

Learning in lockdown

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Reaching Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar camps

An unfortunate side-effect of Covid-19 and resulting lockdowns has been the separation of children from schools and learning centres which ensured routine learning and growth. Given that this situation has affected even children from developed nations, how has it impacted on the forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals (FDMNs) who now reside in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh?

Due to the lockdown, all schools and learning centres in the crowded camps they live in have been shut down, leaving children with little to no outlet left for play, entertainment, learning, or well-being. The youngest children aged two to six years old, who used to visit the child-friendly spaces (CFS) have been left the most

vulnerable as, these centres used to provide opportunities for learning through play with their peers.

Since 2019, BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED) has been implementing a play-based curriculum known as the Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) delivered through CFSs in Rohingya camps. After the sudden closure, BRAC IED developed and implemented a novel telecommunications intervention called “Pashe Achhi” from April 2020 to June 2021, with the motto of staying “beside you” (the children).

The sessions have been designed as 20-minute phone calls between play leaders (facilitators), children, and their mothers every week. Pashe Achhi encompasses both tele-counseling and tele-learning; the former focuses on providing psycho-social support whereas the latter focuses on learning of children.

BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (BRAC JPGSPH) has conducted a small-scale qualitative study in July 2020 aiming to understand the perceptions of the community regarding the intervention. Within three months of implementing the Pashe Achhi telecommunications services, both the Rohingya community and the play leaders have been making the most of the intervention:

Rokibul, father of two, said: “I like their phone calls a lot. My wife and children can talk (with the apas) and are very happy. We lived a difficult life in Myanmar; no-one asked how we were doing like they do here. We were not able to send the children to school. Here (in Bangladesh), they are giving us many things and an education for our children. Nowadays, the khelakhana and schools are closed due to the disease. The fact that they are still calling and asking how we are doing is a lot; it is something that I thank Allah for.”

Like Rokibul, other parents appreciate their children’s continued education during this time. The content that children used to learn at the HPL centres such as local poems and local stories have been adapted for the tele-learning portion of the intervention. Parents expressed interest in addition of further academic-focused content such as alphabets and counting to enhance school-readiness of their children. However, play leaders and mothers of children alike face the issue of keeping the younger children’s attention throughout the entirety of the session.

Despite this, most children are interactive and enthusiastic about answering calls made by their play leaders. They cooperate and recite rhymes with joy and zeal during the sessions. This is mainly due to the relationship built up earlier between

play leaders and children. Many parents report that their children are eager to continue talking past the current session duration of 20 minutes. They expressed that as the sessions also help them relax through keeping their children occupied for some time, it would be great if the duration could be increased to 25 or 30 minutes.

Besides learning, a major part of the Pashe Achhi intervention aims to ensure proper Covid-19 safety messaging and awareness. Mothers report that they have learned the benefits of proper hand-washing, wearing masks, and physical distancing due to the messages imparted. Parents expressed that they feel empowered through being equipped with this knowledge and want practical demonstration of issues such as proper hand-washing techniques and proper ways of putting on masks.

Our analysis shows, there are two key strengths of Pashe Achhi, its content and delivery style, which have resulted in well-acceptance. In terms of content, BRAC IED has focused on healing, learning, and Covid-19 messaging, all of which are very relevant during this period. Whereas, the mode of content delivery is conversational style using native dialect which is useful and practical for this population. However, both community and implementers face certain challenges in receiving and providing services. Foremost is the issue of poor network connectivity in the camps which makes sessions prone to frequent call drops.

During the time of operation, Pashe Achhi connected 1,106 session facilitators to over 37,000 care-givers, children, and families every week, reaching more than 80% of Rohingya children. Although the telecommunications intervention is currently discontinued in the Rohingya camps, it continues to be provided in mainstream Bangladesh.

Similar interventions may help in ensuring the mental well-being and learning of children residing in hard to reach areas, where children are deprived from such facilities. At this critical junction, extending a hand to populations that face an uncertain future would be a welcome move.

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