

# IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN RURAL BANGLADESH

Only 40 per cent of children in Bangladesh are enrolled in pre-primary education, with this figure estimated to be much lower in rural areas. Research led by Monash University, Australia, and supported by local partner the Global Development and Research Initiative (GDRI) Foundation, has evaluated whether introducing pre-schooling in remote rural communities in Bangladesh can help prepare children for primary school. By developing a set of policy interventions designed to improve children’s educational outcomes, the research demonstrates how early childhood programmes could be effectively adapted for implementation at scale, using locally available resources and infrastructure.

## THE CHALLENGE

Over the last decade, Bangladesh has made significant progress in expanding access to education, achieving near-universal primary school enrolment. However, more than half the children who complete primary education are unable to read, write or count to the expected level.

Although evidence has shown that early childhood education can improve school readiness by supporting children’s language, literacy and numeracy skills, there is a notable lack of research on the impacts of investing in

low-cost early childhood and parenting programmes in low-income and lower-middle-income countries.

In Bangladesh, many parents, particularly those from rural areas, are unable either to send their child to pre-school or to support his/her development adequately at home. Innovative research from the ESRC-DFID study '[Investing in our future: the early childhood intervention and parental involvement in Bangladesh](#)' is making a valuable contribution to our understanding of low-cost pre-schooling in remote rural areas.



Photo: A young girl reads with her Early Primary Education (EPE) teacher in Bangladesh. Credit: GMB Akash/Panos Pictures.

## THE RESEARCH

By combining elements from existing early childhood programmes, the researchers designed two low-cost interventions aimed at improving the school readiness of children in remote rural communities in Bangladesh.

The first intervention was a formal pre-school programme that provided early education to children for five days a week. Children were taught in groups of 15 by specially trained, locally recruited staff. The curriculum focused on developing cognitive, social and emotional abilities by developing language, basic numeracy, creativity, and problem-solving skills. The second intervention comprised a weekly home visit by teachers to caregivers to help enhance the learning environment within the home. These visits reflected the curriculum provided in the formal pre-school setting. Through the home visits, it was hoped that parents' attitudes and behaviour towards the development of their children, and their knowledge about it, would be optimised.

With the support of the GDRI Foundation, the interventions were carried out in 223 randomly selected rural villages in two districts (Khulna and Satkhira). Over two years, 7,000 children were assessed at the beginning of the programme, after one year, and at the end. As well as analysing the two separate interventions, the team also assessed the effectiveness of combining the pre-school programme with the home visits.

The results shed light on the how effective traditional, formal pre-school settings were compared with a programme which nurtured at-home development. The evidence showed that although the home visits yielded positive results in the short-term, particularly regarding children's reading and verbal communication, traditional pre-school settings were associated with higher cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, including literacy, numeracy, gross and fine motor skills, communication and problem-solving skills. Pre-schools were also more cost-effective.

According to survey results, parents felt more satisfied when their children were in nursery, and the findings indicated that children benefited from interaction with other children. One parent remarked:



[In the nursery], my child learns new things every day – how to talk, queue up and respect others. At home, we can't teach these things.

The research has made an important contribution to the understanding of low-cost pre-school education in remote rural areas, by demonstrating that interventions that involve helping parents support

their children's learning cannot replace the traditional nursery-like set-up of a formal programme.

## THE IMPACT

In Bangladesh, the research team established a national advisory committee consisting of early childhood experts, NGOs, government representatives and local researchers, to discuss how early childhood programmes can be effectively adapted for implementation at-scale in poor, rural areas.

One mother reported on the impact of the early years' provision:



Parent-teacher meetings in the early years nursery school were very helpful. We got to know a lot about our child. We have never seen this kind of early years' initiative.

Drawing on the tools they used to assess the cognitive and non-cognitive abilities of children, the research team are collaborating with BRAC to help traumatised Rohingya child refugees, to evaluate a play-based early childhood development programme. The team has provided support for curriculum development and helped build capacity by training Bangladeshi planners and researchers in the area of early childhood development, and enhancing their skills in the research methodology and analytical techniques of Random Control Trials used in the original research. As a result of this collaboration, the team are also working with BRAC international in Uganda and Tanzania on pre-school interventions a using play-based curriculum.

Looking ahead, the team plan to conduct a follow-up study on the medium to longer-term effects of such interventions by assessing the children to understand what happens to them in primary school and whether the benefits (such as reading and writing ability) last longer than similar skills acquired by children who didn't access any form of pre-schooling.

## FURTHER READING

[Bangladeshi Sangbad Sangstha \(2019\) 'Workshop on early childhood intervention held', \(3 December\) \(accessed July 2020\)](#)



### Investing in our future: the early childhood intervention and parental involvement in Bangladesh

The research team was funded by the ESRC-DFID Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme led by Asadul Islam, Monash University, Australia. The research was carried out in partnership with John List (University of Chicago), Anya Samek (University of Southern California), Steven Stillman (Free University of Bozen-Bolzano), Ummul Ruthbah (University of Dhaka), the Global Development and Research Initiative (GDRI) and BRAC.

## THE IMPACT INITIATIVE

### For International Development Research

The Impact Initiative seeks to connect policymakers and practitioners with the world-class social science research supported by the ESRC-DFID Strategic Partnership, maximising the uptake and impact of research from: (i) the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research, and (ii) the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme. We seek to identify synergies between these programmes and their grant holders, support them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities, and facilitate mutual learning. The Impact Initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the University of Cambridge's Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre.

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### CREDITS

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