

Getting ready for school in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: A comparative analysis of mother-tongue- and national-language-based preschools in Adivasi communities

Ms. Elizabeth Pearce (Save the Children), Ms. Gowri Vijayakumar (University of California at Berkeley, U.S.A.) and Ms. Meherun Nahar (Save the Children)

Introduction

A total of 1664 Adivasi (indigenous) children in 100 pre-primary centres in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts are taking part in the Shishur Khamatayan Project (SKP), in which they are provided with activity-based learning in their mother tongues.

The project is implemented by Save the Children and Zabarang Kalyan Samity (ZKS). The curriculum was developed collaboratively with community members who chose the scripts to be used in the preschools (Chakma script in Chakma preschools, Marma script in Marma preschools, and Roman script in Tripura preschools) and who developed learning materials based on local stories and illustrated by local artists.

Preschools are divided into K1 centres, for 4-year-olds, and K2 centres, for 5-year-olds about to enter primary school. The two-year K1-K2 sequence begins completely in mother tongue (MT), using mother tongue script, and introduces oral Bangla (the national language) in the final six months as a transition (or "bridge") to primary school.

Between June and July 2010, Save the Children conducted a school readiness analysis of SKP children in comparison with children from mainstream Bangla-medium preschools in 3 sub-districts in Khagrachari district. The aim of the analysis was to identify strengths and weaknesses of the use of mother tongue (Chakma and Tripura) in preschool classrooms, both in terms of child-level learning outcomes and learning environment.

SKP preschools were compared to Bangla-medium preschools run by two different implementing organisations. These preschools have roughly similar curricula to SKP preschools; the main difference is that SKP preschools incorporate the mother tongue more fundamentally into the curriculum, including mother tongue script and local stories. In comparison preschools, mother tongue is used only to facilitate Bangla learning.

The design of the analysis consisted of three components; a) One-on-one assessment of children b) Classroom observation to evaluate learning environment and teacher-student interaction c) Focus group discussions with parents to document their attitudes toward language, preschool, and primary education.

The SKP children and comparison children all came from similar communities. However, because SKP preschools tend to be located in more remote areas, socioeconomic status (SES) in SKP preschools was significantly lower than in comparison preschools. In addition, SKP children were significantly younger than comparison children. Teachers in SKP preschools had significantly fewer years of experience than children in non-SKP preschools, possibly because SKP is a newer programme.

Conclusions

Despite various limitations (see complete paper for detailed findings), the study shows that SKP's mother tongue-based preschools do offer children a significant advantage. SKP children have better quantitative, communicative, and environmental skills than their peers. On average, children learning in a MT setting outperformed their non-MT peers by 10 percentage points on a general school readiness assessment and 5 percentage points on an assessment of concepts about print.

Within the school readiness assessment, SKP children outperformed their peers in every competency area except writing. The largest difference between MT and non-MT children was in the competency area of communication, language and literacy, in which MT children scored 26 percentage points higher than non-MT children on average.

In addition to the better skills that children in a MT preschool environment develop, they develop these skills in an environment that involves more child engagement and participation and more integration of local culture. Classroom observation data show a higher level of child engagement in MT classrooms and a generally more friendly and participatory learning environment.

The areas in which MT children did not outperform their non-MT peers were in letter recognition, on which they scored, on average, 11 percentage points lower, and in writing and fine motor skills, where scores were essentially indistinguishable. These shortcomings raise some questions about MT graduates' long-term success (given that children will enter the Bangla-language primary education system) and a need to factor this into programme approaches (possibly either seek to include more mother tongue in the primary system, or strengthen the bridging process in pre-primary).

For twenty detailed programme, curriculum, policy, and research recommendations arising from the study, please see the main paper.

Discussion and comments

On recruitment of teachers: When recruiting local teachers, is there a problem of compromising on quality if recruitment is only carried out from within the immediate community? Save the Children (SC) answered that in Bangladesh, teacher recruitment is carried out by local district central management committees who know the community and know who is available. They are the ones who must judge how the school is doing and how teachers are doing.

Progression and loss: A delegate wondered what happens after children move from learning in their local languages to national languages? Is anyone keeping track? In terms of the Chakma language, (Bangladesh) children did not get exposure to their own script, so what happens then? Many local languages have a rich oral legacy that also relates to biodiversity in their areas, the delegate added. SC answered that it is advocating with local and higher government departments on how children can retain Chakma and other languages in primary school; in particular, it is advocating that children can continue in their own languages until Grade 5. This advocacy has had some results with government but any plans for implementation are still at the very early stages and unknown.

MLE only for the poor? A delegate said that rich and powerful parents do not tend to send their children into MLE education. What is being done about this? SC answered that the challenges in this arena are overwhelmingly for children who are not from rich or powerful backgrounds. It is sad that rich children are losing their mother tongues; it is a real loss, but those families have a choice while poor children do not. There was further discussion on whether the fact that it is the powerful who have the power to influence MLE policy meant that advocacy efforts should be more integrated and widened so as not to focus only on the marginalised.

Cultural losses: In Bangladesh if one wants the words for many rich aspects of culture and biodiversity, one has to go back to the indigenous languages. If the state doesn't take note of this, much of this rich heritage will be lost.