ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND AGE IN GRADE IN BANGLADESH

CREATE BANGLADESH POLICY BRIEF 5

APRIL 2011

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND AGE IN GRADE IN BANGLADESH

This policy brief highlights findings from CREATE research in Bangladesh regarding age in grade. These reveal a huge problem with over age pupils in schools in Bangladesh affecting access and attainment. Many children enrol late and/or fail to progress though the grades. These problems are associated with poverty and poor health. This policy brief summarises CREATE Research from Bangladesh and suggests policy recommendations to help solve problems of age in grade incongruence. In is based on the CREATE Pathways to Access monograph: *Age in Grade Congruence and Progression in Basic Education in Bangladesh* (Hossain, A., 2010)

The problem with overage enrolment

In Bangladesh, the official age of entry at Grade 1 is 6, it is expected that children will be promoted to Grade 2 in the next year at the age of 7 and to the next year to Grade 3 at the age of 8 and so on. However, for various reasons this is not happening. There are two ways in which children become overage for their grade. One is through initial overage enrolment and the other is through repetition or retention in the same grade. Overage enrolment is a complex issue and involves people's perception of schooling, the age and size of the children and the problem is compounded by a lack of birth registration documents.

A lack of awareness of the importance of sending their children in school at the right age is important, the reasons for this stem from pervasive illiteracy and poverty. Health and nutrition play important roles in children's delayed enrolment and school performance. The consequences of late primary school enrolment are clear and studies show that a two-years' late primary school enrolment, on average, costs individuals a substantial 6% of their lifetime income (Glewwe and Jacoby, 1995).

CREATE has developed an expanded vision of access. Among other aspects of meaningful access to education, the CREATE model emphasises the importance of entry to primary at an appropriate age and progression within a year of the appropriate age for each grade (Lewin, 2007).

Age in grade incongruence

To measure the dimensions and effects of the problem of a lack of age in grade congruence, two groups of children are identified; one group who are in the right grade at the prescribed age (for example, those children who are aged 6 and in Grade 1) and those who are not at the right grade at the prescribed age (for example, those who are in Grade 1 at the age of 7, 8 or 10). The first group of children is 'age in grade congruent' and the second group is 'age in grade incongruent'.

Over 80% of the children enrolled in Grade 1 in 2007 were overage and among them 23% were overage by more than two years. Although we do not know what proportion of these children were overage at enrolment and what proportion are repeating from the previous year, it is clear that a large proportion of them are enrolling in school late.

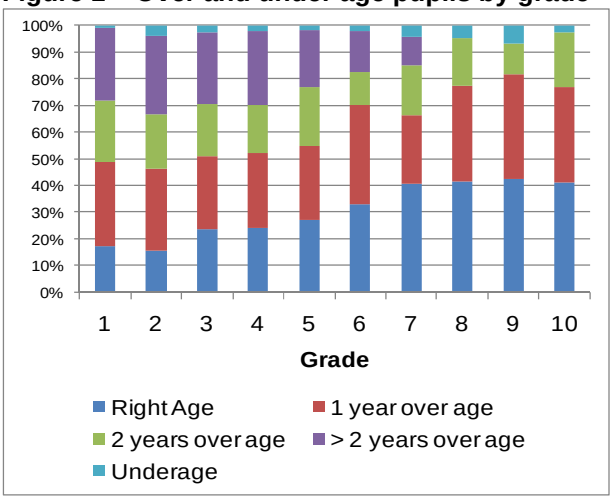
The lack of a proper birth registration system, improper catchment area survey by the school, people's perception of children's schooling age, and stunted growth of the children due to malnutrition are the most probable reasons for children's overage enrolment.

Overage enrolment increases the risk of children leaving school early due to marriage norms for older girls and family needs for older children's assistance for economic activities. It also jeopardises classroom teaching process by putting diverse ability and maturity children in the same classroom. Schools and teachers are often blamed for their low levels of performance in improving children's achievement but problems of age in grade incongruence mean a challenging teaching environment. Children from 5 to 13 years old are participating in the same lesson in the same classroom with different stages and paces of learning ability, maturity and needs. In this multi-grade situation, teachers are trying to teach with a mono-grade pedagogical approach and curriculum.

Proportions of Over and Underage Pupils

Figure 1 reveals the huge numbers of overage children in different grades with only 31% of children having the correct age in all grades. Overage entry of children at the initial grade is an acute problem and the higher levels of age in grade congruency in higher grades is an indication of many incongruent children dropping out of school at an early age. Beyond Grade 7 there are no children who are overage by more than 2 years. The lowest age in grade congruence is found in Grade 2, where about half the children were 2 years or more overage.

Figure 1 – Over and under age pupils by grade



More than one third of children are overage by more than two years. A pressing problem is to ensure that the needs of this wide range of age group children are being met in the classroom. The teaching learning process needs to be adjusted for this problem to ensure that teachers are not using mono-grade teaching strategies in a multi-grade setting.

Grade progression

Slow pupil progression, caused by repetition or retention in the same grade irrespective of age compounds problems of overage pupils in class caused by late enrolment. CREATE's Community and School Survey (ComSS) provides an opportunity to look at the issue from two different years (2007 and 2009) on the same sample children yielding detailed longitudinal data.

Progression was calculated on the basis of schooling information of the learners from the years 2007 and 2009. The child who was studying in Grade 1 in 2007 was expected to be in Grade 3 in 2009 if s/he did not repeat, and the same was true for 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th graders. However, the study identified a substantial proportion of children who were not progressing on time. To understand the issues in more detail, the study divided children into two groups, those who progressed properly and those who lagged behind their projected grades. Those who dropped out in the mean time were excluded from the analysis of age in grade progression.

Problems with Progression

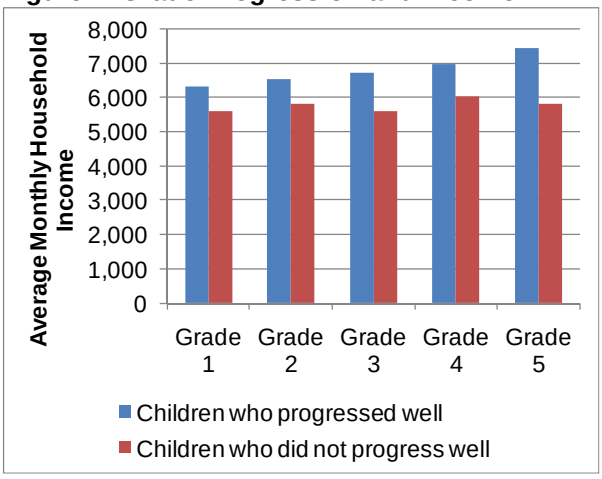
Progression was calculated based on children's position in school grade in 2007 and 2009. If a child studied in Grade 1 in 2007 then progression expects him/her to be in Grade 3 in 2009 after two years. Age and academic attainment were not considered. If a child goes up to the next class in time they are considered to be in the good progress group without reference to age.

A little less than 50% of children in Grades 1, 2 and 3 failed to progress to the next appropriate grades in 2009 and this failure rate goes down to 25% for Grade 4 and 5 children. The majority of the children enrolled in Grade 1 were unable to progress to the next expected grade. The ComSS second round identified a huge number of children dropping out at Grade 1. These children who are not progressing in time are being retained, repeating or dropping out. This data indicates a serious problem, or range of problems that is occurring in the first year of education.

Over aged Children and Poverty

The influence of families' economic conditions on children's education is almost universal. This study shows that even at the early grades (Grade 1 and 2); people who send their children to school over-age have lower incomes compared to people whose children are the correct age for their grade. However, at secondary level the difference has disappeared. This is because at the primary level, children from all economic categories participate in the school irrespective of their age but most of the overage and poor children drop out before reaching secondary education.

Figure 2. Grade Progression and Income



Children who have failed to progress come from relatively low income families and this pattern is found across the primary grades (Figure 2). Some children enrol overage and others become overage for their class due to repetition or retention and in both ways poor children are over represented in the grades lower for their age.

Possession of a range of media and communications assets (such as a mobile phone, newspapers and a radio) was negatively associated with being age in grade incongruent.

A significant proportion of age in grade congruent children come from families where at least one of the parents has some education compared to families where both parents are illiterate up to Grade 7. However from Grade 8, children from illiterate parents surpass the children from parents with some education in being age in grade congruent. This is also confirmed by the fact that 19% of children in Grade 1 are from illiterate parents compared to 24% in Grade 10.

Parent's perception of their children' health was categorised into two groups- 'good health' and 'not so good health'. 'Not so good' health children are those who have been always sick or occasionally sick in the last year according to their parents. The ComSS data show that age in grade congruency is influenced by the health condition of the children, at least at the lower grades. The 'not so good' health children are more likely to be age in grade incongruent compared to the children with 'good health'. This implies that poor health obliges some children to enter school late and others to repeat grades and become over-age for their grade.

In the lower primary grades (1, 2 and 3), a lower proportion of children with poor health are progressing to the next grade compared to children with good health. At the primary level, differences in both height and weight are associated with children's progression. Children with low height and weight progress to the next grade in significantly lower proportions compared with children who are taller and heavier. Height and weight is related to the nutritional status of the children. Usually poor children suffer from malnutrition and become stunted with low height and weight.

Controlling for the age of the children for a specific grade, the study found that the proportion that are progressing is positively influenced by the weight and height of those particular age group children. This means that even in the same age group, the children who have lower weight and height are progressing less compared to those who are taller and heavier.

Effects of Age in Grade Incongruence

ComSS data also reveal the effects of age in grade incongruence. Age in grade incongruent children repeated years more often than their classmates of the correct age, they were represented in higher proportions in the low achieving group and they attended less frequently (missed more days of school) than those who were the correct age for their grade.

These indicators – repetition, poor attainment and absenteeism are linked to 'silent exclusion', they are nominally in school, but may be learning little and are at risk of dropping out (Lewin, 2007). Indeed there is evidence, due to the shrinking proportion of overage children at higher grades that being over age is associated with dropping out from school, due to this cycle of poor attainment, attendance and repetition.

Policy Recommendations

On the basis of CREATE research in Bangladesh, a number of policy and research recommendations can be made that will help to tackle issues of age in grade incongruence and poor progression.

The phenomenon of 'silent exclusion' identified in CREATE's conceptual model needs more thorough investigation through qualitative as well as quantitative methods to understand the causes, consequences and potential solutions to the problem.

CREATE research has indicated that dealing with a wide age range in the classroom is a pedagogical issue which should be incorporated in the teacher's training module. Teachers should use and be trained to use appropriate teaching methods and techniques to address the needs of a mixed age group of children.

The birth registration policy in Bangladesh should be followed and implemented properly in the rural areas of the country. This would help to ascertain the ages of children for correct entry into school.

An effective pre-primary school system would help to prepare children for school and get them into age in grade congruent batches before entry into the school system.

A 'no detention' policy should be implemented to allow for regular progression through the grades for children.

CREATE research in Bangladesh indicates that children who do not have adequate reading and writing materials are not progressing well. The private costs of education are growing fast and the primary education stipend money (1,200 Taka per year) is not commensurate with the yearly costs of education. Therefore, the government should provide basic reading and writing materials free of cost instead of giving cash.

The primary education stipend programme is not working properly. Due to targeting and distribution problems, around 50% of non-poor children are presently receiving this stipend intended for the poor (Hossain and Zeitlyn, 2010). To fulfil children's nutritional needs and improve children's attendance and attainment, a school feeding programme should be introduced by the government.

Health problems are found to be an important factor for age in grade incongruence and low progression of poor children. Therefore, to increase access, retention, and progression and cycle completion rate, the government of Bangladesh should introduce a 'school health programme'.

Finally, for the intermediary or short term 'stop gap method', additional academic support for the silently excluded poor children should be provided by employing additional, local community teachers in low performing schools or by providing extra academic support to poor and silently excluded children by creating low cost out of school learning centres involving local NGOs, working in education.

- Glewwe, P. and Jacoby, H. G. (1995) An Economic Analysis of Delayed Primary-school Enrolment in a Low-income Country: The Role of Early Childhood Nutrition. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 77: 156-169.
- Hossain, A., (2010) *Age in Grade Congruence and Progression in Basic Education in Bangladesh,* CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph No. 48, Brighton and Dhaka: University of Sussex and BRAC University.
- Hossain A., and Zeitlyn, B., (2010), Poverty and Equity: Access to Education in Bangladesh, CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph No. 51, Brighton: University of Sussex
- Lewin, K. M. (2007) Improving Access, Equity and Transitions in Education: Creating a Research Agenda, CREATE Pathways to Access, Research Monograph No 1. Brighton: University of Sussex.

This Policy brief is based on CREATE Pathways to Access monograph No. 48: *Age in Grade Congruence and Progression in Basic Education in Bangladesh* (Hossain, A., 2010). It has been written by Benjamin Zeitlyn and Altaf Hossain.

CREATE is a DFID-funded research programme consortia exploring issues of educational access, transitions and equity in South Africa, India, Bangladesh and Ghana. For more information go to: www.create-rpc.org