



Ready to Start School, Learn and Work

Evidence from three education programmes
for out-of-school children and adolescents
in Bangladesh

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Taniya Laizu Sumy, Mohammad Mohsin and Iqbal Hossain

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for out-of-school children and adolescents
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CONTENTS

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.....	5
ABOUT THE LET US LEARN PROGRAMME IN BANGLADESH	6
PPE: GETTING YOUNG CHILDREN READY TO START SCHOOL	8
ABAL: A LEARNING PATHWAY TOWARDS PRIMARY SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY.....	12
ALP: VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS.....	17
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	22
REFERENCES.....	24
ANNEXES	25

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Leverage community-run centres with trained facilitators to bring pre-primary education (PPE) to remote villages, providing young children with the necessary skills to enter and learn in primary school. All children participating in the community PPE classes in the area of study transitioned into formal primary school after completion of the one-year cycle. Rapid learning assessment mechanisms were put in place to monitor participation and development, enabling facilitators to provide remedial support to learners who were struggling to keep up with the class. As participation of children with disabilities (CwD) remains modest, additional investments should be made to promote awareness of PPE and care for this vulnerable group at the community level, reinforce facilitators' training in delivering inclusive support, and ensure that learning spaces and materials are accessible for all.

Scale up the Ability-Based Accelerated Learning (ABAL) model to provide out-of-school children with a tailored pathway towards foundational skills and primary school equivalency. Thanks to evidence-backed practices such as ability-based learning (or teaching at the right level), community-run facilities, flexible learning hours and dedicated teacher support, all ABAL participants completed their first year of the programme achieving solid learning gains in Bangla, Maths, English and Social Science. Ninety per cent of ABAL learners passed standardized tests in foundational literacy and numeracy after their first year and made significant progress in social and non-cognitive skills.

Leverage local businesses to deliver vocational training and create direct paths to employment for vulnerable young adolescents in their community, especially girls. Ninety-six per cent of Alternative Learning Pathway (ALP) graduates, typically formal school dropouts, found a job at their mentor's local business. Wages remained modest but allowed adolescents to save up to 13 per cent of their monthly salary on average. Participation in the programme increased girls' self-confidence in occupying social spaces and contributed to reduce pressures for early marriage.

ABOUT THE LET US LEARN PROGRAMME IN BANGLADESH

Children in the Sylhet division, in the Northeast of Bangladesh, face complex challenges in accessing quality education, at all school levels. Sylhet's low-lying flood plains (*hoars*) are inundated for half the year, making access to schools extremely difficult in remote communities already facing poverty. The region ranks among the poorest performers in learning attainment across education levels. Fifteen per cent of children attend pre-primary education and only 21 per cent of children aged 3–4 are developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy, against a national average of 29 per cent (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019). Primary and lower-secondary school completion rates in Sylhet are the lowest and second-lowest nationwide, respectively (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019). Boys, who often engage in income-generating activities to contribute to household revenues,¹ are at significant risk of dropping out in lower secondary: in 2019, 18 per cent of lower-secondary age boys were out of school nationwide, compared to 8 per cent of girls (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019). Social norms including early marriage also put adolescent girls' progression in education at risk. In rural areas, only 25 per cent of girls complete upper-secondary school, compared to 30 per cent of boys (UNESCO UIS data, 2019).

UNICEF Bangladesh and its partners have leveraged resources from the Let Us Learn (LUL) initiative to deliver **three alternative learning pathways** for out-of-school children and adolescents in remote areas of Sylhet. This report presents evidence on the achievements of the three programmes, highlighting key policy recommendations. The findings draw on analysis of programme monitoring data,² qualitative case studies, focus group discussions and interviews. This paper is one of a series of research reports presenting emerging evidence on programmes supported by the LUL initiative, which aims to expand quality learning opportunities for disadvantaged children in five countries.³

Each learning pathway aims to **get learners ready for one of three key transition points** in a child's education:

1. **Ready to start school:** The community-based **Pre-Primary Education (PPE) programme** aims to ensure early learners are ready to transition into primary school. Robust evidence suggests that pre-primary graduates are more likely to be ready for and complete primary education and continue to higher levels of education. In Bangladesh, the percentage of children on track in early literacy and numeracy is close to 50 per cent for children who had attended early childhood education, compared to less than 20 per cent for children who had not (UNICEF, 2019). The PPE programme offers age-appropriate early childhood education to children aged 5–6 through 150 community-based learning centres in Sylhet. Classes run for two and a half hours a day, six days per week, under the supervision of a dedicated trained facilitator from the community. Activities take place in a child-friendly learning space and participating children receive learning materials. The programme lasts one year reflecting the current one-year government curriculum for PPE. For the 2021–2022 school year, LUL-supported PPE centres will shift to a 2-year programme, piloting an extended government curriculum for PPE of 2 years.

1 In Bangladesh, among 12–14-year-olds, 10.2 per cent of boys engage in regular economic activities, compared to 2.2 per cent of girls; among 15–17-year-olds, the same statistics are 11.2 per cent of boys and 1.9 per cent of girls. Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019.

2 The exact sample size and data timeframe is reported below each figure.

3 Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Liberia, Madagascar and Nepal. LUL-supported programmes vary based on the challenges facing each country context but align to the same four equity pillars: access and retention; quality education; systems strengthening; and disaster risk reduction.

2. **Ready to learn with foundational skills:** The **ABAL programme** offers out-of-school children aged 8–14 a flexible pathway towards primary school equivalency, using an ability-based pedagogical approach. Evidence has shown that similar teaching at the right level (TaRL) approaches have large and consistent positive impacts on children’s learning (Pershad et al., 2020). Students are grouped by their learning levels in each subject so that they can learn at their own pace, and not be left behind by the class. Critical to the programme is its focus on foundational literacy and numeracy skills. These enable a transition from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’ and are essential building blocks for productive employment and civic engagement. The ABAL learning centres have flexible learning hours to support children who may work, live far away, or face other barriers to access formal schooling. ABAL learners can opt to mainstream into primary school at any point along the 44-month programme, or continue the ABAL course to completion, which enables them to take the end-of-primary cycle examination and obtain primary school equivalency.
3. **Ready to enter the job market:** The **Alternative Learning Pathway (ALP) programme** prepares out-of-school adolescents (aged 14–18) for entry into the labour market by building vocational skills through a mix of practical on-the-job training and classroom teaching that reinforces foundational competences. ALP is a six-month programme, and the on-the-job training is carried out four times a week by a master craft person (MCP) who owns a business in the community. Enhanced adolescents’ employability will allow them to earn higher incomes, provide for their household and ultimately contribute to society. For adolescent girls, a pathway to earn income can be a way to gain independence and avoid early marriage. Yet, in Bangladesh, only 1.5 per cent of girls and 4.5 boys aged 15–24 participate in technical and vocational training (UNESCO UIS data, 2019). As the window of opportunity to take advantage of the demographic dividend is closing, it is urgent to scale up skilling programmes for the youth that are inclusive for the most marginalized.

PPE: GETTING YOUNG CHILDREN READY TO START SCHOOL

Bringing pre-primary education to the community

In 2019 and 2020, the community-based PPE centres provided access to 9,000 young girls and boys aged 5 and 6, who would otherwise be out of school. Community members interviewed in Sylhet's Sunamganj District confirmed the young children would not receive pre-primary education without the learning centre set up through the LUL initiative. The nearest government school offering PPE was two kilometres from the village – a prohibitive distance for young children, especially during the monsoon season when floods are frequent and persistent.

Only a limited share of PPE participants, less than 1 per cent across the two cohorts, had a reported disability. While some forms of disability or learning functionality are inherently difficult to detect, likely leading to underreporting of actual cases, the share of children with disabilities (CwD) participating in the PPE programme is lower than the nationwide disability incidence among children under five, which is 9 per cent (Lancet Global Health, 2018). Additional efforts to include CwD are necessary both on the demand and supply side. Raising awareness among families is crucial to tap into the potential of school- and community-based early identification and mainstreaming of CwD. On the supply side, an assessment on the pedagogical training of facilitators and accessibility of learning spaces and materials could shed light on potential ways to reinforce the delivery of an inclusive package for CwD. In low- and middle-income countries, CwD are estimated to represent almost 30 per cent of the total out-of-school population of primary and lower-secondary age (International Commission of Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016).

Several programme components, from staff to infrastructure, contributed towards offering a quality, child-friendly learning environment at PPE centres. These elements include dedicated facilitators, community-supported centres with access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities, and supply of pedagogical materials aligned with the government curriculum. All 150 PPE facilitators receive a 15-day basic training and a 4-day refresher course on child psychology, early childhood education pedagogy, learning packages and assessment. All facilitators are women selected within the community through a competitive recruitment process.

Community mobilization boosted awareness of and engagement in PPE. Community members interviewed during a field visit reported that, after the sensitization conducted by UNICEF Bangladesh and partners, they voluntarily contributed their own land and resources to establish the PPE centre. The programme also encouraged the active participation of community members in the operations of the learning centres through the establishment of management committees. While the level of engagement varies from community to community, the management committees typically held regular meetings to monitor learning activities, tracked teacher and student attendance, and took corrective measures based on identified challenges.



Credit: ©Shaiful Karim/Dhaka Anshania Mission (February 2020)

Box 1. A cost comparison of the PPE programme with public pre-primary schools

Based on budgetary and programmatic documents, the yearly cost of bringing the PPE programme to the Sylhet area is approximately US\$50 per child. In contrast, estimated public expenditures per pre-primary student in the national education system amount to US\$177 (see Annex C for further details on cost estimates). The LUL-supported PPE programme's unit cost per child thus amounts to less than 30 per cent of the unit costs per child incurred in the public system. The per-child public cost, in addition, does not account for household out-of-pocket expenditures, which are substantial in Bangladesh, where 32 per cent of total education costs are taken on by parents at the primary level (IIEP-UNESCO, 2020).

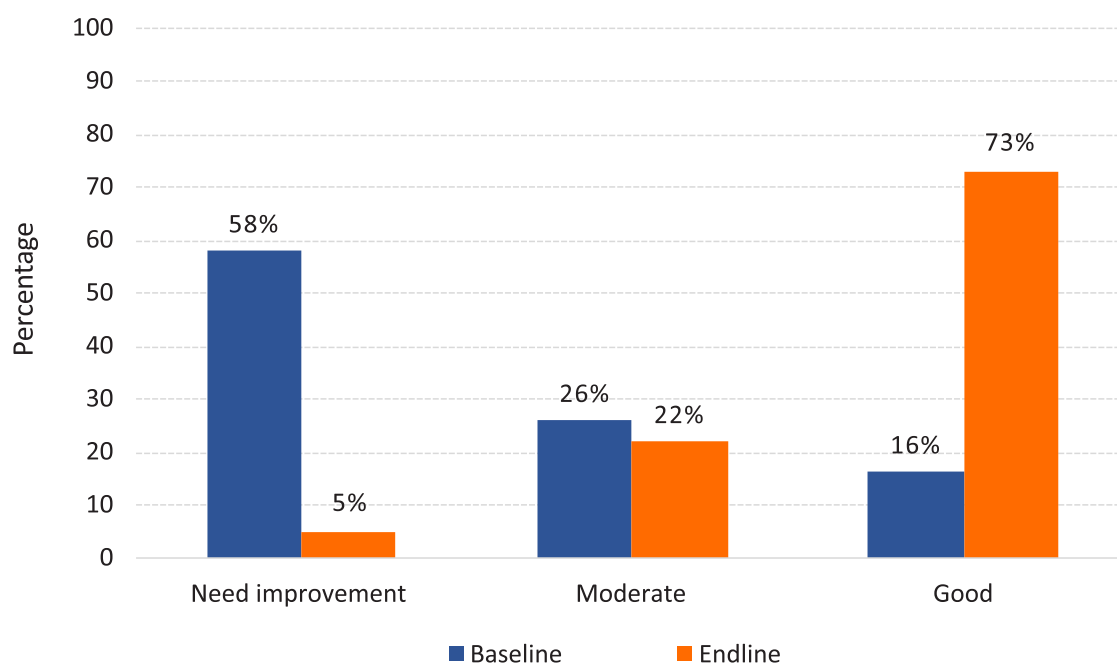
While this exercise only constitutes an initial cost comparison based on projected expenditures, it provides suggestive evidence of the potential for scalability of the PPE programme. Additional impact evaluation work could make the case for scale-up even stronger by quantifying the degree to which each dollar invested in the programme translates into improved school readiness and learning for PPE children in remote areas.

Learning and stimulation to get ready for primary school

Continuous assessment data show that PPE participants made remarkable progress in terms of learning and child development. Facilitators tracked children's progress across eight learning and development domains in line with government standards.⁴ The percentage of children in the 2020 cohort rated as 'Good', the top grade, increased from 16 per cent at the beginning of the programme to 73 per cent at endline (see Figure 1).⁵ Similarly, the share of those who 'Need improvement' plummeted from 58 per cent at baseline to 5 per cent at endline.⁶ Fifty-five per cent of children across the two cohorts progressed directly from 'Need improvement' to 'Good'. Girls and boys showed similar progress (see Annex A for more details).

Low baseline results – which are not surprising since most programme beneficiaries had not previously participated in any early childhood education activities – highlight the generalized need to further support early learners to be on track to start primary school. Children that are identified as struggling through the continuous assessment system received additional support. For instance, a PPE facilitator interviewed during field visits explained that struggling learners are paired with a high-performing peer, an approach which has been shown to yield positive results (see for example McMaster et al., 2006).

Figure 1. Evolution of learning and child development ratings of PPE participants at the beginning and 6–12 months after the start of the programme



Source: PPE monitoring data, 2020 cohort. N=4,500.

4 These domains are physical and mobility, social and emotional, language and communication, early Mathematics, creativity and aesthetics, environment, science and technology, and health and safety.

5 The endline assessment was conducted 6 to 12 months later depending on the cohort's enrolment date, centre's capacity and COVID-related prevention measures.

6 Data for the 2019 cohort show comparable progress, but from a slightly better baseline.

After completing the programme, all 9,000 PPE graduates from the 2019 and 2020 cohorts enrolled in primary school for the following academic year. This achievement affirms the programme's success in improving school readiness and boosting parents' awareness and valuation of enrolling in primary education. Anecdotal evidence from a Grade 1 teacher in Sunamganj suggested that PPE centre graduates were more comfortable in and prepared for school once they enrolled at the primary level. Additional data collection efforts are nonetheless needed to track and understand learners' longer-term advancement in the primary cycle.

Learning and mainstreaming of the 2020 PPE cohort were disrupted by the pandemic, but programme adaptations sought to mitigate dropout and learning loss. In Bangladesh, all in-person learning activities were suspended in March 2020. Following a rapid survey that found that 95 per cent of PPE families owned a feature mobile phone, PPE facilitators who would otherwise teach at the centres were trained to provide remote support to beneficiary families via phone calls. In May 2020, they started the phone outreach to share information about COVID-19 preventive measures and provide remote support for home-based learning activities. According to programme staff, this initiative, which will continue until school reopening, mitigated programme dropouts through maintaining a channel for dialogue with parents and students, while raising health awareness. More in-depth research is however necessary to assess to what extent PPE children continued learning through this mobile phone-based support.

ABAL: A LEARNING PATHWAY TOWARDS PRIMARY SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY

(Re-)Integrating children in primary-level learning

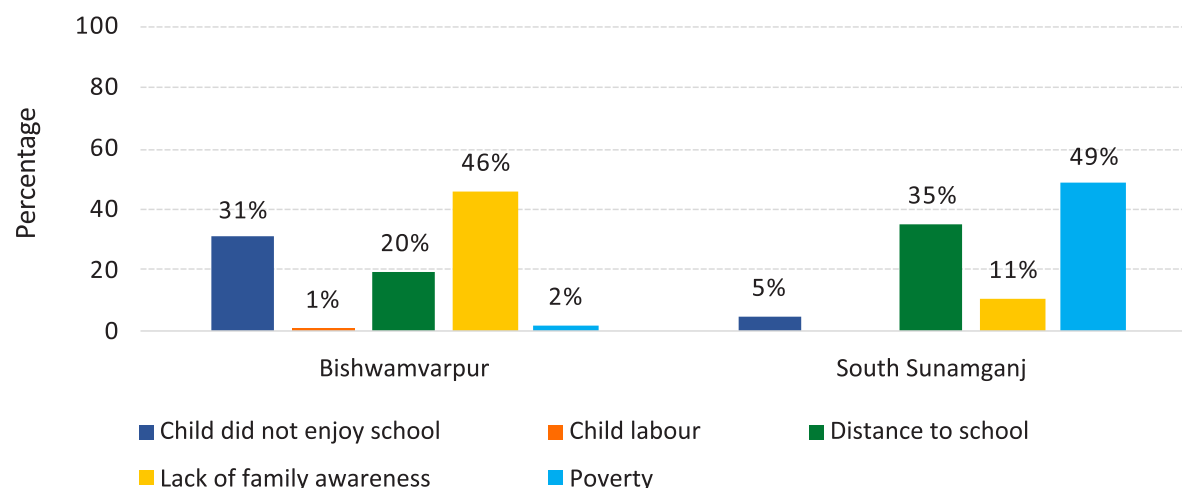
LUL supported the establishment of 100 ABAL learning centres, housed in existing community-based facilities in underserved villages in Sylhet. **ABAL centres supported 3,750 out-of-school children with low education achievement, ensuring equitable participation of girls and boys** (51 per cent were boys, 49 per cent girls). Upon enrolment, 72 per cent of beneficiaries had previously dropped out of school, mainly at an early stage (grade 1 or 2), while 28 per cent had never been to school. Competency-based baseline tests confirmed that new ABAL participants had limited skills and knowledge in Bangla, Maths, English and Social Science. ABAL recruitment is open to learners aged between 8 and 14, though in practice almost half were 8 and 9 years old. The centres also received learners with a recorded disability (1 per cent of total), but inclusion of CwD remains comparatively limited vis-à-vis the prevalence of disabilities among 5–17-year-olds in Sylhet, which stands at 2.2 per cent (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019).⁷

Barriers to formal schooling varied in the two target sub-districts, requiring adapted strategies to boost participation at the learning centres. School dropout in the Bishwamvarpur sub-district was mainly explained by demand-side constraints, with 46 per cent of families lacking awareness of education (Figure 2). Community mobilization conducted by ABAL facilitators has been pivotal in changing parents' perspectives (see 'Raising education awareness in marginalized communities', below). Children not enjoying school was the second most common reason reported for being out of school in Bishwamvarpur, which underscores the importance of a child-friendly learning environment. Teaching at ABAL centres is structured around an ability-based model, where children are grouped based on their proficiency in each subject. In addition, classroom spaces are designed to be child-friendly, with appropriate sanitation facilities and colourful learning materials on the walls.

Meanwhile, in the South Sunamganj sub-district, supply-side and structural constraints were the main reported barriers to school enrolment. Forty-nine per cent of families indicated poverty as the main barrier for children's schooling, while 35 per cent reported distance to school as the main binding constraint. The establishment of ABAL learning centres in communities that did not have nearby schools relieved distance-related barriers, while flexible teaching hours boosted access for learners who were expected to work or otherwise support their household during traditional school hours. In addition, cash transfers disbursed via mobile money to learners' mothers supplemented family incomes and provided an additional incentive to continue learning.

7 As mentioned in the context of the PPE programme, some of the less visible disabilities or learning disfunctionalities may have passed undetected at ABAL centres, resulting in an underestimation of the actual inclusion of CwD.

Figure 2. Reasons why ABAL participants had dropped out of school before enrolling in the programme, by upazila (sub-district)



Source: ABAL monitoring data, 2019-2020. N=3,751.

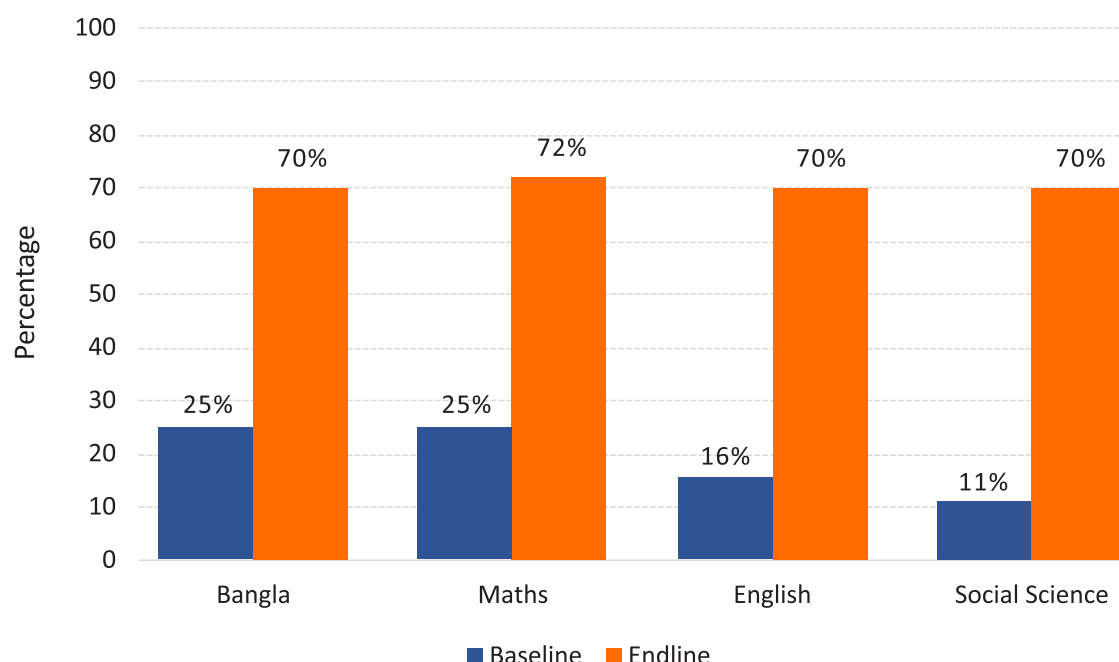
Providing foundational skills

All learners in the current cohorts, who enrolled in 2019 or 2020, completed their first year. Flexible learning hours, dedicated facilitators, the offer of a child-friendly classroom in the community and the provision of financial support are design elements that have been conducive to this achievement, according to programme staff. Although COVID-19 forced all in-person learning activities to be suspended in March 2020, LUL facilitators supported beneficiaries remotely via feature mobile phones. While such forms of remote learning may suffer from barriers such as limited parental support or lack of take-home learning materials, ABAL's in-built monthly rapid assessment system will facilitate the evaluation of each learner's competence level upon reopening and allow learning activities to be tailored accordingly.

ABAL participants learnt across all subjects and acquired foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

Competence-based tests conducted at baseline and at about one year after the start of the programme show that participants made remarkable progress in Bangla, Maths, English and Social Science (Figure 3). Girls and boys, who had lower scores at baseline, achieved very similar endline results.

Figure 3. Test scores (% 0–100) of ABAL participants at baseline and at 1 year later



Source: ABAL monitoring data, 2019-2020. N=3,751.

Moreover, in June–July 2020, 90 per cent of ABAL participants passed competence-based tests in mathematics and literacy that are administered as part of a monthly assessment mechanism. To put this result in context, MICS data show that nationwide 49 per cent of children aged 7–14 demonstrate foundational reading skills and 28 per cent demonstrate basic numeracy skills.⁸ The monthly assessments, which are administered by teachers and based on competences defined by the government, found learners on track amid the pandemic, but also showed that learning mathematics over the phone is comparatively more challenging for target beneficiaries.

35 per cent of learners, who had achieved adequate grade-level competencies, opted to mainstream in formal primary schools or *madrasahs*.⁹ ABAL learners can mainstream into formal school at any point along the 44-month module, or continue in ABAL centres until completion of the programme, which enables them to take the end-of-primary cycle examination. Most (85 per cent) of those who decided to mainstream did so at an early stage, i.e. within 1 year after enrolment in ABAL, while the remaining 15 per cent mainstreamed within 2 years. Most of those who mainstreamed (68 per cent) reintegrated into grade 2, while 25 per cent transitioned to grade 3, and 5 per cent to grade 4, with the remaining 2 per cent enrolling in grade 1. Almost all ABAL learners mainstreamed into the grade above the one they completed during their year with the programme. Preliminary multivariate analysis (see Annex B for further details) shows that girls and boys were equally likely to opt for transferring to a formal school, all else being equal.

8 The underlying assessment systems of ABAL and MICS tests are different, although both are competence-based and focus on foundational skills. The two tests cannot thus be used as direct comparators. Here, MICS scores are used to shed light on the (limited) general proficiency in foundational skills among Bangladeshi children of similar age groups as ABAL learners.

9 The Madrasah (Islamic Religious School) education stream, going from primary to tertiary, runs in parallel to the formal school system. Madrasah education is provided by public and private institutions, and some private madrasah (Kharizia) are beyond the purview of the general system of education (UNESCO, 2016).

Participation in ABAL brought about additional benefits to learners, including more regular socializing, increased awareness of hygienic practices and improved non-cognitive skills, and lifted children's aspirations. Case studies conducted by UNICEF Bangladesh highlighted how ABAL centres effectively offered a protected space for children to regularly interact with peers and engage in recreational activities, including creative work. A pilot assessment showed promising end-of-first-quarter gains in non-cognitive skills such as empathy, self-confidence and tolerance, particularly for girls, although there are some concerns about data quality (See Annex B for further details). A case study participant, who had grown up in a modest household of fishermen and was previously out of school, revealed that attending ABAL centres made him gain confidence and shift his aspirations for the future. While the student used to dream of buying a fishing boat, he now aspires to become a teacher. Interviews with community leaders also emphasized improved hygiene among children, who began washing their hands regularly with soap, using the latrines according to hygienic measures and keeping their clothes cleaner.

Box 2. Cost comparison of ABAL vis-à-vis public education in Bangladesh

Based on programmatic documents and financial reporting, the estimated cost per ABAL participant amounts to US\$110 per year. Since ABAL covers primary education over a period of 44 months, its total cost per child is approximately US\$440. In comparison, the annual cost per public primary school student per year in Bangladesh was US\$86 in the academic year 2015–16 (Universalia et al., 2020). As primary public education has five grades, the full module cost per child would be equivalent to US\$430, which means that the difference in costs between ABAL and formal school is minimal. The estimated cost for public primary schools, in addition, does not include out-of-pocket household expenditures for education, which amount to 32 per cent of per student total costs in Bangladesh at the primary level.

While these are only preliminary cost estimations and some caveats apply in making comparisons, the **costs to deliver ABAL appear to be in line with those of formal primary school**. Cost comparisons should also factor in that ABAL brings learning opportunities to remote areas, which are typically more expensive to cover (and in fact not covered at all in most cases) by public or private education providers.

Raising education awareness in marginalized communities

Sensitization activities made a difference in communities where awareness about schooling and child well-being had been limited. Many ABAL villages do not have a formal school. Prior to the establishment of a learning centre, children reportedly used to work in low-paying daily jobs, help with domestic chores, or simply spend their time playing or being idle. Case studies of ABAL beneficiaries collected by UNICEF Bangladesh highlighted greater awareness among parents about the importance of education (see Box 3), birth registration and child rights.

“I can see change in people in my village right now. They are aware of children’s education [to a degree] that I have never seen before [...]. Now, birth registration has been confirmed to ensure the rights of children.”

—Local officer, Shimulbak union

Many communities have taken ownership of ABAL learning centres, actively participating in their management. A learning society comprising teachers and community members was created in communities where ABAL centres were set up, with important implications for the sustainability of the interventions. In one programme village, ABAL learners' parents adopted a plan to run the learning centre in case the project came to an end. The parents there met monthly to discuss education-related challenges and find collective solutions to problems. In many other target communities, parents and other local actors regularly participated in the centres' management.

Box 3. Sensitizing parents about schooling: a case study from the field

LUL sensitization played a decisive role in changing parents' perspectives about schooling.

Parents interviewed as part of a case study in the Joykalosh union had initially refused to enrol their son at school. The father, the only breadwinner in a family of six, works as a fisherman and as a day labourer when his health allows it. Nobody in the family had ever studied and schooling was viewed as unnecessary. In these precarious economic circumstances, the opportunity cost of enrolling a child at school is high. When the ABAL learning centre opened its doors in the community, UNICEF's implementing partner, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, held meetings to sensitize parents of out-of-school children on the benefits of schooling. Although initially reluctant, these parents changed their mind after these sessions. Now, their son regularly attends a learning centre, enjoys socializing with his peers and has reportedly made remarkable progress in reading and writing.



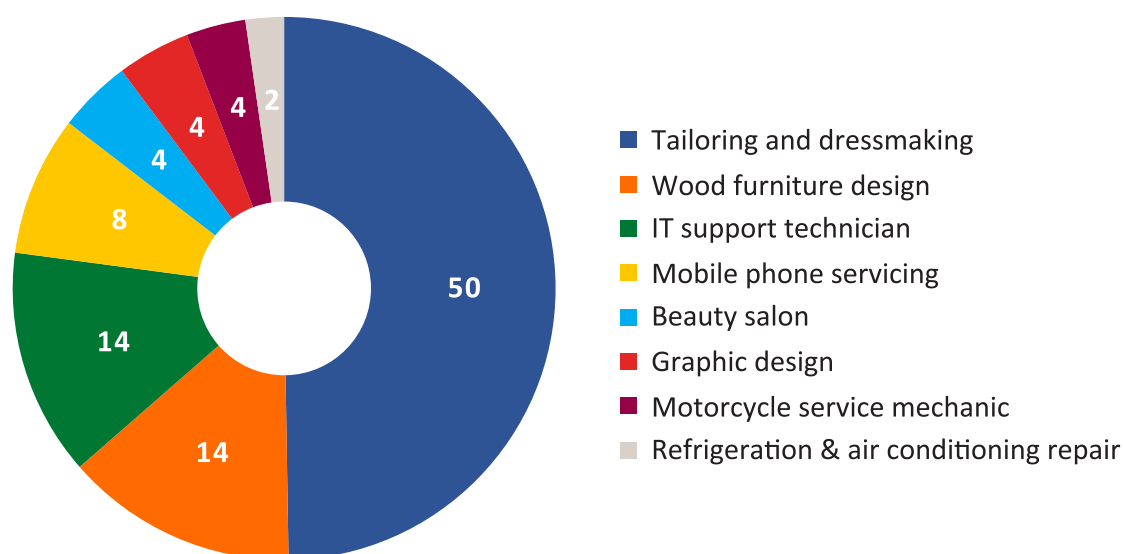
Credit: ©Shaiful Karim/Dhaka Ahsania Mission (February 2020)

ALP: VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS

Providing job-specific skills to out-of-school adolescents

Overall, ALP recruited 1,000 young adolescents, who were assigned to 400 dedicated master craft persons (MCP) – of whom 10 per cent were women. ALP offers on-the-job practical training that takes place at a designated community-based MCP's workplace four times a week for a duration of six months. MCPs, who were trained as part of programme activities to deliver competency-based training and assessment, received a monthly allowance of 2,000 Taka (US\$24) for providing training to up to three apprentices, besides benefiting from the operational support the trainees provided to their business. Despite the pandemic-induced economic slowdown, there has been hardly any turnover among the programme's MCPs. ALP learners could choose the trade in which they wanted to receive training. Figure 4 represents the full range of trades selected. The ALP component is implemented by BRAC.

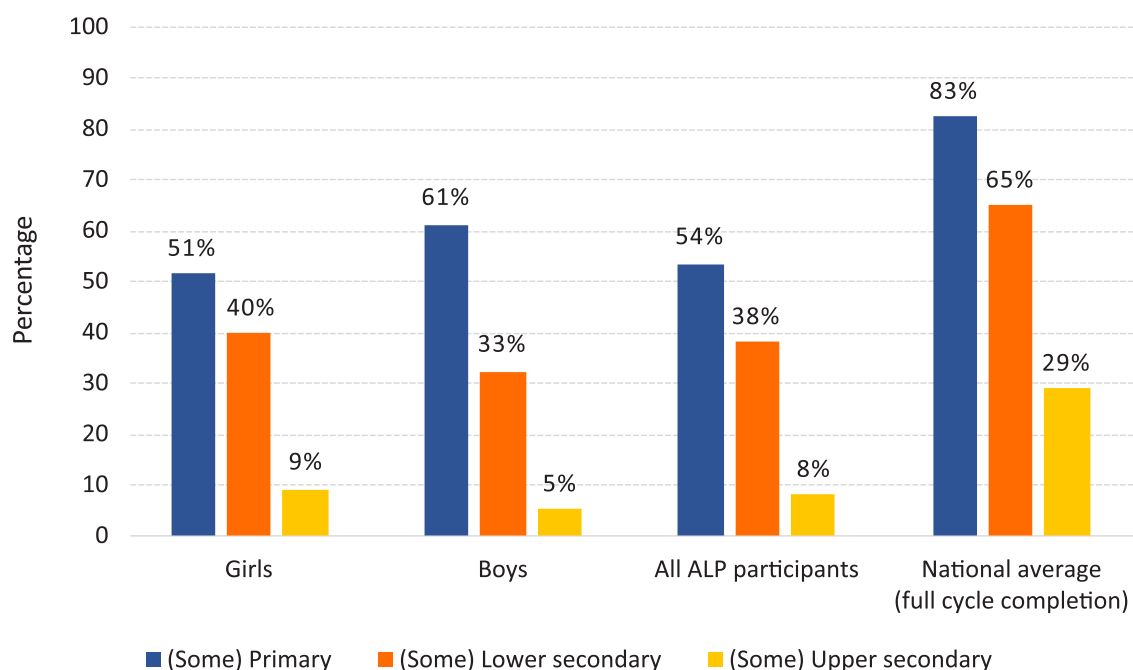
Figure 4. Full range of trades selected by ALP learners (per cent)



Source: ALP monitoring data 2019. N=961.

ALP catered for adolescents aged 14–18, especially girls (69 per cent), with low educational achievement. Only 54 per cent of ALP participants had completed part of or the full cycle of primary education, whereas 83 per cent of Bangladeshi children complete primary school nationwide (UNESCO UIS data, 2019). Similarly, 38 per cent of participants received some lower-secondary education (without necessarily completing), against a national average of 65 per cent finishing lower-secondary school. As Figure 5 highlights, boys had on average lower educational achievement than girls when enrolling in ALP.

Figure 5. Education achievement of participants upon enrolment, per cent, by gender



Source: ALP monitoring data 2019. N=961.

Most ALP participants faced poverty and other compounding aspects of marginalization. Over 90 per cent of the ALP participant cohort reported living on 2,000 Taka (US\$24) or less per head per month, equivalent to living below the international poverty line of US\$1.90 a day. Monitoring data documents ALP's efforts in including CwD: around 11 per cent of beneficiaries had a disability, most often a physical or visual impairment. In addition, 3 per cent of learners belonged to marginalized groups, including the Bihari community,¹⁰ orphans and street children.

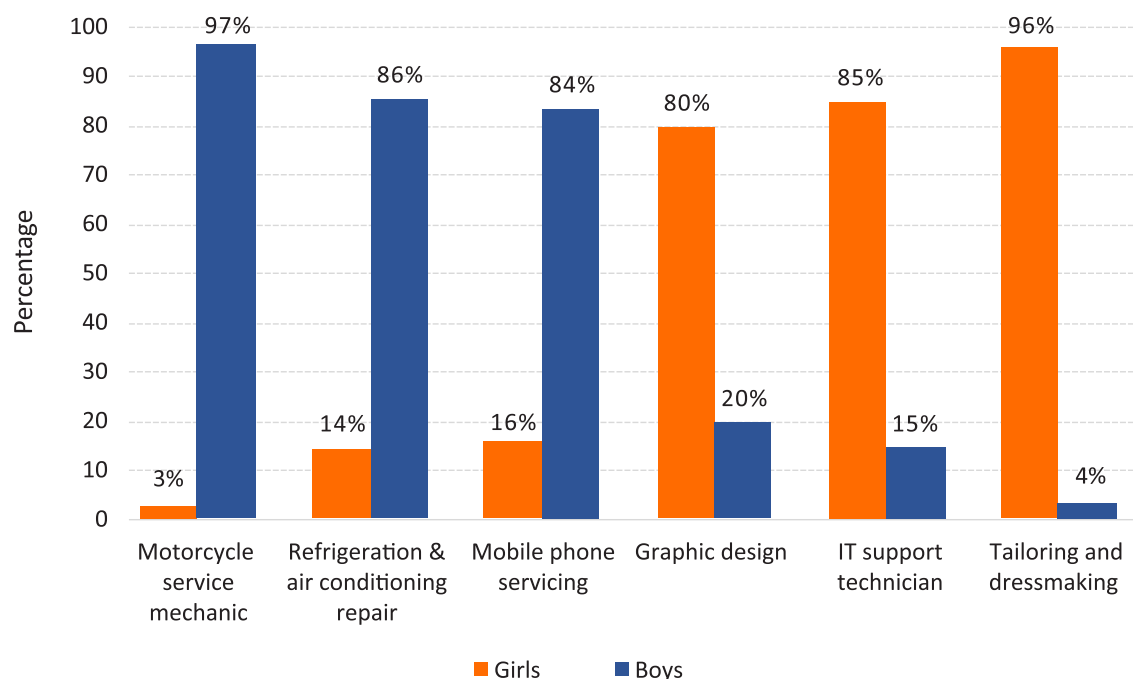
The ALP training experience

Out of the initial 1,000 participants in the 2019 cohort, 96 per cent successfully completed the programme. Migration and flood-related displacement towards areas outside of the ALP catchment zone were the main reasons behind dropout, which remains nonetheless limited. Girls largely opted for training in tailoring, IT support and graphic design, while boys largely engaged in motorcycle servicing, refrigeration/air conditioning repair and mobile phone servicing (Figure 6). While this breakdown highlights a distinct pattern in trade choices along gender lines, it also shows that **girls did not remain confined to traditional trades but also signed up for training in more modern and male-ascribed trades** such as IT support.¹¹ Girls represented 85 and 80 per cent of the trainees in IT support and graphic design, respectively.

¹⁰ Non-Bengali Muslims who originally belonged to the Eastern Indian State of Bihar. Many members of the Bihari community have been stranded in Bangladesh for several decades, with many still living in temporary settlements.

¹¹ For a discussion of gender imbalances in the IT sector, see Saifuddin et al. (2019).

Figure 6. Trades selected by ALP learners, by gender. Woodwork and beauty salon are not visualized as the number of participating girls (woodwork) and boys (beauty salon) was negligible or zero



Source: ALP monitoring data 2019. N=961.

Participants with a lower initial level of educational attainment tended to select more manual trades, while participants who had completed more schooling opted for trades requiring digital skills. Among ALP beneficiaries who only went to primary school, 58 per cent chose tailoring as compared to only 14 per cent among those who reached upper-secondary grades. In addition, participants with higher educational achievement largely selected more modern sectors, such as IT support (44 per cent) and graphic design (20 per cent). Higher educational attainment may shift a child's job aspirations, or, conversely, limited schooling may create behavioural barriers towards engaging in more modern, technology-intensive sectors requiring foundational and digital skills.

Although beneficiary-level data on attendance are not available, programme staff reported that **challenges existed in ensuring regular learner participation** especially during the rainy and fish-catching season.

Promoting employment, income generation and saving

Focus group discussions with participants and programme staff have widely documented that, **prior to enrolling in ALP, many beneficiaries used to spend their time working on low-paying manual jobs or simply being idle.** The programme played a decisive role in re-engaging these youth in the learning process.

96 per cent of ALP graduates found employment right after completing the programme, mainly with their respective MCP. MCPs were the main employers, but 4 per cent obtained a job at an external employer and 2 per cent started their own business, mainly in tailoring. Before the COVID-19-induced economic slowdown, virtually all MCPs claimed that there would be future job opportunities at their

store, offering promising indications on the relevance and sustainability of the training offered. Post-ALP employment results are in line with national post-TVET employment trends at the national level, which indicate that 94 per cent of TVET graduates find paid work or engage as self-employed entrepreneurs (Bangladesh Technical Education Board, 2018). Such statistics, however, refer to the broader TVET graduate population, including skilled and high-skilled labour that attended longer and more structured specialized training programmes. ALP instead provides a direct path towards employment to the most marginalized youth.

Post-ALP jobs became an additional source of income for beneficiaries. However, earnings were modest and discrepancies existed across genders. Overall, the average monthly salary from post-ALP jobs amounted to 2,580 Taka (about US\$30), which is equivalent to 19 per cent of the average household-level monthly income in rural Bangladesh.¹² Girls, who reported making 2,390 Taka (US\$28) per month, overall earned 25 per cent less than boys, whose earnings amounted to 3,000 Taka (US\$35). Earnings appeared to be more equal in modern trades, such as IT support and mobile phone servicing, but the sample size is too low to make conclusive statements. Girls earned more than boys only in the tailoring sector, by a modest margin of 6 per cent. Although most MCPs' businesses operate in the informal sector, the programme strives to uphold standards for decent jobs by delivering formal appointment letters that establish remuneration and benefits, and promoting a safe work environment.

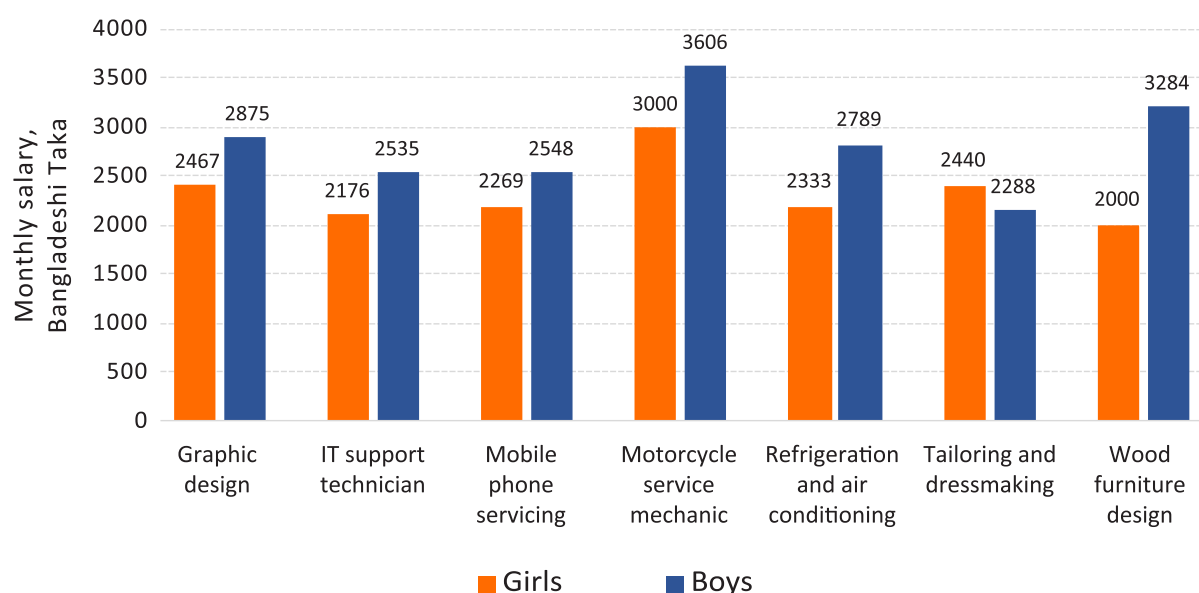
Anecdotal evidence from field programme staff suggests that the work experience that ALP trainees accumulate under the supervision of their MCP broadened future employment opportunities and earning potential, with some graduates moving on to better-paying businesses. Accreditation of ALP graduates could contribute to further improve remuneration in the job market, as well as enable them to continue professional or vocational training. Longer-term tracking of ALP employment and earning status is necessary to better quantify the sustainability of these jobs and their impact on living conditions.



Credit: ©Shaiful Karim/Dhaka Ahsania Mission (February 2020)

12 The average income for rural households was 13,353 Taka in 2016. Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2017).

Figure 7. Monthly salary reported by ALP participants, Bangladeshi Taka, by gender. The trade of Beauticians is not included because it had no male participants



N=961. Source: ALP monitoring data 2019.

Participation in ALP promoted moderate savings. While modest, post-ALP monthly salaries constituted fair entry-level remuneration for graduates, most of whom have limited educational achievement and job-specific experience. Monitoring data indicate that 92 per cent of participants were able to save up to US\$4 on a monthly basis (equivalent to 13 per cent of their monthly salary), while the remaining 8 per cent saved between US\$4 and US\$8 monthly.

Participation in ALP helped reduce pressures for early marriage for girls. Several face-to-face interviews with girls revealed that their participation in ALP had made parents change their minds about adolescent girls' role and prospects. ALP allowed girls to gain the space they need to pursue their interests and to visualize a future with alternative opportunities. According to an ALP Program Manager, seeing that their daughters can contribute financially to household revenues through their work delayed parents' decisions to marry off their daughters.

"ALP saved us from [early] marriage."

—Two ALP female beneficiaries in the tailoring sector

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The three learning pathways that UNICEF Bangladesh and its partners deliver in the Sylhet region as part of the LUL initiative have effectively expanded access to quality education pathways for children who would otherwise be out of school. These pathways are making a decisive contribution towards marginalized children's **'readiness' at three key transition points: entry into primary school, acquiring foundational skills to access learning, and entry into the job market**. Although the programmes have benefited vulnerable groups, such as children living in poor households, ethnic minorities and girls, additional investments may be needed for targeting children with disabilities, whose participation in PPE and ABAL remains limited. The main recommendations stemming from the evidence summarized in this report are:

UNICEF and implementing partners:

- Continue the scale-up of community-based programmes such as PPE, ABAL and ALP in hard-to-reach communities where access to government schools is lacking, to bring tailored learning pathways to vulnerable out-of-school children. Consider producing an in-depth investment case to raise additional funding to sustain the scale-up of the programmes.
- Boost participation of children with disabilities in PPE and ABAL through promoting awareness at the community level; and through assessing the inclusiveness of facilitators' training, their preparedness to identify and refer CwD, and the accessibility of learning spaces and materials for all – taking corrective measures accordingly.
- Continue raising awareness at the community level on children's education and rights, particularly for girls, to promote their continued learning and reduce child marriage.
- As part of the COVID-19 response, continue engaging beneficiary families and learners to pre-empt dropout from programmes and identify ways to provide remedial support to mitigate learning loss.
- Further increase monitoring efforts to collect high-quality data on learning and learning loss, particularly for foundational skills, and longer-terms outcomes, such as advancement in school (for PPE and ABAL graduates) and employment and revenues (ALP).

Ministry of Education, wider government and development partners:

- Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB): consider accreditation of adolescents who complete training in ALP and pass an associated assessment.
- Ministry of Youth and Employment: consider supporting MCP-mediated training as an effective, community-based solution for training adolescents, particularly in remote areas, and providing them with a direct pathway to employment.
- Ministry of Education: consider promoting the development and administration of adapted learning assessment instruments for non-formal education, as well as capacity-building in this area, to identify the most impactful learning practices for out-of-school children.

Researchers:

- Collect and analyse high-quality data on learning, school advancement and non-cognitive skills through validated tools to further explore the contribution of alternative learning pathways on foundational and socio-emotional skills.
- Collect and analyse longitudinal data on employability, revenues and work conditions of ALP graduates to explore longer-term outcomes of the programme.

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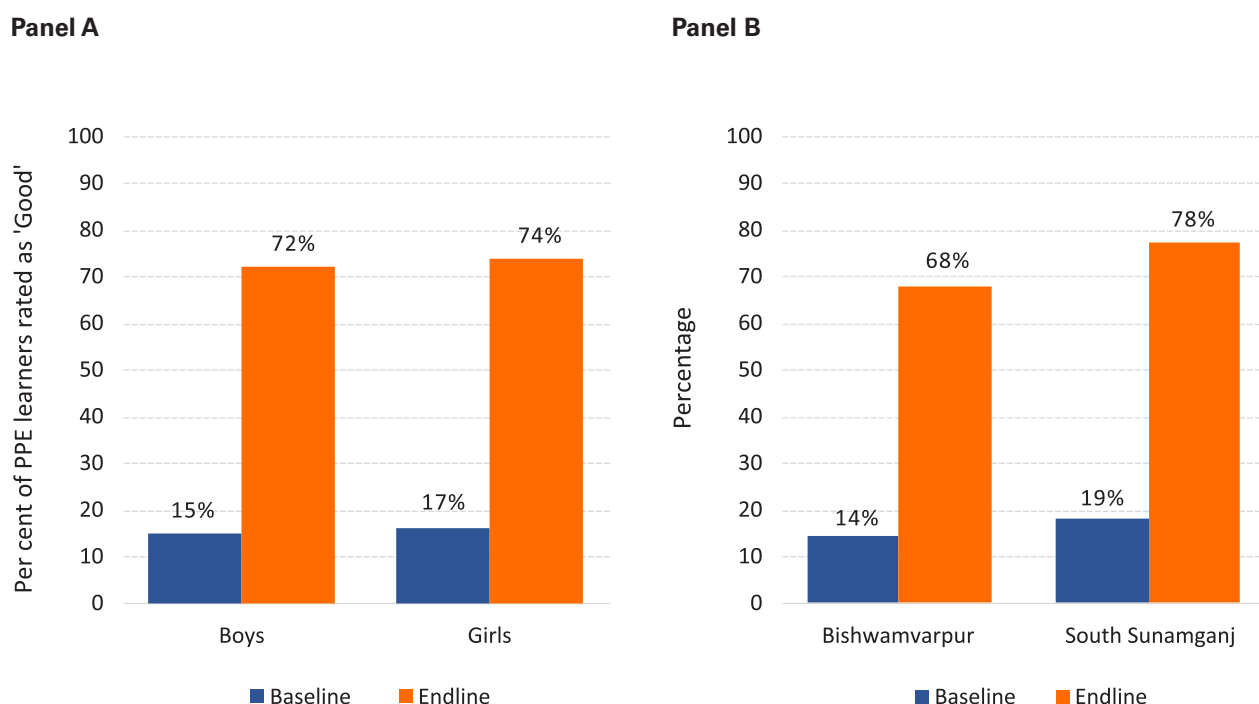
ANNEX A – ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE ON PPE

Children's development evaluation assessment

Children's development towards school readiness is measured through a multidimensional, continuous evaluation system. The evaluation system comprises indicators on school attendance, active participation in the classroom, social and emotional skills, and awareness of good hygiene practice. The assessment is conducted monthly by the dedicated facilitator. Facilitators regularly inform parents about their child's score and progress over time, although the implementing partner reported that parental engagement on this assessment exercise has been mixed.

Overall, assessment data for the 2020 cohort show remarkable progress, from an initial situation of generalized low performance. At baseline, 58 per cent of children needed improvement and 26 per cent of were graded as 'Moderate', while only 16 per cent received the highest score, 'Good'. At baseline, girls were performing slightly better than boys, but both groups show remarkable performance at programme completion (Figure A1, panel A). PPE beneficiaries in the South Sunamganj sub-district were performing slightly better than their peers in Bishwamvarpur, but again the relative improvement is similar across the two sub-districts (panel B).

Figure A1. Percentage of PPE beneficiary rating 'Good' at baseline and at programme completion, by gender (panel A) and by sub-district (panel B)



Source: PPE monitoring data, 2020 cohort. N=4,500.

ANNEX B – ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE ON ABAL

Baseline assessment results

Baseline test scores show that participants generally performed poorly on all subjects covered, including Social Science, English, Maths and Bangla (Table B1). A baseline assessment of ABAL participants is carried out upon enrolment and is used to place students in a level that is adapted to their skills, for each subject. Those scoring from 0 to 9 (out of 25) are placed in the first level, those scoring from 10 to 17 are placed in the second level and those scoring 18 to 25 are placed in the third level. The average scores in Maths and Bangla, the subjects where participants fared best, did not exceed a score of 6 points out of 25. Social Science was the subject where students on average achieved the lowest score (2.7 out of 25). As Figure B2 illustrates, **the largest share of students tested were therefore placed in the first level for all the subjects.**

Table B1. ABAL participants' baseline assessment results

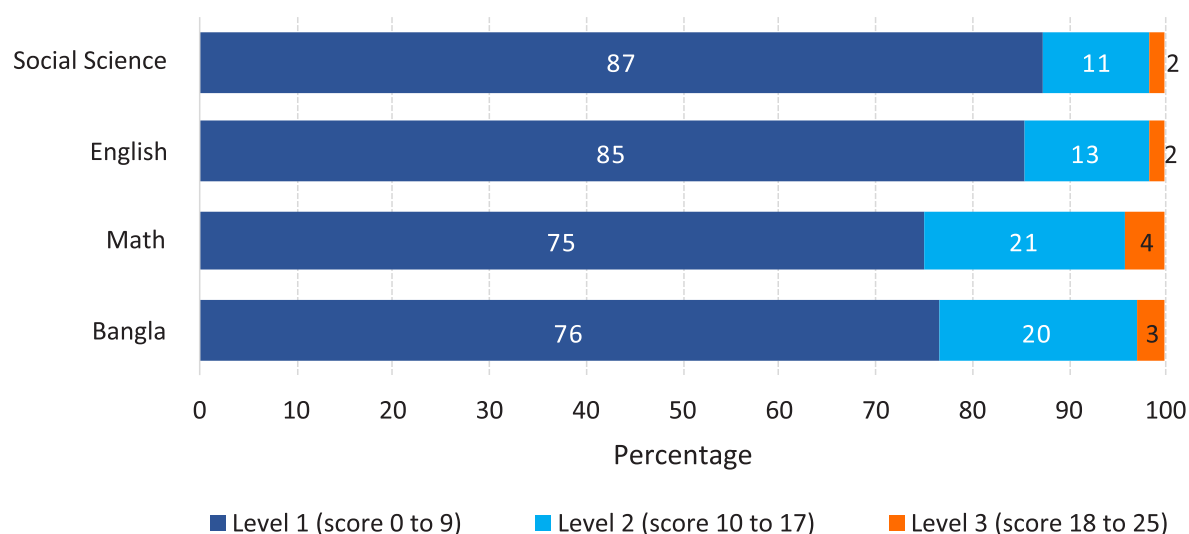
Subject	Average score (out of 25)
Maths	6.3
Bangla	6.3
English	4.0
Social Science	2.7

Source: ABAL monitoring data, 2019-2020. N=3,751.

Several hypotheses may explain such low scores. First, most children were out of school and had dropped out at early stages. Some may have dropped out of school years before and forgotten what they had previously learned. In addition, although access to primary education has greatly expanded in Bangladesh, improving students learning achievement has been less successful. National assessments show that enrolled students at all grade levels were failing to master grade-level competencies.¹³

¹³ For example, in Maths, mastery of grade-level competencies was only achieved by 38 per cent of grade 3, 24 per cent of grade 5, and 35 per cent of grade 8 students. In literacy, 47 per cent of grade 3, and 36 per cent of grade 5 students mastered grade-level competencies in Bangla and 44 per cent of grade 8 achieved mastery of English (DPE, 2017).

Figure B2. Grade placement of ABAL participants, based on baseline score, for each subject



Source: ABAL monitoring data, 2019-2020. N=3,751.

Factors associated with likelihood of mainstreaming

Preliminary multivariate analysis can shed light on which individual factors are associated with the likelihood of ABAL learners mainstreaming into formal school. The ‘probit’ model developed for this purpose includes whether a child mainstreams into formal school as the outcome variable, with age, gender, educational family background (mother’s education) and enrolment date as explanatory variables. Learning achievement is the powerful explanatory variable in this model. Learners are much more likely to decide to mainstream into formal school when they achieve basic grade 1-level skills than when they master higher skills equivalent to grades 2 to 4. This may also be because it is easier for schools to accept earlier grade students than older, overage students in the middle of the primary cycle. Opting for mainstreaming is also more likely early in the programme, i.e. after only one year, rather than later (more than one year). Learners’ age and their mothers’ educational attainment are also positively correlated with the likelihood of mainstreaming. The analysis does not show any differences in mainstreaming likelihood between girls and boys.

As mentioned above, this analysis is only preliminary. Additional monitoring data, for instance on distance from formal school or family income, would be needed to further refine the model to understand the specific factors associated with mainstreaming. Qualitative research around mainstreaming would also be useful to provide nuances to the decision-making process.

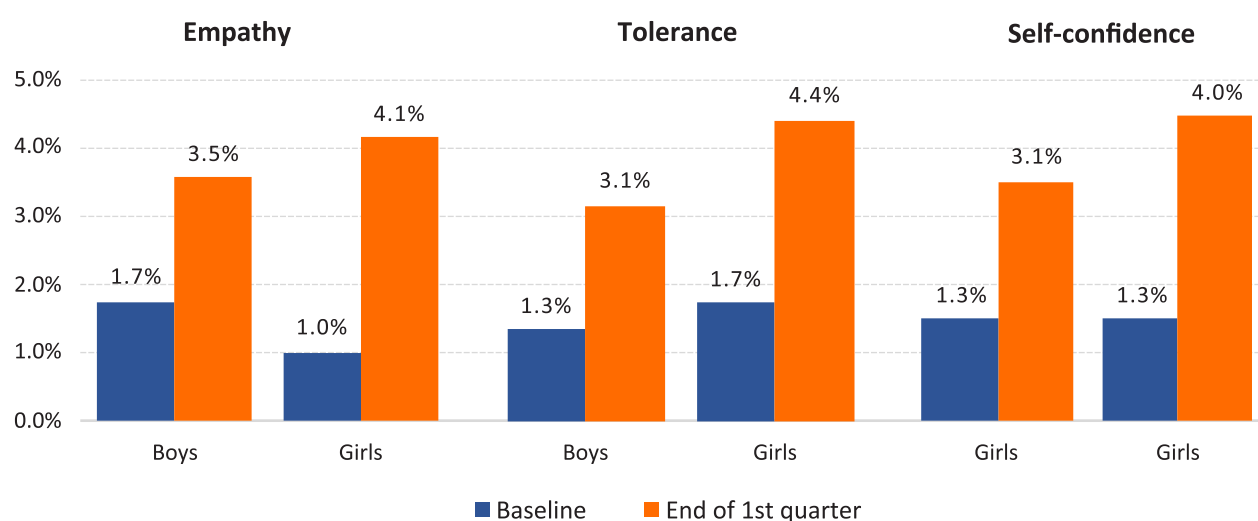
Non-cognitive skills assessment

As part of a pilot assessment of non-cognitive skills, ABAL’s implementing partner has trained teachers to evaluate programme participants’ empathy, tolerance, self-confidence and morality. For each of these, children are graded as ‘Non-satisfactory’, ‘Moderate’ and ‘Good’, based on a detailed scoring system. The assessment is conducted on a quarterly basis, which allows students’ progress to be tracked over time.

The baseline percentage of ABAL learners that were rated ‘Good’ is strikingly low, accounting for less than 2 per cent of the full sample. The combined share of ‘Good’ and ‘Moderate’ does not exceed 10–13

per cent of the whole cohort. Such low figures may reveal some limitations in the assessment tools and the objectivity of the ratings. These scores should therefore be treated with caution. That said, data shows marked progress at the end of the first quarter, across all non-cognitive skills (Figure B3). Girls, particularly, show encouraging improvements in terms of empathy and self-confidence, where the proportion ranking as 'Good' has quadrupled over the assessment period. Despite these gains, however, non-cognitive skill levels continue to be rated low overall. In future, the grading protocols will be progressively refined, as teachers will become increasingly familiar with the evaluation of non-cognitive skills.

Figure B3. Baseline and end-of-first-quarter non-cognitive skills scores: percentages graded as 'Good' for each non-cognitive skill



Source: ABAL monitoring data, 2019-2020. N=3,000.

ANNEX C – CALCULATIONS FOR COST COMPARISONS

In order to conduct the cost comparisons between the various alternative learning pathways explored in this report and government programmes the following calculations were conducted:

Pre-primary public-school costs

Total projected public expenditures, pre-primary education, year 2021 (Taka crore): 5,306

Exchange rate: 1 US\$ = 84.68 Taka; 1 crore = 10,000,000 Taka

Total projected public expenditures for pre-primary education, year 2021, in US\$:

$5,306 \times 10,000,000 / 84.68 = 626,594,237$ US\$

Enrolment target¹⁴ at pre-primary level, year 2020: 3,548,520

Government-wide unit cost per pre-primary student (excluding household expenditures): 177 US\$

Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2020. [Education Sector Plan \(ESP\) for Bangladesh, Fiscal Years 2020/21 – 2024/25](#).

¹⁴ All cost figures concerning pre-primary education (PPE) are projections from the Education Sector Plan 2021–24, as the authors could not find solid data on actual costs. As such, these cost projections are based on enrolment targets rather than on actual numbers of PPE learners enrolled, to avoid distortions.

for every child, answers

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