



AGA KHAN FOUNDATION

The Impact of Investing in Early Childhood Development in Afghanistan

A Case Study by the Aga Khan Foundation



AN AGENCY OF THE AGA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

Worldwide 200 million children under the age of 5 are not reaching their developmental potential due to poverty, poor health and nutrition, and lack of stimulation and learning opportunities. Nowhere is this more true than in Afghanistan where children face multiple challenges to their development and only 1 percent of children aged 3-6 years old are attending pre-school.



ABOVE (top to bottom): Children use locally resourced materials to support basic numeracy acquisition.

A home-based ECD centre, run by a 15-year old boy (back right), who had been the first child from his village to attend school.

OPPOSITE: Children engage in child-centered interactive art classes at Dashti Esa Khan ECD class to promote creativity and enthusiasm for learning.

Why Early Childhood Development?

Young children's earliest years lay critical foundations for a person's entire life. ECD efforts strive to improve the contexts in which children are growing up so that these are supportive of children's overall development - physical, social, emotional and cognitive

The Aga Khan Foundation and its sister agency, Aga Khan Education Services, in partnership with the Afghanistan Government and Dubai Cares, have supported the provision of quality community-based pre-schooling in northern Afghanistan. Our programming is holistic in nature – collaborating with parents, community members and teachers to provide critical support for ensuring every child has a successful start to life.

Since 2009, this programme enabled nearly 8,000 young girls and boys each year to attend pre-primary education and transition into Grade 1 at some 700 government and community-based primary schools supported by AKF.

The Study

In order to better understand the impact of our programming in early childhood education, the Aga Khan Foundation partnered with Dr. Frances Aboud from McGill University in Canada. As a leading educational psychologist in her field, Dr. Aboud conducted an independent, evaluative study about the impact of ECD on students' levels of school readiness and learning in Bamyan and Baghlan provinces at the end of 2014 –the first research of its kind in Afghanistan. The study's design comprised of three parts:

- The study compared school readiness scores of 188 children from 22 villages who had attended AKF-supported pre-schools against 176 children from 22 matched neighboring villages who had not attended an AKF-supported pre-school before entering Grade 1.
- The study compared academic achievement scores of 196 children who had attended AKF-supported pre-schools with 179 children who had not attended an AKF-supported pre-school at the end of Grade 1.
- The study interviewed 75 parents, teachers, school administrators, and community elders in Afghanistan to better understand the perceptual value of ECD programming in relationship to children's education, health, safety and well-being.

Key Findings

1) Children from AKF-supported pre-schools scored higher on a standardized school readiness test than children who did not attend pre-school. Children who had attended pre-school scored 78% on the 35-item school-readiness test, compared to 46% for children who had not attended pre-school. The difference between both groups of children was highly significant ($p < .0001$) with a very strong effect size of 1.82 (where 0.8 is generally considered large). See Table 1.

2) Children from AKF-supported pre-schools scored higher on Grade 1 curriculum-based tests that assessed their competencies in speaking, listening, reading, writing and mathematics than classmates who did not attend pre-school. The results showed a highly significant difference between the two groups ($p < .0001$). Pre-school attendance clearly continued to exert a strong effect (0.85) even after a year in the same classrooms with the same Grade 1 teachers. See Table 2.

3) Children from AKF-supported pre-schools are seen by their parents as more capable, caring communicators who know how to express themselves, ask interesting questions and be respectful to others.

4) Children attending AKF-supported pre-schools were considered by their parents as having more awareness about personal health and safety than children not attending pre-school.

5) Parents of children attending pre-school are more engaged in early learning activities with their children than parents of children not attending AKF-supported ECD programmes. Based on household-level self-reports, the study found that parents of children attending pre-school provided more child-friendly play materials, looked at books with their children more frequently, and encouraged their children to count more often than parents of similarly aged children who were not enrolled in AKF-supported pre-schools.



ECD children know how to express themselves and ask questions, they are less afraid of school.

Table 1

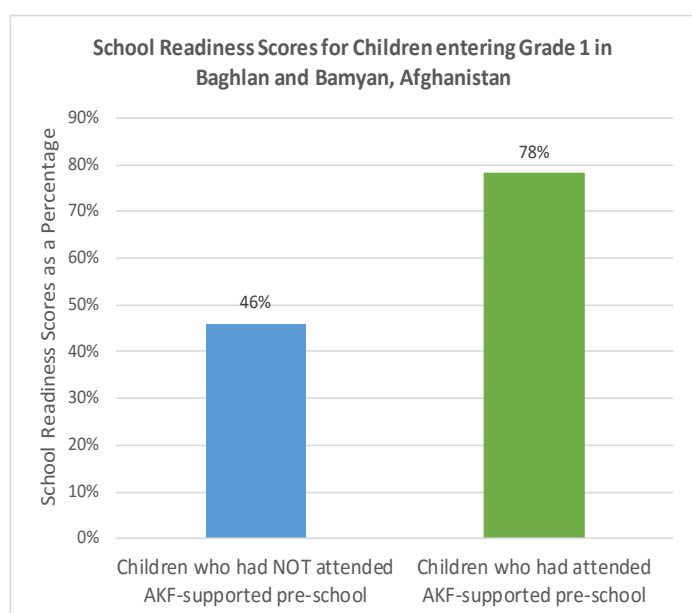
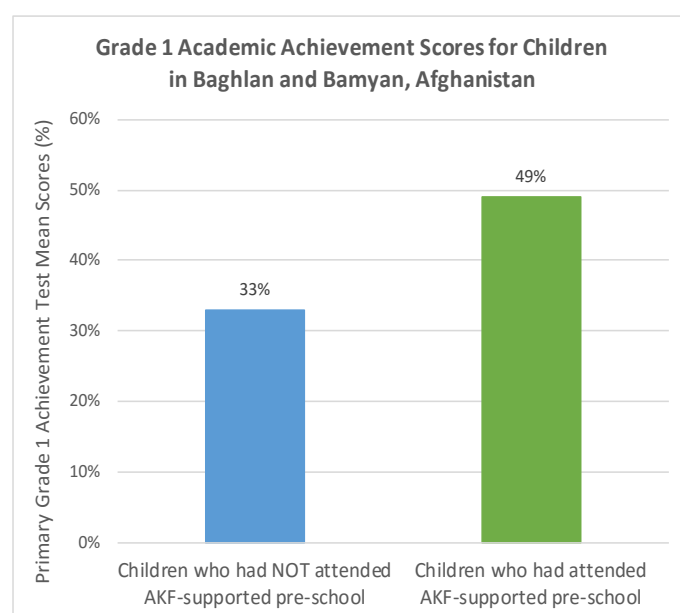


Table 2





Policy Influence

The study demonstrates the tremendous difference that low-cost community-based ECD programmes can make in children's lives, even in the most remote settings.

The findings have proved critical in demonstrating the value of pre-school support in policy-level discussions on the future of ECD in Afghanistan and throughout the world.

ECD is now rooted in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals with a universal target that states, "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education".

As positive as this is, care must continually be taken to ensure that policies, governments and curricula do not narrowly interpret this to push down Grade 1 content into pre-school. Care must also be taken to ensure continued understanding of the multiplicity of factors that influence the quality of life for young children and their families, especially within the context of Afghanistan.

Transitions

According to the 2016 State of the World's Children UNICEF Report, "In the next 15 years, the world's population of 15- to 24-year-olds will increase by nearly 100 million. Most of these young people will be in Asia and Africa. They will be the parents who raise tomorrow's children, the workers who keep the global economy going, the leaders who determine what kind of world we live in. Today, they are children".

The opportunity to build the foundation on which all children can enjoy a lifelong ladder of equitable and quality education must not be missed.

The Aga Khan Foundation remains committed to ensuring that children and young people are equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that help them interact effectively with the world while contributing to a pluralist society.

ABOVE (top to bottom): Children have increased access to community-based early grade education through locally supported learning centres, such as tents adapted for classroom use.

Girls and boys enjoy collaborative, team reading in a Dashti Esa Khan ECD classroom using contextually relevant, child-friendly, local reading materials.

The study demonstrates the tremendous difference that low-cost community-based ECD programmes can make in children's lives, even in the most remote settings.

COVER: Making significant improvements to children's development and school readiness in an early grade primary class.

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The Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) is part of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), a group of private development agencies working to empower communities and individuals, often in disadvantaged circumstances, to improve living conditions and opportunities, especially in Africa and Asia. Its agencies work in over 30 countries for the common good of all citizens, regardless of their gender, origin or religion. Its underlying impulse is the ethic of compassion for the vulnerable in society.

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