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Do programmes outside the formal education system improve children's literacy in developing countries?

For a majority of children globally, the substantial increase in access to primary schooling has not led to a significant improvement in learning. To address this learning gap, numerous programmes are being implemented outside the formal education system to improve children's literacy. These programmes aim to supplement what children learn in schools, or they are intended as alternatives for children who do not have access to pre-primary or primary education.

A recent 3ie-funded systematic review examined the effectiveness of programmes that are aimed at parents, families and communities for improving children's literacy in low- and middle-income countries. The reviewers assessed the effectiveness of educational television, interventions that show parents how to support their children's readiness for school, and interventions that use a tutoring approach involving peers or adult community members.

Main findings

- Educational television, when viewed three to five days a week over four months, had a positive effect on the literacy of children of pre-primary school age. However, viewing television less than three times a week did not have a significant effect.

- Interventions that showed parents how to develop their child's readiness for school were found not to be effective overall, but they worked well in specific contexts in Armenia, Kazakhstan and Turkey.
- Peer tutoring had a positive effect on children's early writing skills, including knowing how to hold a pencil and how to write some letters.
- There is no rigorous evidence available on the effectiveness of several kinds of supplementary interventions, such as community libraries, reading clubs, local language publishing, electronic readers and laptops intended for use outside school, religious instruction, and community mobilisation.

What is a systematic review?

3ie-funded systematic reviews use rigorous and transparent methods to identify, appraise and synthesise all of the relevant studies to address a specific review question. Review authors search for published and unpublished studies and use a theory-based approach to say what evidence is generalisable and what is more context-specific. The result is an unbiased assessment of what works, for whom and why.

About the systematic review: This brief is based on *Parental, community, and familial support interventions to improve children's literacy in developing countries: a systematic review*, 3ie Systematic Review 26 by Elizabeth Spier, Pia Britto, Terri Pigott, Eugene Roehlkapartain, Michael McCarthy, Yael Kidron, Mengli Song, Peter Scales, Dan Wagner, Julia Lane and Janis Glover. This review synthesised findings from 13 quantitative studies, which examined interventions implemented in Armenia, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Yemen.

In this review, literacy was measured in terms of reading and writing skill-related outcomes. Literacy of pre-school children or pre-literacy was measured in terms of vocabulary, phonemic awareness, concepts of print and decoding skills, among others.

Useful evidence for policy and programming

Educational television was often compensatory rather than supplementary.

The reviewers found that educational television was often provided in countries where formal pre-school programmes are either not widely available or affordable. They were targeted at children and families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Hence educational television was often compensatory rather than supplementary to school-based programmes.

There was variability across countries on time spent by parents on educational activities at home, although participation in parent-support programmes was high across studies. Most of the studies on parent-support programmes involved take-home assignments. Researchers found that parents or adult caregivers often lacked time to engage in activities with children.

Evidence to inform research priorities

The evidence available is almost entirely focused on children aged five to seven. The review also shows that there is no rigorous evidence on a wide variety of supplementary literacy programmes being implemented outside the formal education system. There is an urgent need for generating high-quality evidence for assessing the effectiveness of these programmes for children across different age groups and contexts.



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