

Chapter 7

Lost Spaces, Lost Learning: Towards Urban Interventions to Address Educational Disparities in Low-Income Communities in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Introduction

Education is widely acknowledged as a critical driver of development and prosperity in the ASEAN region. However, disparities in access and quality persist across countries, income groups, and genders. While progress has been made in educational standards, there is a pressing need to shift from traditional rote-learning methods to approaches that promote autonomous learning, creativity, and problem-solving. Rote learning, which emphasizes memorization over understanding, is increasingly seen as outdated and insufficient in preparing students for real-world challenges. In contrast, experiential, inquiry-based, and active learning approaches rooted in the science of teaching and learning foster critical thinking and deeper engagement. These methods require supportive environments and collaborative spaces that allow children to explore, question, and construct knowledge with others, rather than passively receive information. Learning poverty rates, which reflect the percentage of children unable to read or write by the age of ten, vary significantly, with Cambodia at 51%, a disparity exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (ASEAN, 2022).

UNICEF defines lifelong learning as a continuous process that begins in early childhood and extends throughout life, encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal learning opportunities. It emphasizes the development of a broad set of skills, including cognitive, social, emotional, and practical skills, that empower individuals to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world (UNICEF, 2019). In parallel, UNESCO's Learning City initiative promotes cities by integrating educational policies with broader urban development strategies, cities can foster a culture of continuous learning, ultimately improving the long-term prospects of their populations (ASEAN, 2022), and mobilizing resources across all sectors to foster inclusive learning for people of all ages. A Learning City ensures equitable access to quality education, revitalizes learning in families and communities, and creates environments that support learning in workplaces and through digital platforms (UNESCO, 2015). Both initiatives highlight the importance of inclusive, flexible, and community-centered education strategies, particularly in urban areas, where spatial planning, public infrastructure, and community engagement can play a crucial role in enabling access to lifelong learning for marginalized groups, including children in low-income communities.

Global Issues

The majority of the global population lives in urban centres. Of the 4 billion people living in urban areas today, nearly a third of them are children. It is estimated that by 2050, almost 70 % of the world's children will live in urban areas, many of them in slums (UNICEF, 2023). Millions more make the move each month, many end up in slums or informal settlements. An estimated 350 – 500 million children live in slums, with limited access to essential services like health care, education, and sanitation (UNICEF, 2022).

Around the world, 258.4 million, or 17 per cent of the world's children, adolescents and youth, are out of school. The proportion is much larger in developing countries: 31 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 21 per cent in Central

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Asia, vs. 3 per cent in Europe and North America. (UNESCO, 2019). Additionally, 39.7% of the urban population lives in slums. Share of households living below the updated national poverty rate is at 17.8% and 22.8% in urban and rural areas, respectively (UN-Habitat, 2023). Among children, 44.2% are classified as multidimensionally poor, facing an average of 3.6 out of five deprivations, underscoring the deep challenges of poverty and inequality in urban environments (UNICEF, 2014). Children aged 5-14 years, 44 per cent of children are classified as multidimensionally poor, meaning they are deprived not just in income, but across multiple basic needs. According to UNICEF (2014), this classification is based on five key dimensions: education, health, nutrition, housing, and access to clean water and sanitation. On average, these children experience 3.6 deprivations out of 5, highlighting the complex and overlapping barriers they face in achieving a decent quality of life. This multidimensional approach goes beyond income to reflect the real, lived experiences of poverty, especially in urban low-income communities.

Challenges-Cambodia

Phnom Penh's low-income communities face significant challenges, including overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and a lack of public spaces, exacerbating the struggles of children living there (Plack et al., 2024). Children in these areas often lack proper learning spaces, limiting their development, while child labor and unsafe conditions further restrict their educational opportunities (UNICEF, 2018). Government policies frequently fail to address the educational needs of poor children, and long physical distances to schools act as additional barriers to access (UNICEF, 2011). According to UNESCO (2021), Cambodia ranks highest in terms of out-of-school children for primary school (6-11 years old) and upper secondary school-age (14-18 years old) children.

Urban poverty, spatial inequality, and limited infrastructure are recurring themes in the literature on educational disparities in Southeast Asian cities. A review of existing studies reveals that children in low-income urban communities face multiple overlapping barriers to education, including financial problems, child labor, school dropout, unsafe environments, and inaccessible infrastructure. These challenges are deeply rooted in both socio-economic and spatial factors, and they directly affect children's physical mobility, learning outcomes, and emotional well-being. This literature review aims to explore how these factors interact within the urban context of Phnom Penh City. The following sections will examine key issues found in the literature: the impact of household income on education, including child labor and school dropout; space limitations and lack of accessibility; infrastructure and safety issues; gaps in child-focused urban planning; the scale and experience of urban childhoods; and specific child safety challenges in Cambodia. Together, these themes form the foundation for understanding how urban conditions shape educational inequality and point to the need for child-responsive urban interventions.

The Issue of Household Income-Cambodia

Child Labor

About 54.6% of parents of out-of-school adolescents wish for their children to pursue education but are hindered by financial constraints, with 21.7% unable to afford private schooling, often seen as a better option in underfunded public systems (UNICEF, 2018). Many families prioritize immediate income needs, pushing children into the workforce over education, highlighting the link between poverty, education access, and difficult family decisions (UNICEF, 2018).

Poverty is the primary driver behind child labor. Low levels of income in the capital's urban poor communities often force children to acquire jobs to contribute to household income (UNICEF, 2018). Integration of these children into regular schooling becomes challenging as they get used to being financially independent. Children are mostly employed in the informal sector, which largely remains outside the purview of government regulation. (UNICEF, 2018).



Figure 1. Children Collecting Recyclables on an Urban Road in Phnom Penh (Pictured by author).

School Dropouts

Of the adolescents currently out of school, 87.5 percent stated that they had previously attended school. The lack of attention from teachers, as well as the need to pay informal fees to teachers, emerged as important barriers to enrolment and continuous participation in schools (UNICEF, 2018).

Already living below the poverty line, parents cannot afford to pay an informal fee. Discussions with community members revealed that teachers often only tend to pay attention to students during extra classes for which they charge a fee. Unable to obtain this money (often up to the value of 10,000 Cambodian riels or US\$2.50 a month), adolescents from poor families tend to start to fall behind on education and subsequently drop out of school (UNICEF, 2018).

Child Marriage

About 42.9 percent of families that reported child marriages claim that they got the adolescent married because of societal pressure and to align with the family's traditions/beliefs (UNICEF, 2018), and 35.7 percent claimed that the marriage took place because of the couple's desire to get married and 21.4 percent got their children married before the age of 18 because the girl had gotten pregnant (UNICEF, 2018).

Space Limitations and the Lack of Accessibility

Safety

17.8 percent of the children's families reported that they were aware of a case where an adolescent from the community was missing from home. Missing children are often at risk of trafficking, as seen by the fact that within Phnom Penh's urban poor communities, about 42.2 percent of families reported that they believe that missing children are susceptible to trafficking, and 30.5 percent believe that missing adolescents are at risk (UNICEF, 2018).

Travel Distance

A long distance between home and school can compound the effects of poverty, with poor households often unable to cover the cost of transportation (Chitondo, 2022). According to parents, the reasons for dropping out during primary education include the high cost of schooling, the poor quality of services, and long travel distances to school (World Bank, 2018).

Moreover, traffic-related safety concerns can impact decisions to walk or bicycle. When more children are driven, more parents become convinced that traffic conditions are unsafe for walking or bicycling. Fifty-five percent

of parents who reported not allowing their children to walk or bicycle to school identified the number of cars along the route to school as a significant issue in their decision-making process (WBTS, 2021).

Infrastructure and Safety Issues

The sidewalks are often occupied by illegally parked vehicles, outdoor café seating, merchandise displays, and planters. This makes it difficult and sometimes dangerous for pedestrians to walk on the sidewalks. As a result, people have little alternative but to take a walk on the roadways, making such circumstances extremely unsafe for pedestrians and more vulnerable for children (Saphan, 2007, 238ff.).

Pedestrians, including schoolchildren, are particularly vulnerable to traffic accidents. In 2011, pedestrians accounted for 13% of traffic fatalities in Phnom Penh, with a rise in pedestrian fatalities over the years. The lack of dedicated pedestrian lanes and safe crossings exacerbates these risks (Handicap International, 2011).

Urban Planning Principles

Urban planning often overlooks the specific needs of children because of outmoded thinking that children are not capable of contributing to urban development (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Urban planning shapes how children live, learn, and grow. UNICEF (2018) emphasizes that integrating children's rights into city planning creates inclusive, sustainable spaces for all. This approach aligns with the New Urban Agenda (NUA), which calls for strengthening the capacity of governments at all levels to work with vulnerable groups, including children and youth, in shaping urban development. NUA Article 148 specifically promotes inclusive governance by ensuring that children, along with women, older persons, persons with disabilities, and local communities, are meaningfully included in decision-making processes related to urban and territorial planning. This principle reinforces the importance of this research, which explores how the exclusion of children's needs in urban planning contributes to educational disparities and limits opportunities for learning and growth (UN-Habitat, 2017).

Sustainable infrastructure, water, sanitation, food security, waste management, and clean energy support health and environmental stability (UNICEF, 2018). Digital connectivity is also vital for education and social inclusion (UNICEF, 2018). This is reinforced by the New Urban Agenda (NUA), which promotes the development of inclusive digital governance tools and ICT policies to ensure access for all, including children and youth (UN-Habitat, 2017). By encouraging the use of digital platforms such as geospatial information systems, the NUA highlights how technology can support more inclusive urban planning and improve access to services, critical for marginalized communities where digital access can help bridge educational and social gaps.

Prioritizing these elements in urban planning ensures cities where children and communities can truly thrive (UNICEF, 2018). This vision is supported by the New Urban Agenda, which emphasizes capacity-development initiatives to empower and strengthen the skills of women and girls, children and youth, enabling them to actively shape the urban environments they live in (UN-Habitat, 2017).

Together, UNICEF's advocacy for child-inclusive urban development and the New Urban Agenda's commitment to participatory and equitable planning reflect a shared vision. Both frameworks emphasize the importance of integrating children's rights, digital access, and community participation into the planning process. Their alignment underscores a growing global initiative to create cities that are not only inclusive and sustainable but also responsive to the specific needs of children and vulnerable groups.

Space and Scale of Urban Childhoods

Child-responsive urban planning is crucial for ensuring inclusive and sustainable cities. Urban spaces must cater to children's developmental needs, integrating accessibility, mobility, and social inclusion (UNICEF, 2018).

According to UNICEF(2018), the key principles in Shaping Urbanization For Children include:

Human-scaled Urban Design: Cities should provide age-appropriate services across home, street, neighborhood, and city levels, yet many lack a human-centered design.

Proximity & Walkability: Public amenities should be within walking distance, but car-oriented planning has reduced safe mobility options.

Public Space: Outdoor areas should foster play, social interaction, and economic engagement to support children's well-being.

Mixed-Use Development: Essential services, education, healthcare, and economic activities must be integrated into neighborhoods.

Independent Mobility: Safe walking, cycling, and public transport options enable autonomy, benefiting the wider community.

Neglecting child-friendly urbanization leads to poorly serviced, segregated areas, impacting long-term social and economic outcomes. A child-focused or responsive approach to designing cities enhances sustainability and equity in urban environments (UNICEF, 2018) and "will meet the needs not only of families but also other vulnerable populations like women and older persons" (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Gaps

The disparities discussed manifest as significant gaps in the academic achievement of children living in slums or low-income areas. The lack of learning spaces contributes to lower enrollment rates, high dropout rates, poor academic performance, and limited access to quality education. Children in low-income communities are often forced to work or support their families, further limiting their opportunities for education. Poor infrastructure, including unsafe areas and inadequate school access routes, compromises children's safety and discourages school attendance. Studies across different contexts support this pattern. For example, in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, children in poverty face significant challenges transitioning to secondary school, often dropping out early due to cost, distance, and discrimination (Lewin & Little, 2011). Research in Colombia shows that credit and loan programs can improve higher education access and reduce dropout rates for low-income students (Melguizo et al., 2015). In the U.S., low-income Black and Hispanic children have benefited from nature-based environmental education, which not only improves academic outcomes but also supports physical and mental well-being (Sprague et al., 2020). In early childhood education, social justice approaches are found to support greater inclusion of financially disadvantaged families (Fenech & Skattebol, 2019). These studies highlight that while conditions differ globally, the barriers to education for poor children are strikingly similar, underscoring the importance of safe infrastructure, inclusive policies, and community support to ensure educational access.

Research Framework

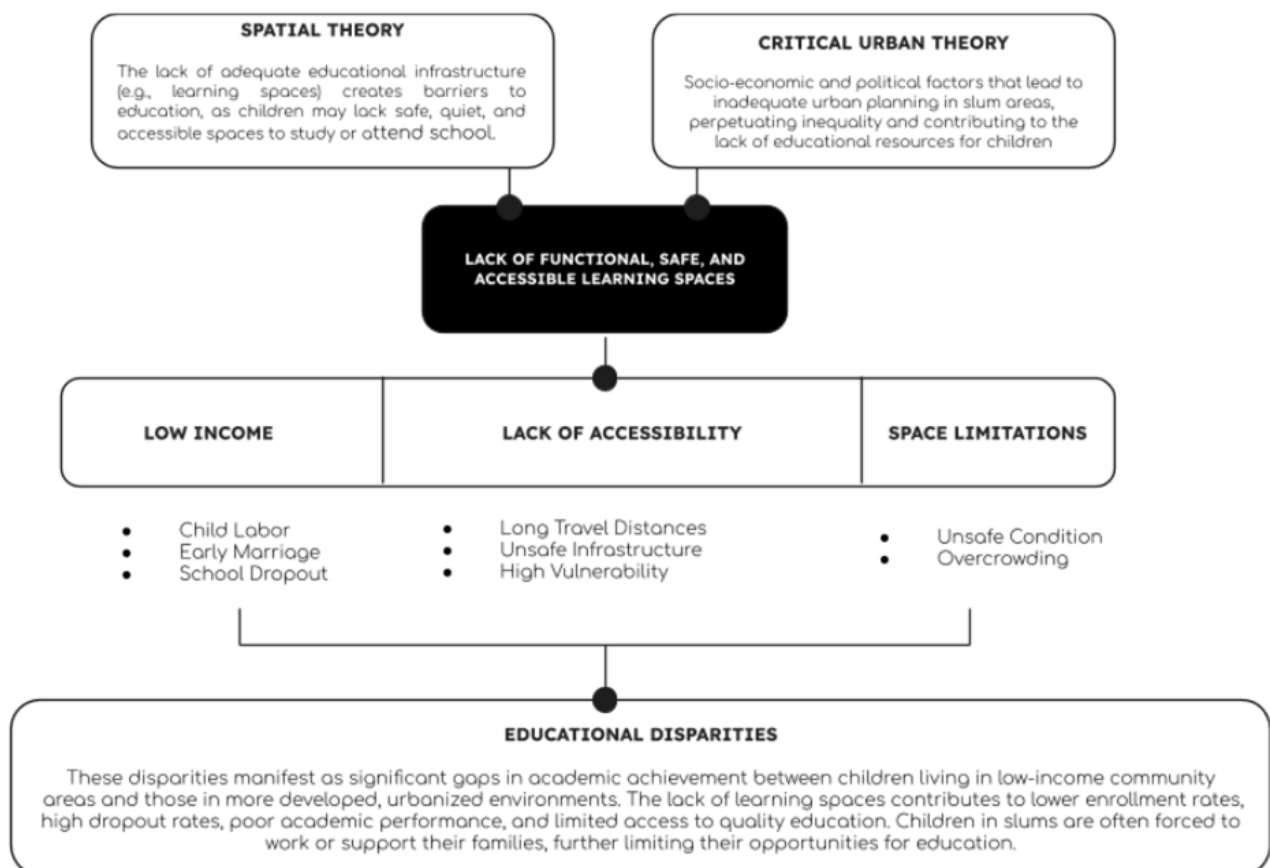


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Spatial and Critical Urban Factors Leading to Educational Disparities in Low-Income Communities (Framework by author).

This conceptual framework highlights how educational disparities among children in poor communities stem from three interconnected factors: low income, space limitations, and lack of accessibility. Low income forces children into child labor, early marriage, and school dropout, while inadequate space creates unsafe and overcrowded living conditions that hinder learning. Additionally, poor accessibility, characterized by long travel distances, unsafe infrastructure, and high vulnerability to accidents, further limits access to education. These challenges converge to create a lack of functional learning spaces, defined as safe and accessible environments essential for education. Grounded in spatial theory and critical urban theory, the framework underscores how inadequate urban planning and socio-economic inequities perpetuate these disparities. It calls for integrated solutions, including urban design interventions and policy reforms, to create equitable educational opportunities for children in low-income

communities, and to enhance children's Right to the City. Every child has every right, as recognized in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2021).

Research Question

How does spatial and urban factors impact access to learning in Cambodian low-income communities & how can urban design address the inequalities?

Research Objectives

- To identify the spatial and urban factors contributing to challenges in access to learning in Cambodian low-income communities.
- To propose urban intervention approaches to address the issues causing educational disparities.

Research Flow

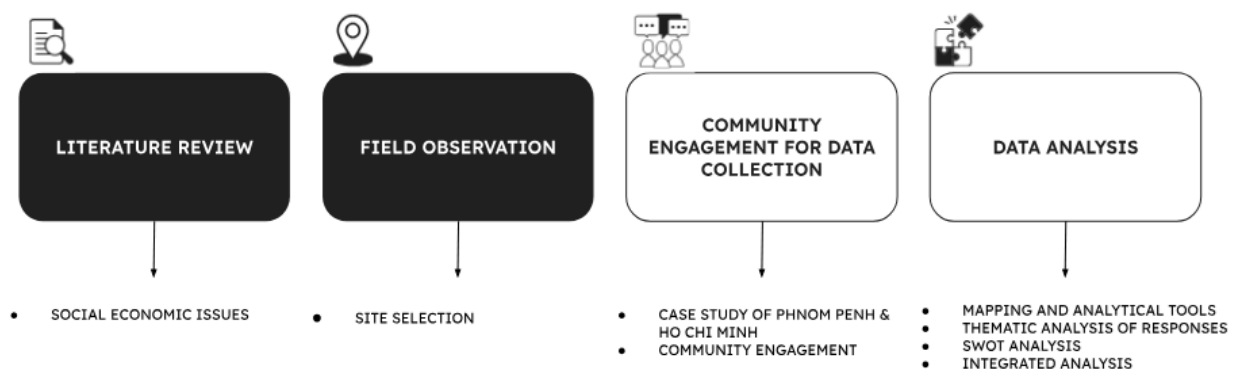


Figure 3. Research Flow from Literature Review to Data Analysis (Diagram by author).

Methodology



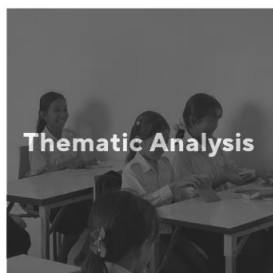
Interview

Asking children how they go to school, the obstacles they face, their fear of going to school alone, and the factors that influence their travel experience can help us understand and improve their journey.



Experiential Mapping

Children draw on their experiences to school, highlighting the challenges they encounter. These drawings serve as a powerful tool for understanding the emotional and practical difficulties children face on their way to school, offering valuable insights for improving their safety and well-being.



Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of interview responses to identify common problems and explore the opportunities for solutions.

Findings

Phnom Penh Case Studies

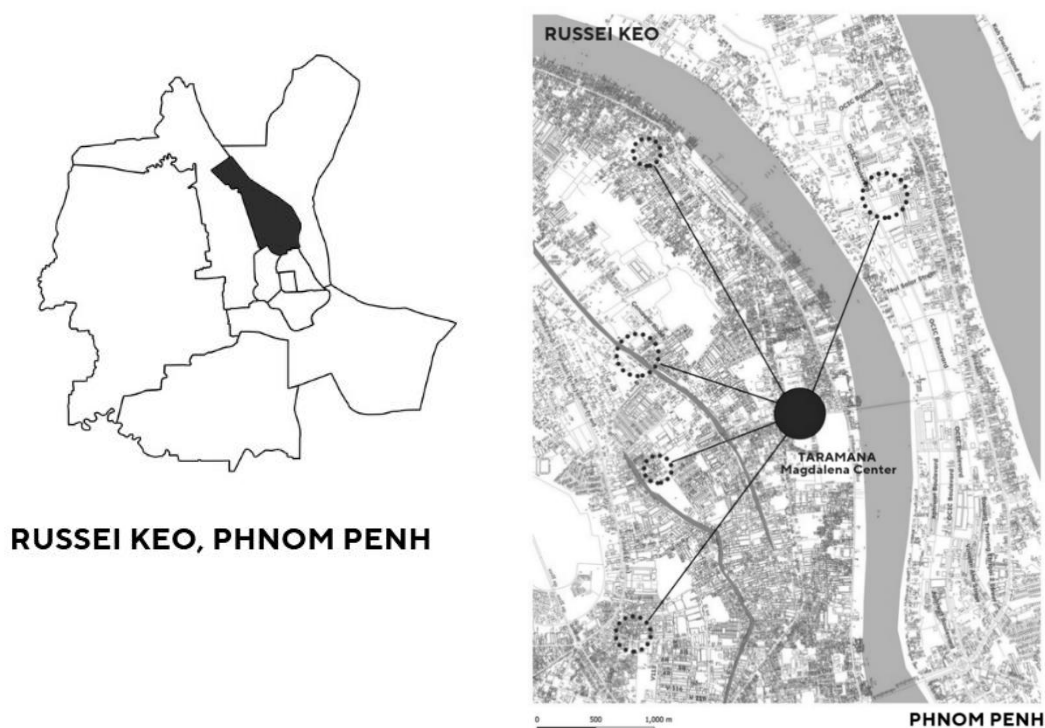


Figure 4. Location of Case Study Areas in Phnom Penh (Developed by author).

Taramana in Cambodia was selected as case studies due to their contrasting urban contexts and approaches to child-responsive urban planning. Taramana highlights the challenges faced by marginalized children in underserved urban areas, demonstrating the role of localized interventions in improving educational access and social inclusion. By analyzing these cases, this study aims to compare how different urban settings impact child-friendly development and identify effective strategies for fostering inclusive urban environments.

Data Collection



Figure 5. Field-Based Data Collection Activities at Taramana Center in Phnom Penh (Conducted by author).

Taramana was selected as the case study site in Phnom Penh because it works directly with children from underserved urban communities in Phnom Penh, a neighborhood facing serious issues related to poverty, poor infrastructure, and limited access to education. Unlike formal schools, Taramana acts as a supplementary learning

center for children who are often at risk of dropping out due to economic pressures, long travel distances, or unsafe environments.

Children actively participate in various research activities, including drawing, answering interview questions, and engaging in classroom-based discussions. The activities aimed to understand children's daily experiences and mobility patterns through participatory and child-friendly methods. These activities highlight both group sessions and individual interactions, emphasizing an inclusive, hands-on research approach centered on children's voices.

Participants Profile

Table 1. Participant Profile of Children from the Taramana Community Center, Phnom Penh (Developed by the author)

No.	Name	Age	Grade	Boy/Girl
1	Vin Monychansursdey	12	6	Girl
2	Nan Sreyleak	12	5	Girl
3	Sang Sokheng	11	5	Boy
4	Khiev Chan meta	11	5	Girl
5	Hong Bunheng	11	5	Boy
6	Ly Rosana	12	6	Girl
7	LyReaksmey Moninich	12	6	Girl
8	Choung Vibol	11	5	Boy
9	Sovan Kanha	12	5	Girl
10	Ang Sok Reaksa	11	5	Girl
11	Phanara Sophalen	12	5	Girl
12	Hang Sreychu	11	5	Girl
13	Treng Sereyvuth	10	5	Boy
14	Sovan Sreyka	10	5	Girl
15	Kosal Dalis	10	5	Girl

Gender	Age Group
Boys	4
Girls	11
Total	15

The table presents demographic data on 15 students surveyed. The students range in age from 10 to 12 years old and are enrolled in grades 5 and 6. There is a higher proportion of girls (11) than boys (4) in this group, as seen in the table, which categorizes the students by age and gender, showing that the majority are girls.

Name: _____
Age: _____
Grade: _____
School: _____

The Journey To My School

Please answer the questions and describe your journey from home to school.

Do you go to school alone or with someone?
How long does it take?

What are the key factors that contribute to your lateness to school?

Have you ever faced any obstacles on your way to school?

Do you feel afraid to travel to school alone? If so, why?

What improvements would you suggest to overcome these challenges?

Figure 6. Child-Completed Survey on Home to School Journey (Organized by the author).

The form asked simple and open-ended questions about who they travel with, what delays them, what kind of obstacles they face, and what they wish could be better. The answers, written in Khmer, were where students described their daily commute from home to school. They described who they travel with, what makes them late,

the obstacles they face, and some common issues raised were poor roads, lack of sidewalks, or being forced to walk in unsafe areas. What stood out most was how many of them had ideas to fix it, like safer sidewalks, more lights, school buses, or even security near their routes. These surveys didn't just collect data, they gave space for children to speak honestly about what their school journey feels like. It showed that physical safety and emotional comfort are equally important when thinking about access to education. These responses were later transformed into drawings during the experiential mapping activity, helping visualize their emotions, fears, and everyday realities.

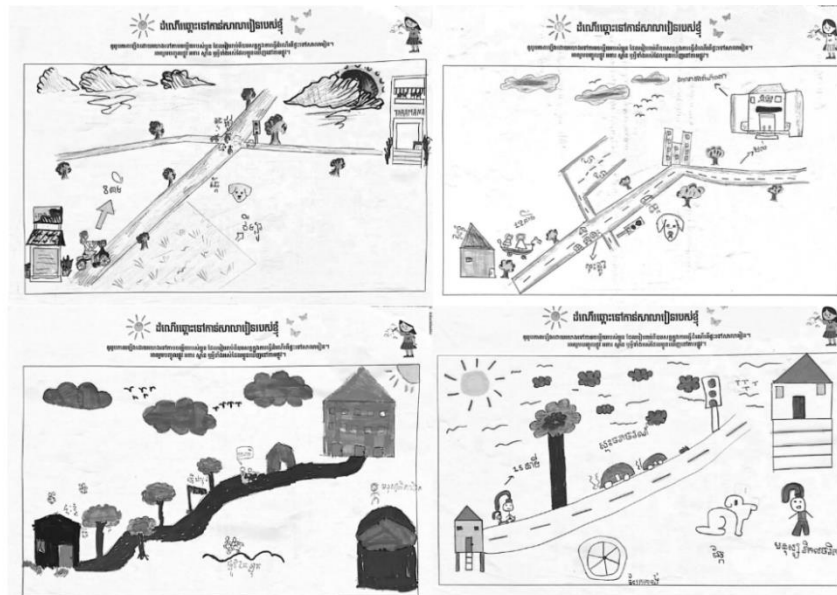


Figure 7. Experiential Mapping by Children Illustrating Daily Commutes to School (Organized by the author).

In Phnom Penh, the most significant safety concern is aggressive dogs, followed by heavy and chaotic traffic, where cars, tuk-tuks, and motorcycles fail to maintain safe distances. Additionally, the threatening behavior of certain passers-by, particularly individuals with mental health issues or those under the influence of alcohol or drugs, further contributes to unsafe public space conditions. These factors collectively create a hazardous environment, especially for vulnerable populations such as children.

The children's drawings also reveal deep feelings of fear and discomfort, with many maps emphasizing isolated roads, dark alleyways, and areas where they feel unsafe walking alone. Most routes lack proper sidewalks, traffic signals, or any visible safety infrastructure, leaving children to navigate busy and poorly managed roads. Moreover, their illustrations highlight the physical and emotional burden of long travel distances, often marked with estimated walking times, reflecting their awareness of how time-consuming and tiring these commutes are. Despite these risks, the children's ability to clearly represent their environment through experiential mapping underscores their strong spatial awareness and the need for urban interventions that prioritize their safety and accessibility.

Thematic Analysis of Common Issues

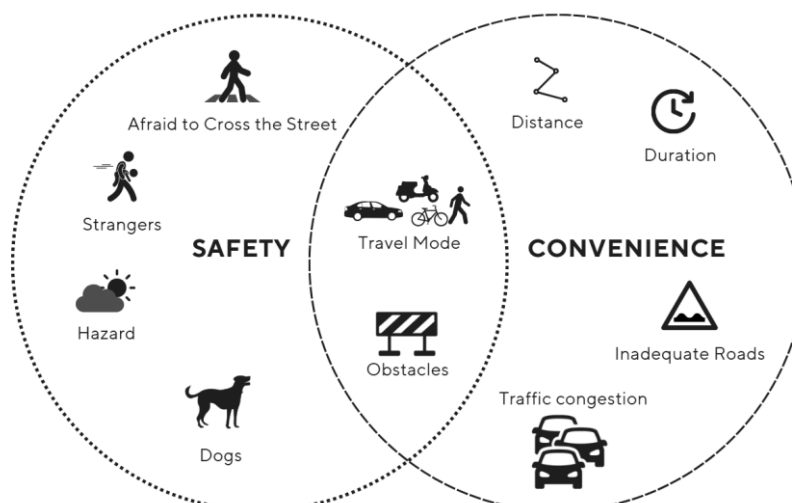


Figure 8. Thematic Analysis of Safety and Convenience Issues in Cambodian Children's School Commutes (Developed by the author).

Key issues children face on their school journeys in Phnom Penh, categorized into two overlapping themes: safety and convenience. On the safety side, children expressed fear of crossing the street, encounters with strangers, physical hazards, and aggressive dogs, factors that make them feel constantly vulnerable. These are not just physical dangers but are deeply tied to emotional stress. On the convenience side, long distances, extended travel durations, inadequate road conditions, and traffic congestion make daily commutes tiring and unpredictable. In between these two themes, shared concerns like the mode of transport and physical obstacles reflect how safety and convenience often intersect. For example, walking or biking on narrow, broken roads without sidewalks poses both danger and discomfort. This thematic breakdown reinforces how urban neglect affects not just infrastructure but children's sense of well-being.

Table 2. Summary of Issues in Cambodian Children's School Commutes (Developed by the author).

Issues	
 Long Commutes	Long distances to schools, especially for low-income communities
 Traffic Congestion	Dense urban traffic creates barriers to safe and timely travel
 Unsafe Infrastructure	Poor road quality, encroached sidewalks, lack of pedestrian space
 Lack of Child-Safe Design	Limited urban planning for children's needs
 Poverty & Education	Child labor, dropout due to informal fees, and inaccessible quality schooling
 Psychosocial Fear	Fear of strangers, mental health-related threats, and stray dogs
 Urban Planning Engagement	Children's urban needs are often neglected in planning
 Child Labor & Dropout	Widespread, poverty-driven, informal school fees, children entering informal jobs

This study highlights several shared urban challenges, including the lack of child-responsive design in urban environments and unsafe urban mobility that negatively affects school access and attendance. Educational disparities are further driven by factors such as poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and weak urban planning. These issues underline the urgent need for integrated solutions across urban design, policy, and infrastructure to ensure equitable access to education for all children.

Affirming and Extending the Literature

The literature, including reports from UNICEF (2018, 2023) and the World Bank (2020), consistently highlights poverty, infrastructure gaps, and poor accessibility as key barriers to education for low-income urban children. These are primarily framed as external and physical limitations, such as long travel distances, lack of sidewalks, or school fees, which undeniably remain important. However, these factors tend to overlook how children emotionally experience

their environments. The literature emphasizes access, but not how fear, anxiety, or trauma may prevent children from using that access even when it's technically available.

This research challenges that limited framing. If the literature sees low-income status as the main contributor to exclusion, the findings here suggest something deeper: emotional safety is not just secondary, it is central. The children's voices reveal that psychological perceived fear, the fear of being kidnapped, attacked, or simply walking alone, can be a more significant barrier than physical distance or road condition. This insight is transformative. If emotional insecurity is what shapes children's mobility and willingness to attend school, then urban planning must treat emotional safety as a core design and policy priority, not an afterthought.

Therefore, physical and emotional safety should not be separated; they are intertwined in children's everyday decision-making. By being on the ground and listening to children directly, this study reveals how essential it is to recognize the perception of danger, not just physical hazards. These feelings often go unmeasured and unplanned for in official documents or city policies. Yet, they profoundly affect whether a child feels empowered to walk to school or is too afraid to leave home. Future research and urban interventions must explore this gap more deeply, converting emotional insights into tangible planning outcomes that prioritize children's well-being in both body and mind.

New Insights Beyond Existing Literature

One of the most important findings that came up during the fieldwork was how much fear shaped the way children move through their cities.

In Cambodia, kids talked a lot about stray dogs, being followed by strangers, and even running into people under the influence of drugs or alcohol. These are not always seen as 'urban planning' issues, but they have a huge impact on how safe children feel about going to school, something that is not well captured in existing frameworks like the Child Protection and Education Needs for the Children and Adolescents of Phnom Penh's Urban Poor Communities (UNICEF, 2018).

These findings suggest a crucial gap in the current child-rights-based urban research, which often overlooks the intersections of safety, trauma, and social neglect in shaping educational access.

Recommendations for Future Research and Action

Listen to children more: Their stories and drawings tell us what the data does or could not. How we address their fears should be part of how we design cities.

Include emotional safety in planning: Fear of kidnapping or drug use in public is just as real as traffic danger. These need to be discussed in urban policies.

Create safer school routes: That includes better lighting, protected sidewalks, and speed limits, but also community safety.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research explored how spatial, urban, and even psychological factors shape access to education in low-income communities in Cambodia, and how thoughtful urban design can help reduce these inequalities. The findings show that the physical environment, ranging from long and unsafe commutes to poor road infrastructure, as well as emotional aspects such as fear of hazards or kidnapping, can have a strong influence on whether children can attend school and feel safe doing so.

The country share challenges related to poor planning, limited safety measures, and a lack of inclusive urban design. These conditions not only restrict children's access to education but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and social inequality. Addressing these disparities requires integrated urban interventions focused on child-friendly infrastructure, improved safety, and inclusive public policies. This aligns with UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI), which supports local governments in realizing the rights of every child, especially the most excluded, by creating safe, inclusive, and sustainable urban environments. According to the CFCI framework, child-friendly cities are built through child-responsive spatial planning, inclusive social services, and policies informed by disaggregated local data. The initiative also emphasizes that children must have a say in decisions affecting their lives and that governance must ensure their survival, development, and participation.

By embedding these principles into urban planning, service delivery, and community design, local governments can move toward inclusive cities where even the most marginalized children are seen, heard, and protected. For Phnom Penh and other growing Southeast Asian urban areas, the path forward must involve not only building physical infrastructure but also cultivating environments where every child can move freely, learn safely, and grow with confidence. This research highlights the urgent need to bridge the gap between infrastructure and emotional security and to ensure that children's lived experiences shape the future of urban design and educational equity.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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