

The background of the cover is a photograph of several children in a classroom setting. A young girl in the center, wearing a green dress and a yellow patterned sash, is smiling and has her right arm raised. To her right, a boy is also smiling and has his hand raised. Other children are visible in the background, some looking towards the camera. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

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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BIMI Policy Brief Series

A Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative publication

Source: World Vision

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. For the majority of Rohingya children living in the region's refugee camps, student enrollment continues 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 (f.e 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).



Over half of Rohingya refugees living in Cox Bazar are children yet only



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.

HUMANITARIAN PLAY LAB Where Children play to Learn

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).



Source: Sesame Workshop

Given the protracted refugee crisis in Cox Bazar, HPL was devised to incorporate psychosocial support, child protection services, and instruction that were both culturally responsive and age-appropriate for the Rohingya refugee population. These interventions were primarily grounded in two axioms. The first axis was that psychological services were essential to stabilize and foster resilience in refugee children; while the second was based on the belief that incorporating activities from the Rohingya culture would instill a sense of belonging, which is crucial for healing and community building (BRAC 2019:1; INEE 2022:24). Consequently, HPL’s curriculum includes various elements that promote the Rohingya culture, language, and identity. The BRAC learning service model exemplifies this approach, staffing Rohingya women from within the camp to work as HPL instructors (called Play Leaders) (Mariam et al. 2021:139).

Under the HPL model, children are separated into three cohorts depending on their age. The first is a home-based model for children ages 0-2. Taught with the help of facilitators and paracounselors, the first track primarily targets mothers as the primary beneficiaries of learning. Through weekly lesson plans, mothers learn about maternal mental health and infant stimulation, with activities modified to meet the mother’s needs. Although meetings are limited to only once a week, HPL staff conduct regular home visits with follow-up counseling for families in need of additional support (Rahman et al. 2023:1). For children ages 2-4 and 4-6 respectively, the HPL model is either set in a more intimate home-based (HB) setting for children (around 15) ages 2-4 and/or larger center-based (CB) approach that can support up to 40 students ages 2-6 per center (Mariam et al. 2021:140). In both models, children engage in a comprehensive play-based curriculum that incorporates activities including dancing, storytelling, and toy making—the latter of which has been lauded for its use of low-cost recycled material from the camp.

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.

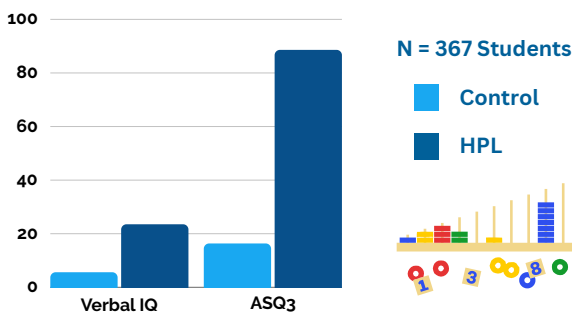


Source: BRAC USA

Over two years, HPL Children who with the lowest baseline scores improved even more significantly than the average child by

136.19 points 

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).



CONCLUSION

Addressing ECEs in Emergencies

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 BRAC 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 (Rahman 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).

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 (Mahruf 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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**



EXPANDING REMOTE, DISTANCED, AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING MODELS

There is no one universally accepted definition of distance education (DE) (Fidalgo et al. 2020:1). However, DE, as defined by the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, encompasses various learning approaches applied when teachers and learners are separated by space, time, or both (INEE 2022:1). Particularly when augmented for low-tech, underserved areas, DE models could help HPL scale by increasing access to communities with limited space and resources. Although DE instruction has been successfully utilized in specific contexts, several barriers exist that limit its wide-scale adoption.

Especially during the pandemic, the use of DE as a learning modality allowed state and non-state actors to continue vital instruction when schools were closed. In 2020, BRAC augmented HPL to cover remote learning. Called Pashe Achhi (Bangla for “Beside You”), the program facilitated counseling and play-based learning through weekly twenty-minute phone calls (BRAC 2019:1; Rahman et al. 2020:11). Although appeals have been made to extend the duration and frequency of Pashe Achhi, the program has been lauded for providing critical psychosocial and academic support to families during the pandemic (Mariam and Tabbasum 2021:1). Since the program’s inception, the Pashe Acchi model has served over 150,000 students and 37,000 families throughout the pandemic (Kahn 2023:1). Nonetheless, Pashe Acchi was never a permanent solution. Devised as an emergency intervention, its use was gradually phased out in 2022 as in-person operations resumed in the camps (Mariam and Ahmad 2023:60; Rahman et al. 2020:12).

Despite its success, Pashe Acchi currently serves as a minor supplement to the HPL model. However, Pashe Acchi should be reevaluated as an independent framework that operates in alignment with HPL to leverage its potential fully. The strategic upside of elevating an independent, remote learning model for Cox Bazar is not only pragmatic, but broadens BRAC’s capacity to scale without overextending the program’s current infrastructure. Put differently, Pashe Acchi’s remote modality mitigates physical scaling constraints because it relies less on the location and/or space needed to operate. By the same token, obstacles to ECE access, including school closures (due to natural disasters) and transportation, are also less of a concern (Qi et al. 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).

“The kids are happy when she calls. They stay indoors and do not want to go out of the home. I feel relaxed when my kids talk to her. (laughing) this is why whenever the kids want to go out for play, I lie that Serama (Play Leader) will call. Then the children do not want to go out from home.” (Rahman et al. 2023:1).

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.



STRENGTHENING ECE ACCESS THROUGH INTERSECTORAL COORDINATION

Promoting intersectoral coordination, planning, and response funding between BRAC, the GoB, and other relevant stakeholders is critical to ensuring the long-term sustainability of HPL. Research has consistently recognized the importance of intersectoral collaboration as an instrument for overcoming complex issues across public and private sectors (Raisiene and Baranauskaite, 2018:80). Practices that implement intersectoral cooperation may improve bureaucratic efficiencies, reduce costs, and improve outcomes in light of government restrictions (Rudolph et al. 2013:2).

To some degree, BRAC's participation in various multilateral bodies, including the Joint Response Plan (JRP) and the Child Protection Subsector (CPSS), provide critical avenues for engaging with the GoB. For instance, CPSS's framework is guided by Child Protection Minimum Standards that center on child protection, local interests, accountability, and meaningful inclusion (CPSS 2021:9). In particular, CPSS' fourth pillar of meaningful participation, undergirds the sector's commitment to involve community and sector input where possible. Of the thirty partner organizations in CPSS, the GoB, represented by the Ministry of Women and Children and the Department of Social Services, provides insight into child protection concerns, including access to education. However, critically absent are other GoB agencies, such as the NGO Affairs Bureau and Ministries of Education, that control, fund, and dictate child welfare practices (CPSS 2021:3; ISCG 2017:1). As such, educational responses are typically fragmented in Cox Bazar, with program initiatives receiving support from some GoB authorities but not others. Subsequently, the lack of comprehensive alignment across government agencies has often hindered humanitarian programs, which rely on guidance from the GoB to operate (Rohingya Response 2023:1).

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.

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.



Source: UNICEF

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This brief is produced by the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative (BIMI) with support from Dr. Harpreet Mangat, Executive Director of BIMI, UC Berkeley

Citation

Bui, D. H. (2023.). "Learning to Play, Playing to Heal: An Evaluation of Early Childhood Education Access for Refugee Children in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh." BIMI Policy Brief Series. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative.

Design & Layout

Daniel Hiếu Thuận Bui

Acknowledgments

This policy brief was made possible via mentorship from Dr. Harpreet Mangat, Executive Director of BIMI, UC Berkeley.

A special thanks to Dr. Loubna Hanna, Vivian Nguyen and Salome Ragot for their substantial feedback on this brief.

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