



A teacher uses classroom resources to help instruct their pre-primary students.

## LEARN PLUS

# Accelerating Access To Pre-Primary Education Through An Innovative Eight-Week Program In Cambodia

Many children from disadvantaged households in Cambodia cannot access quality pre-primary education (PPE). PPE is a critical component in a child’s life, and evidence shows that it can significantly increase a child’s level of readiness for school and lifelong learning. Through an action research project called LEARN Plus, an accelerated pre-primary education model has been adapted and tested in Cambodia to provide disadvantaged children access to quality, gender-responsive pre-primary education.



## KEY FINDINGS

### 1

Teachers of the eight-week pre-primary program (8WPP) must have strong classroom management skills to maintain a safe and productive learning environment for young learners.

### 2

Sustained collaboration and engagement with district and provincial education actors is essential for quality implementation of the 8WPP.

### 3

Community and parental/caregiver engagement enhances support for children’s education and promotes on-time enrollment and school attendance.



Girls walk through their village in Stung Treng, Cambodia.

## What’s At Stake?

In Cambodia, a country in Southeast Asia with a population of over 16 million<sup>i</sup>, 65% of children do not have access to quality pre-primary education (PPE). While the number of children enrolled in pre-primary education programs has doubled since 2007, low-quality teaching and learning environments, among other issues, has inhibited many children’s educational attainment and progression.<sup>ii</sup>

Factors such as poor-quality classrooms, lack of basic water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure, and poor nutrition have resulted in only 27% of 3–5-year-olds across the country being developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy skills.<sup>iii</sup> PPE is a critical component in a child’s life; evidence shows that it can significantly increase a child’s level of readiness for school. When children access quality pre-primary education (PPE), they perform consistently better in school, are more likely to enter school on time, are less likely to drop out or repeat grades, and are more likely to complete primary and secondary school.<sup>iv</sup>

Plan International Canada, Plan International Cambodia and the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) have adapted and pilot-tested an accelerated school readiness program (SRP) to provide disadvantaged children access to quality, gender-responsive early childhood education services. The project was launched in Cambodia in 2021 with support from the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange and is set to be completed by December 2024.

This policy brief shares findings and recommendations from the project to inform policy responses by decision-makers in Cambodia working on education, gender equality and inclusion and early childhood development (ECD).

# Methodology

The accelerated school readiness model is a proven innovation that was adopted from the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) in Turkey. The model has been adapted, tested and advocated for scale in Cambodia, Tanzania and Lao PDR. It is a short and intensive program delivered during the academic break that precedes the start of a new school year. It seeks to develop the physical, language, cognitive and socio-emotional skills of children who are about to enter Grade 1 (typically ages 5–6) with no preschool experience. The model aims to prepare children for primary school through gender-responsive and inclusive approaches.

After piloting, the Eight-Week Pre-Primary Program (8WPP)<sup>v</sup> was rolled out to 29 communities in the Stung Treng province in Cambodia and provided pre-primary education for 432 children (220 girls and 212 boys). Classes were taught for four hours/day, six days/week over eight weeks. Classrooms were held

in safe community spaces with access to clean water and toilet facilities. The program consisted of a daily routine of play-based activities designed to support the acquisition of foundational skills such as social skills, pre-literacy and numeracy skills, and curiosity to learn. It promoted gender-responsive and inclusive teaching and learning approaches, good hygiene and good nutrition. Parents/caregivers with children participating in the program were also educated on gender-responsive parenting skills and how to support children’s learning at home by participating in four 2-hour parenting sessions over the eight-week program. Gender responsive and inclusive teaching and learning approaches include ensuring gender equality in access to education, enabling the establishment of gender-sensitive educational and social behaviours and creating interventions to ensure the retention of female students in school, to name a few.<sup>vi</sup>

The 8WPP provided children who have never enrolled in PPE with a school readiness “short course” before entering Grade 1. It filled a gap and catered to children who were not enrolled in state pre-schools, community pre-schools and other pre-primary programs. The short course uses existing education systems and community resources (i.e., primary teachers, classrooms and community spaces) therefore the Cambodia Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) and other education stakeholders can readily expand and scale it without the need for massive financial investments that often come with traditional PPE programs. The 8WPP is particularly relevant in remote, rural communities where existing programs fall short of the demand.



# Action Research Approach

The LEARN Plus project engaged the Royal University of Phnom Penh, a local consultancy group led by Professor Kasumi Nakagawa of Pannasastra University, and the American Institute of Research (AIR) to conduct implementation research, a gender equality and inclusion assessment, an impact evaluation and a cost study of the 8WPP. The impact evaluation included a mid-line and an end-line evaluation conducted in 2023 that investigated the extent to which the 8WPP improved children’s school readiness, on-time enrolment, attendance and persistence in grade 1, how the results varied for girls and boys and the extent to which it improved parental engagement in support of early education. Overall, the various research activities undertaken in LEARN Plus shed light on the relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of the 8WPP. The project also identified gendered dimensions that affect girls’ and boys’ access to early childhood education (ECE) and gendered power dynamics amongst caregivers toward ECE.

## A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH TO SKILLS BUILDING

Through a daily routine of child-centered and play-based indoor and outdoor activities, the 8WPP focuses on skills building in the following four domains:

- 1 PHYSICAL**  
 To promote the development of self-care skills, encourages movement, physical activity and healthy eating.
- 2 LANGUAGE**  
 To promote reading readiness and oral communications.
- 3 COGNITIVE**  
 To stimulate conceptual development, acquisition of pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills.
- 4 SOCIO-EMOTIONAL**  
 To promote ability to recognize and communicate emotions and establish positive relationships with peers and adults.

Parents and caregivers from the community decorate the 8WPP classroom in anticipation of new classes starting.

# Key Findings

The studies and evaluations cited above revealed the following findings:

**1. Teachers of the eight-week pre-primary program must have strong classroom management skills to maintain a safe and productive learning environment for young learners.**

Teachers participated in extensive training and retraining through the LEARN Plus project to deliver the 8WPP, as proper training benefits teachers and students. A manual to implement the 8WPP was also provided to teachers to support them with their work. It was adapted to the national curriculum and local context and integrated principles of gender equality and inclusion in education. Quality teacher training enables teachers to enhance the skills and knowledge that they require to facilitate the 8WPP classes. Given the comprehensive nature of the program, teachers had to be well-versed in child-friendly, gender-responsive and inclusive classroom techniques and instill good classroom management practices.

About 15% of teachers faced challenges in implementing the 8WPP, given their limited experience and qualifications despite the training. The majority of the teachers, however, had a background in teaching at the primary school level and this coupled with the short course training offered by the 8WPP enhanced the implementation of the program. This indicates the need to enhance the training program to enable all teachers, regardless of teaching background, to meet the needs of their students and create a positive and productive learning environment.

**2. Sustained collaboration and engagement with district and provincial education actors is essential for quality implementation of the 8WPP.**

The LEARN Plus project worked very closely with national and provincial government stakeholders such as the District Office of Education, Youth and Sports (DoEYS); the Provincial Office of Education, Youth and Sports (PoEYS); and a Technical Working Group, comprised of officials from various departments of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of Cambodia. These stakeholders were instrumental in adapting and contextualizing the 8WPP in Cambodia and teacher training, monitoring, and mentoring support for teachers. The support and training were meant to enable teachers to deliver quality instruction and support for young children participating in the program.

In some instances, the mentoring support provided by district and provincial authorities was only partially aligned with the needs of teachers, due to the limited experience and qualifications of some teachers, particularly in rural schools. This indicates a need for improved monitoring and mentoring support for teachers in future iterations of the program. Relevant authorities at the local level provided the most support, through actions such as promoting the classes at the community level and supporting the teachers through monthly classroom monitoring, providing feedback and problem solving with teachers. Overall, collaboration with district and provincial education actors and local authorities such as commune council members is important for ensuring program ownership and sustainability at the local level once the project has ended.

**3. Community and parental/caregiver engagement enhances support for children's education and promotes on-time enrollment and school attendance.**

Parental/caregiver engagement in the pre-primary education of their children is important to ensure continued learning and development at home. More than half of all parents/caregivers participated in information sessions to build their capacity in topics such as children's nutrition, learning and development, child safety, basic hygiene, gender equality, and how to support children's learning. The program also led some families to engage with their young children in more enriching ways to better support early learning and development, such as singing together and storytelling. While many families held beliefs that were not gender equal, there were no significant differences in the

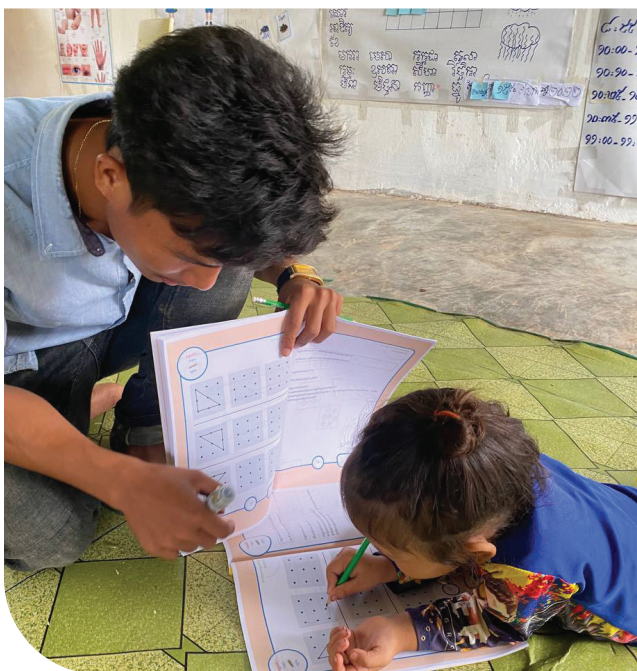


One of the four 2-hour parenting education sessions.

program's effectiveness for families with girls or boys. There was, however, a gender dynamic to parent engagement, with it mainly being mothers who were involved, as opposed to fathers.

There was strong community and parental/caregiver support for the 8WPP program in the communities where it was implemented. Ensuring that community authorities such as village chiefs and commune councils are aware of the benefits of the 8WPP for children enables them to better support and advocate for the program in their communities. However, a few barriers to their engagement with the program arose.

For parents/caregivers engaged in economic activities outside the house (such as seasonal/agricultural work), it was a challenge for some to provide educational support to their children. Parents/caregivers also faced language and education barriers when supporting their children's educational endeavours, as the language spoken at home was not always the same as the language that classes were taught with at school. These challenges of parental engagement should be considered in future iterations of the program. Overall, parental and community involvement can help promote the scalability and sustainability of the 8WPP model in communities.



A teacher provides one-on-one support to a child in the 8WPP.



Children enjoy some outdoor learning and play time as part of the 8WPP.

## Recommendations

The findings from the LEARN Plus project in Cambodia demonstrate that the 8WPP provides opportunities for disadvantaged children to access quality pre-primary education. They also highlight opportunities to strengthen the program design and delivery in this country. The LEARN Plus project has the following recommendations to support funders and policymakers in making informed decisions about where to invest to improve access to PPE in Cambodia, particularly for marginalized children in under-served communities.

### 1. Strengthening the design and delivery of the 8WPP will help to uncover greater evidence around its effectiveness.

While adapted and enhanced LEARN Plus pre-primary models are being scaled in Tanzania and Lao PDR due to the program's positive impacts in those contexts, further implementation and testing of the program is recommended in Cambodia. In support of this, the 8WPP was further refined and strengthened based on findings and recommendations of the various research and studies undertaken by LEARN Plus. Implementing the strengthened program in Cambodia, particularly in communities with no

additional pre-primary options, could generate greater evidence of the effectiveness of this model.

Three essential components must be in place to ensure the scalability and sustainability of the 8WPP once it is ready to be expanded to additional communities across Cambodia. First and foremost, government policies that recognize 8WPP as an alternative form of PPE and provide endorsement and support for its implementation are necessary. These policies should integrate gender-equal and inclusive approaches into programming at all levels, from national and subnational levels, as well as at the district and commune levels to ensure girls have equal

## HOW MUCH DOES THE 8WPP COST PER CHILD?

Understanding the true costs of the program can inform the resources needed to scale up or adapt the 8WPP in another setting.

In 2022, the overall cost of the 8WPP per child was **US \$297**

When the opportunity costs of personnel time, materials bought by teachers and in-kind donations from the community are excluded from the calculations, the cost estimate of the 8WPP decreases to \$138,320 US dollars overall, or \$297 per child. Even though the estimated costs may seem large, it is important to underscore that this estimate includes the start-up cost that represents about 38% of the overall cost. Therefore, the cost of the program could decrease over time as the materials and the training have been designed and teachers might need only a refresher training every year.

opportunities to reach their full potential. Secondly, adequate funding and resources are essential to ensure there are enough trained teachers, a support system, and necessary learning resources to provide quality education. Lastly, strong interest, involvement, and active support from local authorities and educational stakeholders are also needed.

**2. Parental engagement sessions should be an integral component of the 8WPP program, with a stronger focus on gender equality and inclusion and support for the enrolment and retention of children in primary schools.**

Engaging parents and caregivers in the 8WPP program helps enhance their knowledge and skills in supporting the holistic development of children during their pre-primary education. Educational sessions hosted with the parents of participating children also promote equal involvement of fathers and mothers in children's education.

There is a critical need to build parental awareness of the importance of on-time enrolment and daily attendance in primary school to improve children's educational outcomes. Maintaining parental engagement sessions as part of the program will enable parents to better support their children during their schooling, improve their understanding of the importance of child development, and help them incorporate learning in the home.

The LEARN Plus project strives to holistically address discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and ability through the delivery of the eight-week pre-primary program. Enhancing parental and caregiver knowledge and understanding of these concepts is important to ensure that children can benefit from a gender-equitable and inclusive developmental environment both within and outside of the classroom.

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**3. There should be adequate learning and play resources for every child in the classroom to help improve their knowledge.**

While the 8WPP provided great teaching, learning, and playtime materials to teach the children, there was not always enough for every child in the classroom. These materials enhance children's learning by developing their logic and problem-solving skills, encouraging communication and socialization skills, refining motor skills, and nurturing creativity.

The district/provincial education actors should support teachers in developing more learning and teaching materials to implement the 8WPP. Moreover, teachers can mobilize resources from the community to support the operation of the 8WPP, such as ensuring a safe and secure environment on the playground and developing game/playing materials for children by using the local resources available in their community. Involving parents in creating supportive teaching and learning materials can also encourage their engagement in children's learning practices at home. As more parental engagement increases, they can mobilize financial support or create materials with resources already available in the community.



Cognitive learning time for the children as part of the LEARN Plus 8WPP.



(LEFT) Children participating in outdoor play time as part of the LEARN Plus 8WPP. (RIGHT) Nutritious meals are an important part of the 8WPP.





Children take a break from their studies to play outside.

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