



AGA KHAN FOUNDATION

Improving Reading Achievement in the Kyrgyz Republic



AN AGENCY OF THE AGA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, access to early learning opportunities for children 4 to 6 years in the Kyrgyz Republic plummeted. By 2006, only 6 percent of eligible children were enrolled in kindergarten nationwide. The only option at the time was the conventional model of full-time day care which catered mainly to wealthy families. While primary school enrolment remained high, student achievement in early and higher grades stagnated due to under-investment. As a result of the closure or neglect of many Soviet-era village libraries, families in rural communities had very limited access to children's books written in Kyrgyz and other local languages.

The Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP) is a local entity of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), seeking to improve the quality of life of people in the Kyrgyz Republic's Osh and Naryn provinces. Since 2005, it has sought to address these challenges through innovative early childhood programmes, in partnership with local communities and government authorities. These programmes include "Reading for Children", an initiative to rekindle a love of books and reading amongst children and their families.

This brief provides an overview of MSDSP's early childhood programmes, and a summary of the findings and recommendations of a 2013 study, which sought to assess the impact of these interventions on children's reading abilities. The findings showed that children who had attended kindergarten and participated in Reading for Children demonstrated the highest reading achievement.

How the programme works

MSDSP's pre-school education support involves assisting communities and local government authorities to establish alternative high-quality pre-school provision at costs which are affordable for both government and families. MSDSP assists with the renovation of pre-school facilities in central and "satellite" kindergartens. Satellite kindergartens are smaller, based in community spaces or people's homes in remoter villages, and each receives support from a central kindergarten. MSDSP also organises professional development for teachers, and mobilises local government and community financial support to sustain pre-school education.

Central and satellite kindergartens feature a shift model whereby children attend kindergarten for half the day, thereby doubling the numbers that can be served in a particular kindergarten. The total number of instructional hours, however, equates to what is provided in the traditional full-day model. Children participate in these kindergartens for two or three years. As many children move with their families to the mountain pasture ("jailoo") during the summer months, children's learning continues in jailoo kindergartens. To date, around 160 pre-schools have been supported, benefitting annually over 15,000 4-6 year olds (51 percent girls). As a result of these initiatives, the pre-school gross enrolment ratio (GER) has increased significantly in the programme areas. For example, in Chong Alai, it increased from 7 percent in 2005 to 59 percent in 2015.

In recent years, with support from the Global Partnership for Education, the Kyrgyz Government has introduced school preparation programmes – 100 hours (3 months), 240 hours (6 months) and 480 hours (9 months). These programmes have a focus on school readiness and target those children not enrolled in a kindergarten (neither shift nor full-day model).

Reading for Children complements MSDSP's pre-school education support programme by focusing on the critical role of the home environment in children's development and school readiness. It aims to promote a culture of enjoyable, shared reading within families, and a love of books from an early age.

In response to the almost complete lack of developmentally appropriate illustrated books in the Kyrgyz language for young children, MSDSP has developed and published over 50 storybooks written in local languages. Many of these books have been procured by the Ministry of Education and are available nationwide in kindergartens, schools, and the 67 parent resource centres that MSDSP has established in schools, community libraries and other public spaces.

Each centre functions both as a library and as a hub for community activities promoting reading and storytelling. Activities include puppet shows, reading campaigns and workshops for parents and caregivers to improve their confidence and skills to enjoy books with their young children.

Building on such activities, a television series "Read Together" has been produced and broadcast nationally. It brings together children and their caregivers around stories and reading. Competitions based on the books seen in "Read Together" are being organised in schools and libraries outside as well as within programme areas. A local television station will replicate the series.



The Study

In this evolving context, MSDSP conducted a study to explore the reading outcomes associated with different kinds of early childhood experiences. The study sought to understand the extent to which the reading abilities of children in Grades 1, 2 and 4 are influenced by the type and length of early learning programme they attended and/or their exposure to engaging, age-appropriate books and activities to support reading at home.

Children's reading abilities were measured using the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), an internationally recognised test of pre-reading and reading skills, adapted for use in Kyrgyzstan. It covers knowledge of letters, syllables, reading and oral comprehension. In this study, the assessment – in the Kyrgyz language – also included writing skills, concepts about print and oral storytelling.

Primary schools in 12 villages (10 with programme support and 2 without) were included in the study. At each school, between 10 and 12 students were selected from Grades 1, 2 and 4, representing different combinations of early learning experience. In total, 429 students (222 boys, 207 girls) were assessed.

Findings

More time in high-quality kindergarten is linked to better reading results, particularly in Grades 1 and 2.

On average, children who had participated in any type of centre-based early learning programme performed slightly better than children who had not. Across the entire sample, children who had participated in a centre-based early learning programme scored 70 percent while those who had not scored 65 percent.¹ This finding is consistent with previous studies commissioned by AKF in the Kyrgyz Republic and internationally.

When the results were analysed by grade level, type, and duration of early learning programme, the high-quality, multi-year shift model supported by MSDSP was associated with better reading outcomes than the shorter school preparation programmes, particularly in Grades 1 and 2. In Grade 2, for example, children who attended a central kindergarten scored 75 percent on average, while those who had attended the 100-hour school preparation programme scored on average 58 percent.

This difference is highly significant both in statistical terms and for the trajectory of these children. It indicates that exposure to developmentally appropriate environments for significant lengths of time in children's early years leads to stronger reading performance in primary school.

Participation in the Reading for Children programme positively influences reading outcomes across all grades.

Children who reported visiting a parent resource centre demonstrated stronger reading abilities than those who did not. Across all grades these children scored on average 78 percent on the EGRA, while those who did not access a parent resource centre scored on average 66 percent. This is a highly significant difference statistically, reflecting the critical importance of enjoyable reading experiences at home in enhancing children's reading abilities.

The results also identified a strong relationship between participation in Reading for Children and students' creative and oral communication skills. On the EGRA task designed to assess students' creative skills (reconstructing a story from pictures), students who reported using a parent resource centre outscored those who did not by statistically significant margins in Grade 1 (48 percent vs 38 percent), Grade 2 (54 percent vs 46 percent) and Grade 4 (73 percent vs 60 percent).



ABOVE (top to bottom): Attending a quality kindergarten supported by MSDSP will help this little girl in Achakaiyndy Village, Naryn Oblast, to develop stronger reading skills in primary school

A father reads with his sons in Taldysuu, Alai Kenjylga Village, Osh Oblast: Reading for pleasure helps to develop children's language, literacy, critical thinking, communication, social and emotional skills. It also reinforces positive relationships within the family.

OPPOSITE (top to bottom): Students check out library books in Chakmak Village, Osh Oblast. Children who participate in the Reading for Children programme not only read better but demonstrate stronger oral communication skills than those who do not participate in the programme.

When AKF learned that many rural children were missing out on kindergarten during the annual migration to the "jailoo", or high pastures, for four to five months a year, it supported a programme to bring early childhood education to yurts (nomadic tents) in the mountains during the summer pasturage.

¹ For the purpose of this study, composite EGRA scores for each grade were created by converting the result of each subtask into a percentage, and aggregating the percentage. Each subtask was therefore weighted equally.



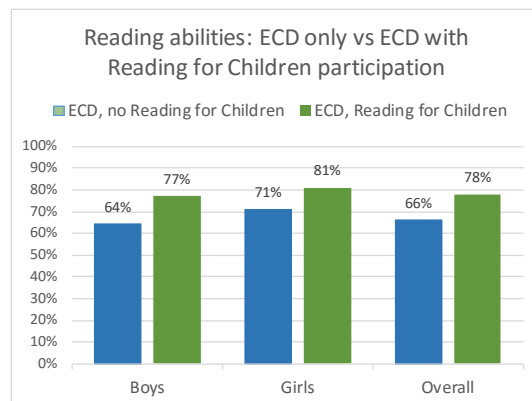
ABOVE (top to bottom): The central kindergarten in Taldysuu, Alai Kenjylga Village, Osh Oblast was renovated in 2005 and can accommodate 60 children; the community contributed a quarter of the costs. A teacher uses felt puppets made by parents and teachers to tell her students the story of “Komosh” (“Kolobok” in Russian). The more that young children enjoy learning through stories, the better readers they become.

Children playing tug of war during jailoo recreation. The jailoo kindergartens have been very popular, and have been replicated in other villages and summer pastures.

COVER: Teaching in Chakmak Village, Osh Oblast. MSDSP’s pre-school education support and Reading for Children programmes are making significant improvements to children’s development and school readiness.

Reading for Children also played a critical role in closing the gender gap on reading. Overall, girls performed better than boys on the EGRA (72 percent girls, 68 percent boys, all grades combined). However, when comparing boys who had benefited from Reading for Children activities, with girls who had not, the boys outperformed the girls.

It is not merely “library use” that can explain the improved reading outcomes. It is access to and use of age-appropriate books with colourful illustrations and written in local languages, combined with support to parents and caregivers to enjoy reading with their children, that yields this positive outcome.



Participation in a centre-based early learning programme and Reading for Children has a cumulative effect on reading outcomes.

Students from all grades who had attended a centre-based early learning programme and benefited from Reading for Children activities performed better on the EGRA assessment than students who had only attended an early learning programme (79 percent vs 66 percent).

This study demonstrates that both the pre-school and home environments influence children’s reading abilities. When both environments provide rich and enjoyable early learning opportunities, the result is improved child reading outcomes.

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on these positive results, MSDSP and AKF have recommended to their Kyrgyz government partners continued expansion of the centre-based early learning programmes, combined with replication of the Reading for Children model and its parental education components as widely as possible.

The Mountain Societies Development Support Programme in Kyrgyzstan (MSDSP KG) was initiated by the Aga Khan Foundation in 2003 with the goal of improving living conditions in mountain communities of the country.

Development partners: Ministry of Education; Global Partnership for Education (World Bank); Quality Reading Program (USAID); UNICEF; Critical Thinking and Writing Program; Republican Children Library; National Books Chamber; National Writers’ Union; National Library Rayon (district) education departments; Naryn and Osh Oblast Children’s Library; Rayon (district) central libraries; Public Television and Radio Corporation (PTRC, Balastan) for TV show “Read Together”; Ltd Multimedia/Turkish television and Radio; AVAZ for animation Adventure to the World of Books; AVISA Web Solutions for Mobile Application; International Foundation “Initiatives of R.Otunbaeva”

For further information: Aga Khan Foundation (Kyrgyz Republic), Address: 93/2, Shopkova Street, 720011 Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, Tel: +996 (312) 621912, E-mail: burulai.aitikulova@akdn.org, **Website:** http://www.akdn.org/kyrgyz_republic

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.

© AKDN, 2016. Information contained in this brief can be reproduced with acknowledgement to AKDN.
Photo credits: AKDN / Thomas Kelly, Jean-Luc Ray, Caroline Arnold

