



PHOTO: ACTIVE LEARNING AT SDN WAJO, SOUTH SULAWESI—USAID PRIORITAS PROJECT

## ALL CHILDREN READING – ASIA

### EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

# Approaches to Teaching and Learning

The quality of instruction in the classroom is key to children's learning and development

#### GUIDED PLAY

There are several different pedagogical approaches used within early childhood education (ECE) classrooms in Asia, with the majority of the evidence base describing a balance of guided play and teacher-directed instruction. This balance occurs when teachers both directly introduce new skills and concepts and guide children's exploration of these new skills through a play-based activity.

#### RESEARCH

- In their 2016 Bangladesh qualitative study, Chowdhury and Rivalland looked at four pre-primary classrooms in semi-rural Bangladesh, checking into teacher perspectives on the role of play within the classroom. Much of what they described was guided play, where experiences were introduced and set up by the teacher to teach a particular skill/concept.
- A United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) program in India for children from 6 months to 14 years old also focused on guided play. Within this program, learners were encouraged to play and experiment, and the teacher became a facilitator creating an informal atmosphere that promoted learning (UNESCO, 2016).

#### RECOMMENDATION

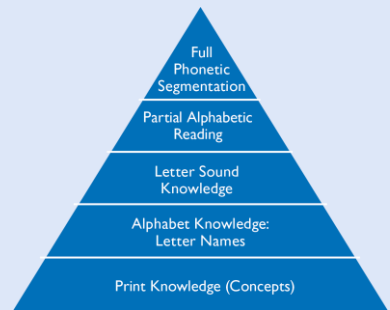
The evidence for instructional approaches in ECE programs in the Asia region points to a balance of teacher-directed instruction for the introduction of new skills/concepts, and guided play for exploration of these skills and concepts. Future programming or interventions should consider ways to encourage this balanced approach in classrooms.

## EMERGENT LITERACY

Emergent literacy is the first stage of reading development, with several components, seen in the figure in the box below. Two common forms of emergent literacy instruction found in Asia were dialogic reading, a form of shared storybook reading wherein the teacher engages children in a verbal conversation about what happened in the story, and oral language development, the skills and knowledge that go into listening and speaking.

### RESEARCH

- In two interventions in Bangladesh, (Opel, Ameer, & Aboud, 2006; Opel, Ameer, & Aboud, 2009), teachers were given five to eight sample *wh*- questions (i.e., who, when, why, where, how) for each book to help guide their conversations with children following a story reading. Results showed that the expressive language of children in the intervention group rose from 26% to 54%, with the expressive language of the control group staying the same.
- A study in rural India found that much of literacy instruction focused on oral language, while print did not play a large role in classroom instruction. Teachers focused on rhymes, songs, oral stories, and conversation. One class also visited the school library regularly, where the librarian read to students and allowed them to look at books (Gokhale, 2009).



### RECOMMENDATION

Interventions should include a focus on emergent literacy, emphasizing oral language learning and dialogic reading strategies. Interventions incorporating support for teachers to engage in higher-order questions and conversation around stories were effective, as were methodologies that focused on engaging students in activities around books.

## EARLY MATHEMATICS

In the early years, children learn foundational mathematics concepts through everyday experiences. When children first enter the pre-primary classroom, they continue building their understanding of foundational concepts through activities and games with concrete objects. Much of the evidence from the Asian region focused on using materials and hands-on activities to teach math, with an emphasis on counting, addition, and shapes.

### RESEARCH

- In rural Bangladesh, researchers developed a math curriculum with specific activities, such as adding numbers up to 10, and math bags (with items such as buttons) provided to each student. At the end of the six-week program, researchers found that children who experienced the math activities made significantly greater gains in math skills than those in the regular program (Opel et al., 2012).
- A study in India found that teachers reported teaching math three to four times a week for 30–40 minutes per day. Most teachers reported teaching children to count using, primarily, their fingers, as well as familiar objects such as beads, math sticks, and pictures (Guha, 2006).
- An early math game-based curriculum was piloted within preschools in a high-poverty area of Delhi, India (Dillon et al., 2017). Children played five games that focused on numeric and geometric skills for four months, after which researchers found a marked improvement in the children's symbolic

math skills compared to the control group. However, by the middle of the first year of primary school, these gains had disappeared.

**RECOMMENDATION** Interventions should include a focus on emergent mathematics. Many studies found success with providing materials to students to create guided play opportunities in areas such as counting and spatial awareness.

## LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

Studies show that the best time to use a child’s mother tongue is when they first enter school (Espada, 2012). Although many countries have not yet developed mother tongue programs in pre-primary and primary schools, some smaller initiatives are beginning to take place in several Asian countries.

- In Bangladesh, BRAC has developed an education for indigenous children program, comprised only of ethnic minority children (Jacob, 2016). Teachers are recruited from the community and undergo a 15-day training on teaching methods and classroom management.
- In the Philippines, the USAID-funded Basa Pilipinas project provided schools with 1.4 million books in mother tongues, including Big Books for kindergarten (USAID, 2018) and created a default learner’s material document for kindergarten, adaptable to mother tongues used across the country.
- In Cambodia, a study looked at community mother tongue schools, often locally developed and led (Benson, 2011). These schools often teach in both Khmer and mother tongue and have a print-rich environment; bilingual labels around the room identify objects in both languages.

## RESEARCH

- Code switching, where the teacher alternates between two or more languages (Office of Head Start, 2018)
- Explicit and systematic instruction on vocabulary (Espinosa & Magruder, 2015)
- Written text paired with visuals (pictures, drawings, etc.), which can promote understanding as well as pre-reading skills (Espinosa & Magruder, 2015)
- A language-rich environment, including opportunities for second-language learners to converse with adults and peers and exposure to rich language through teacher talk or book reading (Ford, 2010)

**RECOMMENDATION** Although there is ample evidence that young children should be taught in their mother tongue, there is not much research from the Asia region specifically in ECE (Piper et al., 2018). Teaching in the mother tongue is often not possible due to constraints on teacher knowledge and lack of materials; in these cases, second-language learning strategies such as vocabulary development, visual learning, and code switching should be emphasized.

## ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There was little evidence of the role of socio-emotional learning (SEL) in early childhood classrooms from the Asia region, despite evidence globally of its importance. SEL is highly contextual; more studies should investigate best practices in SEL teaching and learning.
2. Much of the evidence on teaching and learning approaches comes from Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. More publicly available evidence is needed from other contexts.

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