Learning to Play, Playing to Heal: An Evaluation of Early Childhood Education Access for Refugee Children in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION
Framing the issues at hand

While a majority of refugee children receive primary schooling, a significant number—around 16% of refugee children aged 3-14 and over 80% of children aged 15-24 continue to lack access to a quality education (Hossain, 2023:1). In fact, out of the 64 districts in Bangladesh, Cox Bazar holds the lowest net education enrollment rate and the second highest dropout rate in the nation, indicating that robust interventions are necessary for the long-term development of refugee adolescents and children (Amnesty International, 2020:1; McCaffrie, 2019:58).

These conditions become all the more glaring when considering that of the nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees in Cox Bazar, over half (52%) are women and (55%) children (UNHCR 2023:1). Nestled in the crevice of the Bangladeshi border, the region and world’s most populous camp enjoys just 13 square kilometers of space, or just around 140 square feet per person (UNHCR 2022:1). Today, the camp’s burgeoning population is a product of over six years in the making, when violence at the neighboring Rakhine state of Myanmar drove more than 742,000 Rohingyas into Bangladesh in 2017 (UNHCR 2022:1). Consequently, the humanitarian crisis in Cox Bazar has never been more dire.

Despite its recognition as a human right under various international accords, including Article 22 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and as a fourth priority under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the right to a quality education for refugees has long remained a contested issue. Of the 14.8 million refugee children, only half are enrolled in schools (UNHCR 2023:1).

While almost 2/3rds of those children are enrolled in a primary school, these rates begin to taper off; only 41% and 6% are enrolled in secondary and tertiary-level schooling respectively (UNHCR 2023:1). When compared to non-refugee students, educational enrollment rates among refugees are significantly lower than (around half) the global average (UNHCR 2023:1). Despite these trends however, only 2.9% of global humanitarian aid was apportioned to education in 2021, making it one of the least funded areas amongst the 17 SDGs (United Nations, 2022:1).

In Cox Bazar, the educational crisis (particularly amongst refugee children) is no different. The majority of Rohingya children living in the region’s refugee camp continue to stand at critical levels. Without access to an education, various reports have suggested that Rohingya refugee youth are at increased risk of experiencing various forms of violence, exploitation, neglect and/or abuse (State Department 2019:127; Spires, 2021:9). Vulnerable refugee youth including girls and disabled children are more likely to experience unique social stressors (e.g. child marriage and discrimination) that complicate their access to a quality education (USAID, 2018:44; IRC, 2021:4; UNICEF, 2022:1). As these issues persist, various humanitarian groups have expressed concern that the narrowing window of educational opportunities available to youth will trigger a “lost generation” of children, as many grow without the knowledge and ambition necessary to succeed (UNICEF, 2018:1; Amnesty International, 2020:1).

Key Takeaways

- Currently, only 5-6% of Rohingya refugee children with access to an education are enrolled in an Early Childhood Education (ECE) or Development Program (ECD) in Cox Bazar (MPME 2018:10; OCHA 2022:1)
- Despite efforts by BRAC and other agencies to expand refugee ECE access through Humanitarian Play Labs (a play-based learning model), the current scale and architecture of financing and building the labs are insufficient to respond to the rising need for refugee education.
- There is promising evidence of the effectiveness of play-based education models in emergencies, but issues including physical space and political gridlock have impeded scaleability.
- Potential solutions may include increased coordination with the government of Bangladesh and implementing agencies, as well as remote-based/distance learning opportunities for refugees in underserved areas.
Evidently, the implications of limited educational access are particularly profound in Cox's Bazar, where over half of the Rohingya refugees are children. Because refugee children are already predisposed to conflict-based violence, securing an education can help to provide a sense of normalcy, encourage long-term growth, and stabilize communities post-conflict (Education in Emergencies, 2023:1). Yet, ensuring a robust education—especially during emergencies—has long been a challenging endeavor; in part due to systemic and structural barriers surrounding access and learning outcomes. Children receiving an education in refugee camps face a myriad of issues, including inter alia, disproportionate student-teacher ratios, poor quality of instruction, and insufficient learning materials/facilities (USAID, 2018:29). As a result, many children are often forced to put their education on hold until after they're resettled within a new society (Kurshan, 2019:1). Similarly in Cox Bazar, expectations and resistance surrounding refugee resettlement have heavily impeded efforts in facilitating refugee education and inclusion. While the state of Bangladesh has been lauded for accepting Rohingya refugees, the government has taken steps to limit refugee integration in the hopes that they may one day repatriate back to Myanmar. As such, Rohingya refugees have long been denied access to the state's national education system, including the Bangladeshi curriculum, work, land to grow food, and general movement outside of the camps they reside in (Batha 2023:1). Subsequently, the restriction of movement means that any education offered outside of the camps and in permanent structures are prohibited as well (Esveld, 2019:1; Human Rights Watch, 2022:1).

Given these circumstances, children are administered an informal, temporary education by a constellation of non-state actors, including UNICEF and BRAC. Across the camps themselves, around 3,400 learning centers are in operation, a majority of which (around 2800) are coordinated by UNICEF and UNHCR (UNICEF 2023:1). Together, various solutions and initiatives have been posed to alleviate the issue of refugee education access in Cox Bazar. However, few have been analyzed for their effectiveness on psychosocial, socioemotional, and learning outcomes amongst Rohingya children.

Although immense progress has been made to increase education access, particularly around primary enrollment among Rohingya refugees (currently 82%), only 5-6% of children are currently enrolled in an early childhood education (ECE) (Shohel 2023:1; MPME 2018:10; OCHA 2022:1). As such, this policy brief examines the efficacy of refugee education, primarily at the ECE level.

The issue of refugee education has been an enduring crisis in Cox Bazar, where over half of the refugee population are children (UNICEF 2023:1). Although over 5,700 learning facilities are currently in operation—a majority of which are run by UNICEF—access to an early childhood education (ECE) stands at critically low numbers. According to the Bangladesh Ministry of Education and UNICEF, only 5-6% of Rohingya children with access to an education were enrolled in an ECE and/or ECD program (MPME 2018:10; OCHA 2022:1)

Consequently, the Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL or the ‘Play Lab’) is a programmatic framework that emerged in response to growing restrictions and child protection concerns surrounding ECE access amongst refugee children. Developed in 2015 by BRAC, a member of the Child Protection Sub-Sector (CPSS) and Bangladesh’s largest NGO, HPL is a culturally responsive, play-based learning program that combines psychosocial support for children in crisis contexts. Since its inception, the model has been adapted for use in three countries: Uganda, Tanzania, and Bangladesh—each with large refugee populations running from 250,000 to over 1.5 million (UNHCR 2023:1). In Bangladesh, the program has served over 43,000 low-income Rohingya children ages 0-6 at Play Labs in the Ukhiya, Teknaf, and Cox Bazar regions since its implementation in 2017 (INEE 2022:8; BRAC 2021:2).
Finally, mental health plays a large role in guiding the program’s response to ECE education. With supervision, training, and support from the national program (BRAC), frontline staff, including facilitators and paracounselors, are able to identify potential risk factors in children and make referrals where appropriate (Rahman et al. 2023:1). Through continual clinical assessments and data collection, the program has been able to streamline and adapt its content for use in HPL’s curriculum.

Although little scholarly ink has been spilled on the efficacy of HPL, extant research findings have shown promising results. For instance, in a study involving 367 students, researchers found that between the control and intervention group, HPL students performed significantly better compared to the control group across areas including Verbal IQ, Early Learning and Development Standards, and the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ3). For instance, in ASQ3, a screening tool used to monitor the physical, socio-emotional, and intellectual development of children over time, students in the HPL’s average score increased by 88.61 points compared to only 16.36 for the control (BRAC 2021:4). Similarly, across Verbal IQs, HPL students improved by 23.53 IQ points compared to only 5.63 increase for the latter (BRAC 2021:4). The effect scores (a statistical measure that quantifies the effectiveness of an intervention) in these areas ranged from 1.79 to 4.45—indicating an extraordinarily high impact of the program (Hattie 2012:87).
However, further attention is needed to address gaps in service delivery, especially when considering that more than half of school-aged children in the region lack access to mobile networks and other learning modalities (i.e., paper-based materials) (UNICEF 2020:1). Finally, as a humanitarian agency, BRAC’s ability to provide services including HPL, is mainly dependent on the GoB’s approved policies and mandates. Although the Ministry of Education is more lenient on education provision for Rohingya children, the NGO Affairs Bureau, which oversees and authorizes activities in the camps, does not officially recognize play-based learning opportunities in the camps (Mahru 2020:1). Consequently, the bureaucratic process of approving program funding and operations have hampered the program’s capacity to deliver consistent and long-term educational services (Katende et al., 2022:8).

Put simply, the HPL program has been successful in providing ECE access through play-based learning for low-income Rohingya refugee children, but more must be done to effectuate access in underserved areas. As further pilots are underway across Bangladesh, future studies and policies are warranted to best scale HPL’s framework across Cox Bazar. Such adaptations should align with the GoB’s repatriation strategy while ensuring that the educational and socio-emotional development of the Rohingya community is sustained.


RECCOMENDATIONS
What can be done?

As noted, obstacles towards adopting the BRAC’s HPL model across Cox Bazar are primarily rooted in the program’s ability to scale and operate effectively. The first barrier relates to the lack of physical infrastructure and space in the camps for HPL to operate, while the second stems from regulatory restrictions imposed by the Bangladesh government. Consequently, this policy brief analyzes two potential recommendations that may help address gaps in educational service delivery.

- Expanding Access through Distanced, Remote, and Flexible Education Models
- Strengthening ECE Access through Intersectoral Coordination

The promising potential of HPL on refugee education has moved the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to pilot the program’s playing model in over 3,200 public schools nationwide (INEE 2022:21). Given HPL’s initial success, several lessons come to mind. For one, BRAC’s position as a native NGO and member of CPSS (encompassing areas including health, education, shelter, etc.) allowed it to coordinate, scale, and adapt quickly in the face of numerous obstacles (i.e., natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic). Similarly, the program’s bottom-up approach, which emphasized deep community involvement and understanding of the Rohingya context, was central to its success and subsequent acceptance within the camps. Although BRACC initially faced resistance regarding some of HPL’s programmatic decisions (i.e., to hire women exclusively as Play Leaders), the program’s participatory approach to integrating community feedback allowed it to overcome strong cultural and gendered barriers (Rahmman et al. 2023:1; Mariam et al. 2021:148). Throughout every stage of its development, BRAC harnessed national expertise with on-the-ground support to develop culturally responsive curriculum and materials that were low-cost and sustainable (Rahman et al. 2023:1). Since its initial implementation in 2017, HPL’s curriculum has undergone various iterations in areas including inter alia, cultural and psychosocial support based on continual feedback and input (Mariam et al. 2019:1).

Nonetheless, challenges remain. Given the cramped conditions of the camps in Cox Bazar, finding the capacity to physically scale was difficult (Hossain 2021:119). Although BRAC’s early engagement in the crisis mitigated some logistical challenges, the pace of HPL’s expansion in the region has been limited at best. As of 2023, over 117,000 refugee children continue to lack access to a quality education (OCHA 2023:1). Another challenge that HPL faced was navigating natural disaster response. With frequent closures to centers and infrastructure in the region, BRAC adapted its response to include remote learning material (i.e., electronic radios) for refugee children in low-resource areas (BRAC 2023:1).
Finally, Pashe Acchi’s use during the COVID-19 pandemic better facilitates its implementation. With a pre-existing program framework to draw from, there’s less need to reinvent the program from the ground up. In recognition of these benefits, BRAC has increased its remote programming to regions of the country where HPLs are not present (Mariam and Ahmad 2023:61).

However, as models are adapted for specific contexts, BRAC must leverage its capital and networks that build upon Pashe Acchi’s preceding footprint. An emphasis on strengthening the region’s service infrastructure to accommodate low- or no-tech modalities (i.e., books, radio stations, etc.) is critical, especially considering that over half of school-aged children in Cox Bazar lack access to mobile networks and other learning modalities (UNICEF 2020:1). Although the initial upkeep of providing technology may require some funding, evidence has shown that for every dollar invested in education access, the return on investment ranges from nine to seventeen dollars in benefits due to increased years of education and reduced repetition (Muroga et al. 2020:9; Zubairi and Rose, 2017:1).

Finally, there are trade-offs to be considered concerning remote learning. Although Pashe Acchi successfully increased ECE access among children, many parents felt that the frequency of program instruction was insufficient (Rahman et al. 2020:35). Moreover, because play leaders were not physically present, remote learning often necessitated greater parental involvement in their children’s learning (e.g., inter alia, supervising technology use, and providing learning materials) (Rahman 2020:41). Especially in areas where access to teacher(s) and play leaders are limited, changes in the curriculum are necessary to outsource learning support to households and families. Additionally, examining program capacity, including staff and curriculum capabilities, is necessary to adapt the duration and/or frequency of instruction to achieve students’ long-term learning needs.
In Mozambique, for example, respondents from the Ministry of Women and Social Action praised the program for reducing administrative inefficiencies and costs across various sectors (UNJP 2015:28). As such, through effective planning and implementation, the UNJP not only strengthened coordination efforts but also enhanced the role of UN partners within ongoing governmental initiatives (UNJP 2015:28).

In light of these issues, humanitarian actors, including BRAC, should continue to engage with the GoB to streamline bureaucratic processes where possible. A good first step would be to establish shared benchmarks and pilots in partnership with the GoB (Bell et al. 2023:7). As of current, membership requirements for sectors including the Child Protection and Education group carry some provisions for including a GoB focal point; however, additional spaces should be included to ensure adequate representation and feedback from relevant GoB stakeholders (Rohingya Response 2023:1; Mahruf 2023:1). Such a step would involve the creation and adoption of permanent GoB membership that include key stakeholders (i.e., the NGO Affairs Bureau) on key working groups/sectors while relying on current networks (i.e., UN agencies) to revitalize joint planning initiatives.

At the same time, BRAC must be careful not to oversaturate its coordination efforts in a way that dilutes the organization's negotiating and advocacy apparatus. Especially when considering the number of actors who oversee the Rohingya refugee response (i.e., over 116 organizations are members of the Rohingya Joint Response Plan alone), the multitude of stakeholders—all of which hold different mandates and organizational dynamics—can also pose challenges to information-sharing, alignment on educational goals/needs, and implementation (Post et al. 2019:17; Rohingya Response 2023:1). Consequently, a careful balance between strategic partnership and meaningful inclusion is necessary to ensure that multilateral approaches to increase ECE access are not unduly bureaucratized.

Although various multilateral initiatives exist, a successful framework can be traced back to the UN’s Joint Program (UNJP) on Social Protection. Implemented by different UN agencies, the UNJP is a framework that has been adopted in numerous states to expand social protection systems in crisis contexts (UNJP 2022:1). Since 2007, the UNJP has worked with governments to strengthen national planning and budgeting capacities, evaluation and monitoring, and developing strategies for coordination and implementation.


BRACWorld. “Children in #Rohingya camps are one step closer to accessing formal education. 40,000 BRAC school students received over 179,000 textbooks on the Myanmar National Curriculum under the Bangladesh government’s initiative in partnership with UNICEF and UNHCR. @UNICEFBD @UNHCR_BGD” Twitter, 7 August 2022, https://twitter.com/BRACworld/status/1556141729295638529


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As the son of Vietnamese refugees, Daniel holds a deep fascination with issues and initiatives relating to immigrant integration and socioeconomic mobilization. His interests span a broad range of issues, from housing accessibility to higher education equity.

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