (Militello et al., 2013). Some tension might happen to practicing principals while one-size-fits-all standards and the realities of demand required in actual practice are different. Standardization and regulation also tend to lead to hierarchical leadership, which diverts their leadership from collaborating with other pertinent stakeholders, such as students and instructors.

Moreover, there were arguments on how standards will be developed and used to guide professional learning frameworks, self-reflection to inform the promotion and appraisal process, or for performance appraisal purposes (Dinham et al., 2013). The technical function of the standards was found to vary depending on intended purposes. Performance appraisal standards are concerned more with accountability and measuring the effectiveness of principals.



In contrast, professional guide standards are used as professional development frameworks, growing skills rather than strict performance measurement. As evidence, some ASEAN countries used performance standards, like Vietnam, where the standards for principals primarily and directly focus on assessment and recruitment processes through providing (MoET, 2018), while in Thailand, the standards define the required professional knowledge and competencies, as well as the criteria for acquiring a principal's license (Pilanthananond, 2007; TC, 2013). However, in some countries, such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, the standards for principals were guiding tools for providing a framework guiding roles and responsibilities, outlining expected goals, promoting professional development, cultivating future leaders, assisting recruitment and selection, and informing performance reviews (AITSL, 2014; DoBE, 2014; DoE, 2020a; NBPEA, 2015). Based on the reviewed standards, the use of the standards was strongly aligned with political, social, and cultural perspectives and technical operations that might contribute directly and indirectly to principalship.

Content of Standards for School Principals

Most of the standards were developed based on the demands of school leadership within specific contexts, taking into account the principals' roles and responsibilities (Ingvarson et al., 2006; Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019), the daily work of educational leaders, and the future leadership needs (NBPEA, 2015). Certain elements of these standards were consistent with effective leadership practices identified in various studies. Leithwood and Sun (2012) suggested that the core leadership practices or competencies include setting direction, developing people, improving instructional programs, redesigning



organizations, and building relationships. These competencies were considered to provide content validity for the standards for principals (Ingvarson et al., 2006; Pont, 2013). In this respect, Berkovich and Bogler (2020) attempted to group four imperatives of school administration: moral, instructional, managerial, and socio-political standards, which influence principal standard policy. The contents of the standards play important roles in guiding principals' practices and professional improvement. One way to change the principal practice is to "change the professional standards that are supposed to guide practice" (Militello et al., 2013, p. 86). This infers that the school leadership practices might be different in the individual context of education that require content of the standards specifically guide principals' professional roles.

Regarding the reviewed standards from various countries and regions, the contents guide principals' roles and responsibilities to ensure effective leadership practices are strongly aligned with their specific contexts. In highly developed countries like OECD countries, the education system is oriented towards developing 21st-century skills and competencies for leaders, educators, and students to prepare for advanced education by 2030. Consequently, principal standards in these countries are framed with guiding vision and mission, creating organizational conditions, promoting school-based harmony, developing oneself and others, and leading pedagogical management (Pont, 2013) while in African countries, the standards for principals have traditionally focused on several key areas: directing and developing schools, managing quality, leading teaching and learning, improving the curriculum, securing accountability, and promoting staff wellness. Additionally, principals are expected to manage the school as an organization, collaborate with and serve the community,



handle human resources, and oversee extracurricular activities (DoBE, 2014).

In addition, the ASEAN framework for principals proposed a few leadership competencies including strategic thinking and innovation, personal excellence, managerial leadership, instructional leadership, and stakeholder networking (Innotech, 2015). This framework has significantly influenced and linked to the standards for principals in ASEAN member countries, reflecting a shared vision within the region. However, it is intended to complement rather than replace the national standards of each member country. Each nation maintains its standards tailored to its local context.

Based on the reviewed standards, their content is diverse and complex, reflecting the specific educational contexts, though there are some common elements. As illustrated in Table 1, the outline of standards for principals from various countries shows several fundamental leadership competencies that are consistently present. Each leadership competency was derived from multiple theoretical perspectives, as elicited in the description.



Table 1.

Essential contents of professional standards for school principals from different countries

Leadership Competencies	Descriptions
Strategic thinking and innovation	Focusing on improvement through creativity and innovation, strategic decision-making, and building a future vision for an organization (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Haycock, 2012; Leithwood & Sun, 2012)
Leading teaching and learning	Leadership for learning that cooperates with the quality of teaching and learning focus of instructional leadership contributing to student learning and school improvement (Day et al., 2020; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Leithwood & Sun, 2012)
Managerial leadership	Managerial decision-making and problem-solving skills in implementing plans and strategies highly political and adaptive to changes that involve a large variety of activities during the day job (Grace, 2005; Postuła, 2024; Yukl, 1989)
Developing self and others	Principals, together with others, create a professional learning community that contributes to continuously improving teaching and learning, engaging in professional development (Day & Sammons, 2016; Leithwood & Sun, 2012)
Engaging and working with the community	creating productive relationships with parents and broader communities and building sustainable partnerships between the school and communities (Leithwood, 2006; Ngobeni, 2024)

Source: Author's work

Based on the reviewed standards, the significant elements that should be included in the standards must be connected to what principals need to know, understand, and perform effectively in their professional roles and responsibilities in their specific school contexts.



Notably, these reviewed key elements of the standards, presented in Table 1, provided essentially conceptual foundation and reference points in supporting and guiding principals in general and Cambodian principals particularly, in performing their roles and responsibilities highly effectively. Cambodia has implemented educational reform to support the government's development initiatives, including becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a “developed country” by 2050 (MoEYS, 2024a). These standards encompassing the knowledge, understanding, and skills principals need, aligning with political, social, and cultural perspectives and the relevant technical operations, provide a knowledge base allowing to review Cambodian PSSP from these international theoretical perspectives. Reflecting on how the duties and responsibilities of principals have been supported and guided in terms of the functions and contents of Cambodian PSSP requires an awareness of several kinds of professional standards.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative design, utilizing content analysis of document data as described by Cohen et al. (2018). The document selection in this study was mainly based on their significance and contribution to school leadership in the context of study. The first was a primary document, “Professional Standard for School Principals” (PSSP) from MoEYS (2017). Emphasis on school leadership and management effectiveness is getting attention and importance is strongly recommended in national educational policies such as Teacher Policy (MoEys, 2013), educational strategic plan (MoEys, 2014b), and teacher policy action plan (MoEys, 2014a), as well as the education reform programs (Hang-Chuon, 2017). To promote the effectiveness of school leadership and management, MoEYS first established and enacted PSSP in Cambodian education system



(MoEYS, 2017). The PSSP is the main document that links to other educational standards such as, school model standard, teacher standard, and school management standard. Additionally, several school leadership programs (preparation, training, assessment, evaluation of principals, selection... etc.) were referred to the PSSP. The second document, titled “Strengthening Roles and Responsibilities of School Principals for Providing Educational Service in Public Secondary Schools” (No. 36 MoEYS. SNN, August 2023), is a guideline issued by MoEYS (2023a). Due to the recent evolving changes in education, it requires MoEYS to strengthen the principals’ role and responsibility performance. This guideline has a crucial role to support policy implementation and manage principals’ practices. Both documents are public policy resources on MoEYS’s e-library and website.

This analysis included a mid-term review report in 2021 of the educational strategic plans for 2019-2023 and projections to 2025 (MoEYS, 2022b), the annual educational congress report (MoEYS, 2022a), practical survey reports on the implementation of the school model in Cambodia among (MoEYS, 2024c), sub-national timely inspection report (MoEYS, 2024b), informant articles, and regulations related to the implementation of the PSSP. Additionally, the author conducted an online exploratory survey among graduates from leadership training programs for upper secondary principal, to observe their after-training situations.

As Cohen et al. (2018) mentioned, content analysis concentrates on texts, examining and condensing them into summarized form by using previous categories and evolving themes to generate or test a theory. More specifically, the content analysis process involves three phases: preparation, organizing, and reporting results (Elo & Kyngäs,



2008). The author thoroughly read the documents to understand their content, functions, and main topics. In the process of organizing the data, the author examined the key words, phrases, sentences, or pieces of pages to consider whether they are suitable to be analyzed. Next, the author created the categories relied on both deductive and inductive concepts. The author analyzes and simplifies data to generate reliable categories that reflect the study's topic. Such “principals need to conduct professional development via self-study, research, best practices...” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 3), 2, was recorded as “supporting professional development” category. Then, the initial categories were thoroughly evaluated. After evaluating whether the coded contents aligned with the categories or whether the categories were problematic, the author either developed new categories, changed current categories, or eliminated the extracts from the analysis. The author had discussed with other research fellows and senior researchers in the academic conferences to ensure the reliability and validity.

This analysis process was iterative, involving discussions with previous research findings, related policy documents, and other researchers who had investigated similar topics regarding standards for school principals. Moreover, all relevant information leading to revealing the informants’ identity and breaking confidentiality in the data passages was not disclosed.

This current study was conducted in two stages. First, the functions of the standard related to principals’ roles were identified, analyzed, and discussed with previous studies to understand how these functions support the principals’ roles and responsibilities. The second stage focused on analyzing the content of the standard concerning the roles and responsibilities defined by MoEYS (2023a). This investigation



aimed to identify patterns in the functions and contents of widely used standards. Initially, the reviewed standards were coded, resulting in twenty codes for contents and eight for functions. After re-coding, five codes for functions and five for contents were refined. Detailed results and comparisons with relevant standards from the literature will be discussed in the following sections.

Findings

Functions of Professional Standards for School Principals

This study found that the PSSP was widely adopted as professional guidance for principals, delineating five essential technical functions that benefit guiding the principal's professional framework.

Defining leadership areas

The first function involves identifying leadership areas that affiliate with the principals' roles and responsibilities. The PSSP outlines specific competencies correlated with the tasks and duties of principals, detailing the core values and attributes necessary for effective performance. It provides comprehensive insights into the expectations of various stakeholders, from national entities to parents and communities. The PSSP comprises six standards, sixteen components, and eighty-three observable indicators (MoEYS, 2017, pp. 3-8), providing a broad understanding of principal functions. The key competency consists of qualification requirements, capacity and merit, critical thinking and innovation, school management, instructional leadership, and external partnership engagement. The PSSP provided important information related to what principals do to various stakeholders, including teachers, staff, students, parents, inspectors, and the Office of Education.



Supporting professional development

The second function is to support professional development for individuals, schools, and training institutions. The PSSP guides principals' professional development through 1. encouraging and inspiring individual principals to enhance their knowledge and skills based on their needs to perform their duties effectively. As stated in domain 2 of the PSSP, "principals need to conduct professional development via self-study, research, and learning from best practices of other successful principals..." (MoEYS, 2017, p. 3), 2. establishing specific indicators for principals to develop and lead sharing programs within their school communities, such as, "sharing knowledge and experiences and learning from each other through creating sharing programs within the school," and 3. serving as a benchmark for leadership training. One notable evidence of sharing-cum-developing profession is a long-existing and useful technical meeting (Brochum Pachektes) which principals need to lead and comment weekly (i.e. solving technical problems on teaching and learning issues) (MoEYS, 1989). Another evidence of supporting professional development is the completion of leadership training, a prerequisite for the principal position; MoEYS issued some official guidelines to support those who completed the leadership training course to be prioritized as principals or vice principals (MoEYS, 2018c, 2018d).

Guiding performance assessment

The third function was to guide performance assessment. The standard served as a reference for evaluation through two distinct assessment forms. First, there was a self-reflection process where principals evaluated their performance based on personal motivation. This kind

of self-reflection is one of the effective ways to support principals' practices in the daily jobs. No specific guidelines were detailed for specific procedures from the education office while it happens based on principals' motivation. In this respect, the PSSP is used as the main guidance as stated, "having a daily self-reflection for improvement after finishing working 10–15 minutes" (MoEYS, 2017, p. 4).

Second, self-assessment involves using predetermined criteria, procedures, and the participation of both teachers and administrators. The standard emphasizes "self-assessment on working performance for improvement," highlighting the connection between the standard and the assessment tools. Even though the PSSP was not found to be directly used as an assessment tool for principals working performance assessment, these assessments are essential for improving leadership practices.

Defining criteria for selection

The fourth function defined the principal selection criteria in detail. In the first domain of the standard, a comprehensive set of criteria for principal selection was outlined. The selection process was expected to adhere to these standards to ensure the appointment of qualified candidates. The specific criteria for principal selection were pointed out as "at least hold a bachelor's degree or equivalence, completing principals' leadership training, have basic knowledge of information communication and technology (ICT), have the ability to use any foreign language for communication and five-year experiences of teaching" (MoEYS, 2017). It was found that this is the uniformity for all principals stated by these standards. However, the selection process for principals were relied up on several Ministry's guidelines with complexity of procedure (MoEYS, 2015, 2018c, 2018d) to ensure the effectiveness of principals.



Inspiring future school principals

The fifth function aimed to inspire future school principals by offering motivation and expectation, encouragement for professional development, promoting practice, and empowerment. Aspiring principals can enhance their leadership skills through competitive examinations, as noted in the standard: “providing opportunities for educational staff who wish to become principals through competitive examination... receive privilege, bonus, and status...” (MoEYS, 2017 p. 2). For example, principals have the right to accept or refuse and fire contracted staff or teachers. Principals who had the best performance had the opportunity to win the Outstanding Award from the government through annual evaluation by the Ministry (MoEYS, 2016).

Contents of Professional Standards for School Principals

Personal excellence

The main element mentioned in the PSSP was related to the personal excellence of principals. The PSSP stated that “principals follow professional conduct, strengthen team spirit, follow working discipline, have good morality and fairness...” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 3). Regarding this quote, it implies that principals should be professional, accountable, and exemplary for teachers, students, parents, and the community. School principals must practice morality and professionalism to develop trust with teachers, students, and parents. Likewise, leading with personal quality is a critical internal motivator for ensuring effective leadership practices, demonstrated through commitment, self-regulation, and honesty. In addition, the PSSP encourages principals to lead with strong commitment, patience, adaptability and resilience in dealing with difficult situations, as stated

in the PSSP, “being patient and adaptive in hard situations” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 4).

Strategic thinking and change management

The PSSP introduces strategic thinking and innovative skills for principals by encouraging principals to think about the future vision and how to adapt new approaches to enhance their leadership effectiveness. As there was an increase in school autonomy and school-based management practices, principals were encouraged to make decisions for school development. Based on data-based evidence for solving-problem scenarios and innovative ideas to fulfill their duties and responsibilities, as quoted in the PSSP “understanding Ministry's vision, developing school vision, mission and strategic plan (5-year, 3-year and 1-year plan)” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 4), principals are suggested to set up long, medium and short-term plan and goals for schools by aligning with state policy and the needs of the school community. To make principals more advanced in the profession, technology in education has the potential for transformation and innovation to improve administration, teaching, and learning as mentioned in the PSSP that “using modern technology for school management and professional networking” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 5). As a leader of school changes, principals were expected to design an environment where teachers, staff, and students could explore new methods to improve both their teaching and learning and effective school management system.

Managerial leadership

The PSSP focused on three roles for effective school management: administration, personnel, and budget management as stated in the PSSP “school management is crucial to ensure effectiveness and



quality of educational services by focusing on improvement staff management, financial management and administration” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 5). These areas encompass the majority of roles and responsibilities within the management framework. Principals are tasked with addressing all school challenges, including managing resources, providing effective and quality educational services, administration, staff, and finances. Like other institutions, schools require principals with strong managerial skills to ensure the effective operation and allocation of resources for teaching and learning.

In Cambodia’s complexity and change in leadership, principals’ roles and responsibilities extend beyond traditional administration, staff, and financial management. The PSSP indicated that “principals need to lead students to support society and community’s activities including, environment, hygiene sanitation, road traffic, anti-illegal drugs and human trafficking, gardening, traditional ritual, cultural work art, information, and boy scout” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 5). Principals are expected to be involved in leading social work, which is part of principals’ tasks. Leading social affairs is time consuming task that makes this aspect become a significant principals’ effort for school improvement and provide students social skills.

Leading learning and teaching

The PSSP proposed four main components to guide teaching and learning: managing learning and teaching, conducting research, engaging in teacher professional development, and performing internal inspections which mainly contributed to improving quality of instructional leadership as a group of quotes in the PSSP:

“Conducting meetings between teachers, staff, and communities in reviewing, improving, developing and implementing of the curriculum”,

“Researching and seeking good methods for teaching and learning effectively”,

“Facilitating and encouraging knowledge and experience-sharing activities (through creating programs for those who have more experiences share with those who have fewer experiences) and create opportunity for teachers to have study visit”, and

“Monitoring and evaluating the teaching and learning for improving student achievement” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 6-7).

Based on these aspects of the PSSP, principals play as instructional leaders to maintain curriculum development and implementation, inspect and feedback for quality teaching and learning, research new methods for effective teaching and learning, and create opportunities for teacher professional development. Recently, roles and responsibilities of principals in teaching and learning activities are increasing, particularly take attention to digital classroom for improving the effectiveness of students’ achievement (MoEYS, 2024d)

Community-based engagement

The PSSP highlights three fundamental external groups principals must closely collaborate with local authorities, parents, and relevant stakeholders. According to the MoEYS’s PSSP, the principal is defined as a “school and community development agent” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 7). With the widespread implementation of the school-based management policy (MoEYS, 2018a), schools have increasingly



involved parents, local communities, and development partners in supporting school activities. The PSSP also encourages the ownership among local communities for their children's education and school development as stated in the PSSP “communities have a crucial role in the school development process through participating in developing school planning, mobilizing resources, following up school progress” (MoEYS, 2017, p. 7).

Based on the data, Cambodia's PSSP's content consists of five areas that serve as the primary frameworks connecting the roles and responsibilities of principals, as succinctly illustrated in Table 2. Therefore, principals' roles and responsibilities were increased to oversee, manage, and plan for more effective educational services at the school level.



Table 2.

Professional Standards for Principals and Leadership Roles of Principals

Leadership competencies of PSSP	Leadership Roles
Personal excellence	Ensuring ethics and professional conduct Leading self-improvement and continuous professional development programs Being resilient and adaptive Ensuring personal effectiveness
Strategic thinking and Change management	Developing the strategic direction for the school Making effective decision Leading changes and innovation for school
Managerial leadership	Managing school resources and the school system Managing staff performance Managing school programs and projects Managing relevant social affairs (security, health, safety, environment, culture)
Leading learning and teaching	Leading teaching and learning programs Leading curriculum implementation and improvement Establishing a positive learning environment Leading inspection programs and evaluating teachers' performance Distributing planning and learning outcome Leading digital education and research in teaching and learning programs
Community-based engagement	Establishing productive relationship/ network Promoting involvement from stakeholders Ensuring sustainable collaboration with stakeholders Fostering a sense of ownership in the communities

Sources: Professional Standard for School Principals (MoEYS, 2017)

Discussion

The PSSP adheres to specific criteria for principal selection, while the standard itself cannot be directly and effectively used in selection and appointment. Several guidelines supporting the principals selection process were aligned with the criteria defined by the PSSP (MoEYS, 2015, 2018c, 2018d). Due to the socio-political context (Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; Tan, 2007), these criteria can be flexible regarding the availability of qualified candidates in specific schools or areas. For instance, the highest-scored candidate can be selected even though his/her criteria did not meet the standard defined, principals holding high school certificates and higher education degree were only 10 043 out of 13 791 schools in the kingdom (MoEYS, 2023d). There are several possible explanations for this case of finding. The minimum requirement of bachelor's degree reflects the scarcity of higher educational qualification among the potential or would-be principals in Cambodian education. Another implication might be that the PSSP recognizes and defines inclusivity while maintaining the basic standard in selecting principals.

By law, local governors act as representatives for all ministries, overseeing the implementation of policies and standards established by these ministries (NAC, 2008). In addition, following decentralization reforms in Cambodia, the authority to recruit staff for sub-national units was transferred to local administrations (RGC, 2013; MoEYS, 2016). However, the government remains concerned about the local administrations' ability to recruit qualified principals. In a public speech on Teachers' Day, October 5, 2023, the Prime Minister of Cambodia addressed this concern:

"... now we have delegation [authority]...Certainly, we want to delegate the rights to...[governors]. We do not withdraw these rights

back, but we need to have a mechanism because principals need to manage plans from the national level... and governors are not experts in the field of education, so it's difficult to select..." (Manet, 2023).

Coupled with the PSSP reviewed, the standards reflected the school principals' roles as local school leaders who link the gaps between national policy and grassroots' implementation; moreover, principals are expected to demonstrate collaboration skill to work with different stakeholders and implement the educational reform at school level. Regarding the online survey among graduates from leadership training program for upper secondary principals, it highlighted that there have been ambiguities on the selection and recruitment process for principals and some of the ministry's guidelines (MoEYS, 2015, 2018c, 2018d) were not fully implemented at local levels. The inaccurateness of the selection process has still occurred as one participant mentioned that "there is partisanship, bribery and in contrast implementation of guidelines No. 6042 and No. 29".

This finding aligns to international contexts in which the standard guide local administrators to know the demands of principals' roles and helps them make informed decisions and use their selection criteria (AITSL, 2014; Pont, 2013).

Reflecting on principal standards in the ASEAN countries like Vietnam and Thailand, the specific selection criteria have been incorporated into their standards. Yet, some aspects are flexible. For instance, in Vietnam, candidates are generally required to have five years of teaching experience, but this requirement is reduced to four years in disadvantaged areas (MoET, 2020a, 2020b). In Thailand, a license-based system governs principal selection (TC, 2013), whereas Cambodia currently lacks a licensing system for this purpose. Cambodia's approach is somewhat unique.



The PSSP was a professional guide standard that provided a framework for preparation and professional development—different from the performance assessment standard, which is strict in performance appraisal. The PSSP methodically encourages creating sharing and learning programs at the school level and self-reflection in practice. The review of PSSP revealed that principal’s profession is somewhat extent limited for them to effectively discharge their roles and responsibilities. This deficit is uncovered by both provincial survey reports within 51 public schools from preschool to secondary schools and national survey reports among 416 primary schools. Principals were reported as not fully implementing the internal inspection, and self-assessment as well as failing to engage with local communities in enhancing school development (MoEYS, 2024b, 2024c). Even though, the PSSP aligned with other principal standards in different countries, including South Africa, the Philippines, and some OECD nations, where the standards were used to guide assessments and professional development. In other practices such as in the Vietnamese case, the standard served as an assessment tool with specific assessment scales (MoET, 2018).

Lastly, the PSSP stated several benefits for principals' positions, including empowering, growing their profession, and promoting status, aiming to effectively attract, inspire, and empower current and future principals. Attracting qualified candidates to be principals is one of the significant contributions to quality school leadership.

To address the challenges of school leadership in the Cambodian education context, as poor-resourced and socio-economic disparity, qualified principals require the essential ability to manage the changes and resources. By way of illustration, Seng (2022) showed how qualified principals implement policy effectively, they need to



understand the context of school and local community requirements. This function is aligned with the cases of Australia which strongly inspire future principals to develop their talent and succession (AITSL, 2014).

Overall, the standard's functions supported the principal's roles as outlined in the study. They were consistent with the functions of standards proposed by several countries, both developing and developed countries, as well as the Western and communist world. However, in the Cambodian context, there are various types of schools located in different areas—urban, rural, remote, and disadvantaged regions (MoEYS, 2014c)—as well as varying socio-economic and school cultures (Seng, 2022) that require principal standards to consider to be revisited and avoid one-size-fit-all.

In the Cambodian context, personal quality, ethics, and professional conduct are especially prioritized, as they help principals address daily challenges and build trust within the school community. There are several possible explanations for this notion. To date, the majority of effective school development plans depend on levels of participation from parents, communities, and relevant stakeholders, both intellectual participation and resource contribution (Jones & Nagel, 2022; Seng, 2022). Therefore, building trust is the concrete foundation attracting more participation. Successful principals earn trust "*tom nuk chett*" and strong belief among teachers, students, parents, communities, and stakeholders based on their personal qualities (Seng, 2022). Similarly, many standards in different settings prioritize ethics and professional conduct, including the United Kingdom, the United States, China, Japan, and South Africa (DoBE, 2014; JASEA, 2009; MOE, 2013; NBPEA, 2015).



In the context of educational changes, schools gain more autonomy, principals take more responsibility for various tasks, and challenges are increased. School directors fail to manage change and maintain excellent school operations due to internal and external reasons and to lead schools in line with local and regional educational trends (Om et al., 2019). School challenges are communal issues that require collective problem-solving; a study by Seng (2022) mentioned that school vision should be developed through a shared and participatory approach involving teachers, students, parents, community members, and stakeholders. This finding aligns with standards from various countries and emphasizes the importance of shaping the direction and vision of schools (DoBE, 2014; Fedorchuk, 2019; JASEA, 2009; NBPEA, 2015; Pont, 2013).

This review showed that a set of significant content areas such as instructional managerial leadership and stakeholder engagement play critical roles in guiding principals to perform daily practices effectively. Recently, the principals' roles related to social work, the well-being of teachers and students, and external stakeholders' engagement were increasing. This point might be related to educational reform attempting to promote human resource development contributing to the country's development plan for 2030 and 2050 (MoEYS, 2024a), as well as existing challenges faced by principals such as lack of resources (buildings, classrooms, toilets, hygiene and sanitation system and budget constraints), and low national and community support (MoEYS, 2024b, 2024c). In this regard, Reid's (2021) assertion is that the anticipated roles of principals will increasingly focus on health, safety, and security, supporting the emotional and mental well-being of students and teachers, and cooperating with parents and guardians.



Even though, the PSSP has strongly supported and guided the principals' roles from policy perspectives, in real context, principals still face several challenges such as limitations in integrating technology innovation into school and learning systems and failing to increase support from stakeholders, particularly in disadvantaged areas. An example, only 13% of teachers and principals thought they could do their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic school closure; and MoEYS needs to set up specific supporting mechanisms such as developing e-learning manuals, obvious standards for e-learning classes, providing high-quality e-learning material for marginalized students and disadvantage areas (MoEYS, 2021). To achieve the objectives of the PSSP, MoEY needs more effort and commitment to provide facilities and sufficient resources at the school level.

The PSSP's content is aligned with the international and regional principal standards since Cambodia attempted to link its educational development to regional and international standards. The principal standard is a policy highly dependent on school diversity (i.e. school cultures, geographical areas, and socioeconomic); therefore, its content requires extensive engagement with diverse groups of stakeholders. The essential notion is that standards need to consider local leadership requirements, effective professional practices from individual schools' contexts, applicable standards, and the knowledge and skills of principals.

Conclusion and Implications

This study aims to present how the standards for principals can effectively support and guide principals' professional roles and responsibilities within the broader context of educational reform. The findings revealed that the PSSP's framework aligns closely with many



international standards for principals, particularly the ASEAN framework for school principals. Beside the function of defining criteria for selection, the standard's functions strongly supported the principal's key roles as professional development and performance assessment. Additionally, one of these functions helps principals realize all that they should know and perform their roles effectively. It was also indicated that the PSSP guided the principals to develop personal excellence believed influencing on their leadership practice. The principals' personal quality has a significant contribution to a trustful environment for participation from various stakeholders. Likewise, the standard encourages principals to focus on the strategic vision and plan and adapt to the changes, particularly the increasing roles and responsibilities.

However, significant gaps remain in the integration of these standards with local administrative policies and their implementation at the school level. The discussion showed the significance of flexibility in the principal standards to adapt to Cambodian diverse contexts that require in-depth consultation with a wide range of stakeholders to address all the requirements and integrate aspects of effective principal. Therefore, this study suggests that policymakers should align the PSSP to the broader educational reform policies, and implementers localize implementation by considering the school diversity and context-specific requirements. Promoting collaborative partnerships with relevant stakeholders in reviewing and refining the PSSP periodically is also suggested.

This study was a single article conducted in the context of the study to give the significance of the principal standard policy supporting leadership roles of principals in practices. Theoretically, these findings are valuable contributions to the field of educational leadership,



particularly principal leadership. These findings provided a critical foundation for standard developers and policymakers in education to improve future relevant policies. Moreover, it helps principals to strengthen and improve their professional leadership rather than merely based on the implementation of the imposed standards.

Limitation and Future Research Direction

One of the limitations of this study is insufficient according to its selectivity (Cardno, 2018) while some documents were not included such as other subsidiary documents, procedure, and report documents that established the PSSP. The second limitation is the lack of data triangulation in terms of interviews, and survey data from various information sources or policymakers which provided more comprehensive perspectives. This study focused on the context of Cambodia and the supporting data of the PSSP implementations depended solely on the survey reports from provincial and national levels.

Therefore, future research should extend the scope of study to explore more the implementation of the standards based on the individual functions, such as principal preparation, development, and actual practices of principals, using rigorous scientific methods with data source triangulation, to deeply comprehend the strength and limitation of the standards.

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About the author:

Seng Sovath is the Deputy Director of the Department of Legislation (DoL) at the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and a PhD student in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Division of Educational Sciences, International Education Development Program at Hiroshima University. His study fields include educational leadership and management, educational policy, leadership practices, school leadership and management, professional development and learning, leadership programs, research engagement of principals, and school administrators.

E-mail: seng.sovath@moeys.gov.kh