

SCIENCE, CULTURE, AND FRAMING

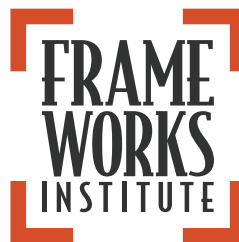
Mapping the Science, Culture, and Framing of Early Childhood Development in Bangladesh

An executive summary of descriptive research on
reframing early childhood development in Bangladesh

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The research summarised here was conducted in collaboration by the FrameWorks Institute and the BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED) between October 2017 and March 2019.

PURPOSE

This research was conducted to build an evidence base for a set of preliminary recommendations which will support the early childhood development (ECD) sector in Bangladesh to strengthen its communications practices.

RATIONALE

This research is grounded in the recognition that translating ECD advocate, practitioner and researcher knowledge about early development is neither a simple nor a straightforward task. This is because people do not receive information as blank slates, but rather use preexisting conceptual models and frameworks that are grounded in their culture to structure their interpretations and understandings. As such, communicators can be more effective and strategic when they have a deeper understanding of people's assumptions and knowledge base.

Research Base

The Expert Story

Interviews with 10 Bangladeshi ECD experts were conducted to refine, expand and contextualise key points from a scientific narrative of early childhood development formulated by the FrameWorks Institute and the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. This science represents the knowledge we want to help members of the public and practitioners to better understand.

Cultural Models Interviews

Fifty-four in-depth interviews were conducted across three groups and three locations: Dhaka, Chattogram and Khulna. Twenty-two interviews were conducted with members of the public, 20 with those who work in the ECD sector, and 12 with owners and senior managers of ready-made-garment factories. Alongside the public and ECD personnel, factory leaders were chosen because of the important role the ready-made-garment sector plays – providing child care in their factories, as mandated by Bangladeshi law. These interviews were analysed to identify dominant, shared “cultural models” (assumptions and understandings) that structure the ways in which people think about children's early development.

On-the-Street Interviews

Fifty-seven on-the-street interviews were conducted in parks, on pavements and in other public spaces with members of the public in three locations: Dhaka, Sylhet and Rangpur. These were designed to confirm, refine and expand our understanding of the public’s dominant cultural models.

Field Frame Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted of communications materials generated by 23 national and international organisations that are active in the ECD field in Bangladesh. Six types of communications materials – including reports, pamphlets, posters, flip charts, pocket books and web pages – were gathered, resulting in a final sample of 86 documents. This analysis identified the dominant narratives that the ECD sector has been telling about children’s early development.

KEY FINDINGS**Expert Understanding and Cultural Models**

By comparing and contrasting the *Expert Story* with findings from the *Cultural Models* and *On-the-Street* interviews, researchers were able to “map the gaps and overlaps” between the science of early development and the dominant patterns held among non-expert study populations.

Overlaps

This analysis showed agreement among scientists and the three study populations (the public, practitioners and both owners and senior managers of ready-made-garment factories) that:

- Basic inputs like affection, good nutrition, adequate shelter and immunisation are critical for early childhood development.
- Developmental milestones happen across multiple domains, including physical, mental, social, language and moral development.
- The quality of a child’s environment matters.
- Poverty can undermine development.
- Childhood development is foundational to the rest of the person’s life.
- The government has a key role to play in supporting positive early childhood development.

- Urbanisation and technology have brought new challenges to both children and families.
- Children’s play is an important part of learning and development.

Gaps

Alongside these commonalities, there are a series of key gaps between experts and one or more of the research populations. These gaps represent key areas where ECD communicators can focus attention to strengthen people’s understanding of the science of early development.

Development: *Early Focus vs. Ageing Up*

Experts maintain a clear focus on the importance of the earliest months and years of a child’s life, and on the early stage of childhood as a key time for intervention. Meanwhile, public thinking about development is not structured by a distinct category of early childhood, and both members of the public and the ECD sector often “age up” in their thinking – shifting attention away from the early years to focus on the school-going years of childhood as the most important, and attributing to younger children those characteristics that better match older children.

Implications

The *Ageing Up* model is a central challenge. As long as members of the public and the ECD sector assume that the most important cognitive development begins when a child reaches pre-school or school age, advocates will struggle to build understanding that aligns with the science – that the earliest months and years of life are a critical time when key cognitive structures and skills develop in children’s brains.

Childhood: *Differentiated vs. Idealised*

Experts consistently emphasise the differences in children’s exposure to a range of risk and protective factors and explain how they lead to highly varied developmental outcomes for children across factors such as region, class, disability and more. While members of the three research populations can also identify these differences, their thinking is also frequently structured by an idealised model of childhood as a carefree time of innocence and play.

Implications

The idealised model of childhood can obscure the important differences in risk and protective factors that children experience, as well as the social, economic and political factors that contribute to them. When thinking through this simplified model, people are likely to underestimate the challenges that many children face during their development. That underestimation weakens public support for efforts to build interventions and systems that can serve all children, especially those confronted with chronic or severe challenges and stresses.

Brain + Emotional Development: *Fundamental Domains vs. Shallow or Absent in Thinking*

Experts discuss a range of key functions that are developing during the early months and years of a child's life, including executive functions and self-regulation skills. ECD sector personnel have a shallower understanding of these domains, while members of the public and ready-made-garment factory leadership do not share a common model of development in these areas.

Implications

The lack of well-developed models of brain and emotional development among key groups undermines efforts to focus attention on the kinds of inputs children need to foster development in these areas. It suggests that members of the ECD sector, and even more so the public and ready-made-garment factory leaders, need help to better understand the specific brain and emotional skills that are under development in the early years, and the kinds of interactions and experiences that best support that skills development.

Hazards: *Environmental vs. Moral*

Experts paid considerable attention to a series of pervasive environmental health hazards in Bangladesh that threaten children's physical and brain development, including exposure to second-hand smoke as well as to toxins such as lead and arsenic. Both the public and ECD sector personnel are more focused on moral threats to children, through factors such as poor parenting, exposure to moral corruption from technologies and negative influences outside of the household.

Implications

The focus on moral hazards has several potentially problematic implications. One is that it can distract attention from the material threats that experts emphasise, thereby weakening intervention efforts that aim to address them. It can also contribute to people's sense of fatalism that many children are destined to struggle in the midst of negative and corrupt influences in the modern world, and that there is little that can be done for them.

Traditional Gender Roles: *Problematic vs. Accepted*

Experts highlight the problematic disconnect of traditional gender norms where men are allocated decision-making power while women are allocated responsibility for children's health and development. Meanwhile, among the other three populations, traditional gender norms were taken as a given and often reaffirmed.

Implications

Traditional gender norms disempower women as decision-makers and can compromise their ability to make choices – based on their daily responsibility for young children – that can best serve their children's development. Those same norms do not encourage active paternal engagement in the day-to-day care for children.

Learning: *Early Is Key vs. Real Learning Begins in School*

Experts consistently raise the importance of learning and skills development in the early months and years of a child's life. While ECD personnel also have a "learning begins at birth" model available to them, their thinking is often structured by the idea that "real" learning begins in school. Members of the public generally default to this latter model, and often believe that "nothing important happens" before the school-going years.

Implications

The strength of the idea that “real” learning begins in school and that no “important” learning happens in the early years means that ECD communicators must take care in their messaging around “early learning”, as they cannot assume people are thinking about learning in the first years of life. It suggests the need for strategies and tools to help people understand that foundational learning happens before children reach school age, and that their early experiences and relationships are central to it.

The Government’s Role in Early Childhood: *Multiple Proposals vs. Difficult to Imagine*

Experts speak of a range of public policy interventions that can improve outcomes for children: in family leave, maternal mental health, child care, home visitation, substance abuse treatment, violence prevention and other areas. Meanwhile, both the public and ECD sector personnel struggled to identify a targeted role for the government beyond traditional investments in health care and education, and tend to “age up” their responses to talk about investments in public park infrastructure.

Implications

It is positive that people look to the government and expect it to strengthen health, education and recreation services that benefit children’s overall wellbeing. It helps make the case for improvements in all these areas, including for improving the early learning infrastructure nationally. Yet the tendency for people to “age up” their solutions can detract attention from early developmental interventions. People need to be helped to see a broader role for public institutions in supporting parents and families with small children, including through social services, child care and in other ways.

Marginalised Populations: *Priority Issue vs. Absent Topic*

Alongside attention to the need for national policy and implementation initiatives that serve all of Bangladesh’s children, experts were highly attuned to the special needs of marginalised populations, including highly isolated populations, ethnic minority populations, and children and caregivers living with disabilities. Attention to these marginalised populations was not evident in the data across our three research populations.

Implications

The lack of attention paid to marginalised populations suggests the need for strategies that can raise awareness of the extra challenges faced by children, caregivers and families among these disadvantaged groups.

Child Care Centres: *Early Learning vs. Feed and Keep Safe*

Experts assert that child care centres should play a critical role as early learning centres, and that centre managers and staff should be well-trained in early learning approaches and methods. The public and many ECD sector personnel instead default to a more conventional and limited model of child care centres as locations to simply keep children safe, clean and well-fed.

Implications

It is positive that people understand that child care centres should serve the physical and safety needs of children and provide a minimum standard of physical care. However, this model limits thinking about the broader role child care centres can and should play as locations of early learning and stimulation.

Resilience: *Gene–environment Interaction vs. Uncertainty*

Experts acknowledge that resilience in children is a complex outcome that remains incompletely understood. However, they share an understanding that both genetic predisposition and environmental experiences play a key role, and that exposure to protective factors (e.g. supportive relationships) early in life can build resilience in a child over the long term, while exposure to risk factors (e.g. chronic stress, neglect or maternal depression) can undermine their resilience. Members of the three research populations share no consensus model that explains resilience, and many struggled to explain why children are more or less resilient in the face of life challenges.

Implications

The lack of a shared model of resilience poses an important challenge and opportunity for ECD communicators: how to help people understand how children's exposure to protective factors early on in life can help them develop their capacity to face hardships later in life; and, likewise, how exposure to adversity and a range of risk factors can undermine a child's developing brain and result in long-term challenges and complications.

Field Frame Analysis

These findings are based on a thematic analysis of communications materials from 23 national and international organisations that are active in the ECD field in Bangladesh. The analysis observed a lack of consistency across the field's communications in how the age parameters of early childhood are defined, with organisations variously defining it as 0–5, 0–6 or 0–8 years of age. It also identified eight dominant narratives that are consistently being used by members of the field:

1. It All Begins with Family

This narrative presents positive family dynamics and family harmony as critical to children's healthy development. Across a subset of organisations, there was consistent focus on the importance of parental engagement and, in particular, on the value of fathers being engaged. Most organisations also focused on the importance of parents and family engaging in interaction, stimulation and play with their children.

Implications

As important as families are, this narrative minimises a critical piece of the story: the role of public policies and community-based institutions. It suggests that ECD communicators can give more attention to how community, place and institutional supports influence children's developmental outcomes, in order to cultivate public support for programmes and policies that strengthen the social contexts in which families raise children.

2. Embedded Gender Equality

Most organisations refrain from gender distinctions between boys and girls and instead reinforce the idea that every child should have the same pathway to healthy early development. Organisations developed this narrative both in their written materials and in their use of visuals. Related to this, the majority of organisations also made a consistent effort to demonstrate an equal role for both men and women as caregivers.

Implications

This narrative advances the understanding that young children, regardless of gender, experience the same early developmental processes, and both need and benefit from the same developmental supports, with support from both female and male caregivers. ECD communicators should continue to tell this important story.

3. The Power of Play

This narrative affirms the importance of play activities for children's social, cognitive, physical and language development. It also emphasises that play is an important means through which children learn, and that parents and caregivers should play an active role in interacting, stimulating and playing with their children.

Implications

As ECD communicators continue to tell this story, they can more strongly emphasise how caregivers can scaffold and co-participate in young children's play activities, and focus on helping people understand the types of interactive, stimulating and problem-solving play that most contribute to children's cognitive and socio-emotional development.

4. The Importance of the Zero to Three Age Span

Despite the lack of consensus around the age parameters of "early childhood" (see above), a significant subset of organisations focus on the special importance of the 0–3 age span, including attention to appropriate nutrition, health and hygiene, safety, stimulation-based activities and learning for children in this age group.

Implications

This focus on the 0–3 age span represents a key consistency with the science of early childhood development. Communicators should continue to reinforce this narrative to focus attention on interventions for, and facilitate greater public investment in, this age group.

5. Social Development

Current communications focus on social development more than any other developmental domain, stressing the importance of improving children’s self-confidence, their ability to be helpful in large groups, and their understanding of the norms and laws of society beyond the family. This narrative affirms that young children’s healthy social development benefits communities in the long run.

Implications

As important as social development is, ECD communicators can do more to emphasise other critical developmental domains, especially brain and emotional development – two areas where most people lack a strong understanding.

6. Beyond Health, Hygiene, and Nutrition

While most organisations devote attention to the importance of health, hygiene and nutrition, many also emphasise that these three traditional areas of focus are necessary but not sufficient to promote positive outcomes for young children. Instead, materials frequently draw attention to additional inputs, specifically stimulation and early learning activities.

Implications

This narrative is important in helping push people to expand their understanding of what constitutes the most “basic” early inputs for children’s healthy development. ECD communicators should continue to emphasise how child–caregiver interactions, stimulation and problem-solving play are basic inputs for young children’s development. They should also give greater attention to the broader community environment that surrounds families and frame it as a “basic” input as well.

7. Healthy Mother for a Healthy Child

Though not as dominant a narrative as others, a significant subset of organisations address the impact of pre – and prenatal and postnatal health on children’s early development and health. Expectant mothers are encouraged to regularly visit health service providers from the moment of conception, and husbands and other family members are encouraged to attend to her needs, nutrition and wellbeing.

Implications

This narrative aligns with expert understandings that children’s development starts *in utero*, with connections across regions of the brain growing and strengthening rapidly during gestation. Coupled with the gender equality narrative, this story has the potential to deepen public support for resources and programmes designed to ensure maternal health.

8. Positive Early Childhood Development Leads to School Preparedness

Many organisations link positive experiences in early childhood with positive outcomes in primary school. Specifically, these materials state that children with increased early stimulation at home and in early learning centres are more likely to have a smoother transition to primary schools and better learning outcomes overall.

Implications

This narrative makes a key link between early experiences for children and later educational outcomes. In so doing, especially if communicators are careful to explain how and why early experiences shape later outcomes, it can help people understand that important and fundamental skill development and learning is happening in the years before formal schooling begins.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above research findings and analysis, we offer the following recommendations to ECD communicators in Bangladesh:

1. Emphasise and define “early”

As many organisations already do, ECD communicators should consistently emphasise the importance of the “first 1,000 days” or “zero to three years” as a critical phase of early childhood in order to better establish these age parameters both in the field and more broadly. This is particularly important in light of the strength of the *Ageing Up* model. The sector can also consider experimenting with the vernacular term *baccha* to leverage the fact that people already associate this term with the first months and years of life before a child reaches school age.

2. Expand the list of “basics” to include stimulation, communication and play

As people often default to a focus on physical safety and care for young children at the expense of important early skill development, communicators should repeatedly emphasise the importance of interaction and stimulation for children from day one. These are not just nice “additions”, but rather fundamental ingredients for healthy development.

3. Talk about the brain as a physical organ

It is necessary to convey the message to the public that the brain is an important physical organ that is being continuously built during a child’s early years. This will help give people something concrete to think about as the locus for skill development and also help give definition to what is often a vague model of “mental” or “cognitive” development.

4. Speak consistently about children’s emotional skills during the early years

Communicators should speak about young children’s need for opportunities to practice emotional skills (such as self-regulation) from very early on in life. As part of this, communicators can give examples for how emotional development can be encouraged throughout the early years, including through exploratory play, problem-solving, and child–caregiver interactions and communications.

5. Define the kinds of foundational skills that constitute early learning

When discussing the importance of giving children “early learning” opportunities, communicators should define the kinds of skills that are under development, to help people break away from a rigid model of learning as an academic category – one usually associated with older children. People need help in understanding

that early learning is *not* academic learning and that foundational learning is happening *before* children reach school age. Communicators should continue to point to interactions between young children and both adults and older children as a key mechanism for early learning.

6. Identify specific ways the environments and systems that surround families can be improved

Communicators can leverage the strength of the *Environments Shape Development* model to help draw attention to the need to create better circumstances not only within, but also around families. While the model of parental and familial responsibility is already strong, people need help seeing how both communities and the government can better serve families with young children. More specifically, alongside important improvements to health and education, people need help seeing additional ways that the government can support positive early childhood development in children.

7. Speak in concrete terms about how to realise our shared responsibility for children

There is a vagueness to the *We Are All Responsible* model that can dilute efforts to build support for concrete, specific interventions and institutions. Communicators should point to those collective and public institutions that enact this shared vision of social responsibility, and speak in concrete and pragmatic ways about how that responsibility should be realised.

8. Continue to situate fathers and other male relatives as central actors in young children's healthy developmental progress

In Bangladesh, there is an emergent model of men as strong and active co-participants in nurturing and communicating with young children, but it is still often subsumed by a traditional gender model that ascribes overwhelming responsibility for child-rearing to mothers. Communicators should continue to situate fathers and other male caregivers as central actors in supporting their children's emotional, linguistic and brain development.

9. Showcase child care centres as locations for early learning

When constructing messages about child care or daycare centres, communicators should be sure to describe them as locations for early stimulation and learning to help expand people's vision for the role these locations can play in early childhood development.

It is the intent of this research to provide a set of useful recommendations and strategies that ECD advocates and communicators in Bangladesh can join together in using and refining. Framing research on ECD in other countries has shown that when ECD communicators *align their narrative efforts* and *begin telling a common story*, the resulting changes in public discourse and thinking are amplified and endure.

COMING NEXT: PHASE 2

Building on the research summarised here, FrameWorks and BRAC IED are conducting a new phase of research to develop and test a range of communications tools and strategies. This second phase of research involves the testing of values, explanatory metaphors and other tools to assess their usefulness in helping people understand and think more productively about how families, communities and government can best serve young children's development across Bangladesh.

The research team looks forward to sharing the results of this second phase of research in the months to come. Stay tuned!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED) and FrameWorks Institute have conducted this research, the goal of which is to illuminate the different perspectives of Early Childhood Development that have currency and shape understandings in Bangladesh.

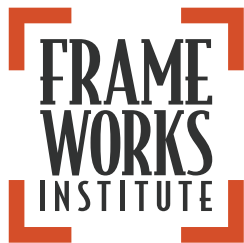
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