



INDONESIA: Can Community Preschools Improve Poor Children's Development?

Early childhood education is recognized as important for children's development, especially for those from poor or otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. Increasingly, gov-

ernments and development groups are grappling with how to create cost-effective services that provide the stimulation and support children need for healthy brain development and growth. One problem is ensuring that poor children have the same access to early childhood services as those

from families who are relatively better off. Most evidence of successful early childhood programs focuses on comprehensive programs that involve a combination of home visits and preschools. In communities that have few resources, can increasing access to preschools lead to improvements in enrollment and children's development, especially among the poor?

The World Bank and the international development community have made early childhood development programs a central part of plans to help improve people's lives. Knowing what makes a successful program is key to getting services to those who need them. In Indonesia, researchers evaluated a project to expand access to early childhood services in the country's poorest areas by giving communities grants for preschools and providing teacher training and facilitators to encourage use of services. The evaluation found that this project boosted enrollment and children's development, especially for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. **Now, with support from the Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund, the research team is going back to see whether the early childhood services created with the project's support are still functioning and how they are sustaining themselves given that project support has ended. As the Government of Indonesia considers expanding compulsory education to include pre-primary school, the results can provide important evidence for how to do this.**



Photo by Amer Hasan

EDUCATION

Context

Indonesia offers a variety of early childhood education services. Playgroups, for example, target children ages three to four; kindergartens are aimed at children ages five and six. Primary school, which is compulsory and free, starts at age seven. While enrollment in primary school is universal in Indonesia, access to preschool has long been unequal. Preschools often charge a fee and the children who attend are usually from wealthier families. For instance in 2007, children between the ages of four and six from the wealthiest households had a 33 percent chance of being enrolled in an early childhood ser-

vice, compared with an eight percent chance for those from the poorest households.

The Government of Indonesia has been taking active steps to redress this imbalance. Working with the World Bank and the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, it developed a project to expand access to early childhood services in rural areas. The project, launched in 2009, provided selected poor, rural communities with resources they could use to either create new early childhood programs or improve existing ones. Communities received facilitators to raise awareness

of the importance of early childhood education, training for teachers and three-year grants for early childhood services.

The grants could be used to provide services for children from birth up to the age of six, including paying for teachers, and most villages set up playgroups for children ages three

to six. While 21 percent of communities used the grant to strengthen existing services, 79 percent of communities used the grant to start new services. The government envisioned that after the project closed, district governments would continue to support these services.

Evaluation

The project was implemented in 50 of the country's 422 districts. These districts were picked based on a ranking that incorporated, among other things, poverty rates and low levels of enrollment in early childhood programs. In each district, 60 villages were picked based on their poverty rates, the number of young children, and the village's willingness to contribute financially to the project. In total, the project was introduced in 3,000 villages, or some four percent of the country's 69,000 villages.

The researchers used the planned roll-out of the project to design an impact evaluation that would allow the effect of the project on children's learning and development to be measured. Using a public lottery, villages were randomly assigned to receive the project in 2009 and 2010 for the purposes of the impact evaluation. In total 218 villages were assigned to receive the project and be tracked for the impact evaluation. The team also collected data on a comparison group of villages, which never received any services under the project. This group consisted of 92 villages. Data were collected in 2009, 2010

and 2013. This note focuses on the results from comparing villages that received the project to those that didn't.

The researchers looked at two groups of children. One group was four years old when the project was launched in the villages. They were immediately eligible to enroll in the playgroups established by the project. Children in the second group were a year old when the project was launched. They became eligible to enroll in playgroups two to three years after the project had been started. (It was decided to include one year olds in the surveys because it was expected that some villages would create new services for young children; in fact, almost all villages focused on playgroups for ages three and older.) By the second round of data collection, the children who had been four when the project was launched were generally old enough to move to a kindergarten. By the third round of data collection, these children were all in primary school. In contrast, the children who were one year olds when the project started were old enough to enroll in playgroups by the time of the third round of data collection.

Results

Children in villages that received support through the project were more likely to be enrolled in an early childhood program and were enrolled for longer than children from villages that didn't receive the project's support.

Enrollment in any kind of early childhood service was 22.2 percentage points higher among children who were one year olds when the project was launched, compared with one year olds in villages that didn't get the project. Children who were four years old when the project started had a 7.5 percentage point increase in their use of early

childhood services, compared with similarly-aged children in villages that didn't get the extra support.

Children in villages that received the project were not only more likely to be in an early childhood program, but they went for longer periods of time. Those who were one when the project started spent an extra six months in early childhood programs and those who were four years old when it started spent one month more than children in villages that didn't get the project.

Children in villages that received support for early childhood services showed improvements in cognitive and socio-emotional skills.

Children who were four years old when the project was launched showed higher emotional maturity when compared with those in villages that didn't get the project. For the children who were one when the project was launched, the evidence suggests that the project led to improved physical health and wellbeing, and language and cognitive development.

When the project was launched, the poorer children in the communities used the services as much as children from families that weren't as poor...

Everyone in these villages was poor, but it was possible to separate families into less poor and more poor. Both groups were as likely to be enrolled in preschool services.

...but the more disadvantaged children benefited more from these services than less disadvantaged children.

One year after the project was launched, poorer children in these villages who were age four at baseline were doing better on measures of language and cognitive development and social competence when compared with similarly poor children in villages that didn't receive the project. Children in villages where the project was carried out also exhibited fewer behavioral problems. At the end of the project, these children were still performing better on these measures of development. The same distinction wasn't seen among children from families that were less poor (relatively speak-

ing). In fact, children from less poor families scored worse on measures of social competence and language and cognitive development than similar children in villages that didn't receive the project.

The research team hypothesizes that this is because when the new playgroups were started, they didn't charge fees. As a result, families that might otherwise have sent



their five and six year olds to kindergarten—which generally does charge a fee—may have kept them in the playgroups set up through the project. For children from the less poor families, not going to kindergarten at the right age meant they missed on the age-appropriate stimulation they'd otherwise have received. This affected their development. For children from the poorest families, being in playgroups helped make up for other disadvantages.

These results are confirmed when being disadvantaged is defined differently. The researchers looked at the cognitive and other development outcomes of children whose parents reported lower parenting skills and children who had never been to a preschool before the project started.

There were also gains for children whose parents had below average scores on measures of parenting skills. These children also did better in language and cognitive development, and social competence after just one year of the project being up and running, when compared to children from similar families in villages that didn't receive the project. These children also had less problems with their peers. Three years later, when these children were about eight

years old, they were still scoring higher on these measures of development.

Children who hadn't been enrolled in any early childhood program before these playgroups were established scored better in the first year on language and cognitive development, and social competence. Three years later, they were doing better in terms of physical health and emotional maturity.

When the project ended in 2013, almost all of the playgroups that had been established were still functioning, but many had started to charge fees and the children who now enrolled tended to be less poor than before.

When the project was launched, the majority of the project playgroups didn't charge any fees. Those that did only charged a minimal amount. By 2013, more than two-thirds of these playgroups had begun to charge fees. The fees were still less than what was charged by comparable early childhood education services in villages that never received the project, but they weren't as low as had been at the start. As a result, the type of children enrolled changed, with more children from less poor families enrolling than children from the poorest families.

Fifty percent of mothers had no more than a primary school education, and sometimes less.

Conclusion

The Government of Indonesia is currently considering policies to expand compulsory education to include preschool education. Quantifying the impact of increasing access to preschool services on children's school readiness and later educational performance, in low-resource settings in particular, will aid the government in making an informed decision.

Was this project a worthwhile investment? Comparable interventions range in cost from US\$37 per child a year in India to US\$289 in Colombia. The project in Indonesia, on the other hand, cost approximately US\$30 per child

(all amounts in 2014 dollars). Under the most conservative assumptions, estimates suggest that every dollar spent will generate 1.3 dollars in benefits. Less conservative assumptions would suggest that the benefit could be as high as 4.3 dollars for every dollar spent. While this is an underestimate that only considers private returns to individuals and does not account for social returns, it does suggest that the project was a worthwhile investment and that community preschools that are given support can help improve poor children's development.

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