

The Impact of Parent-Teacher Meetings on Student Learning and Behavior in Bangladeshi Primary Schools

Researchers:

Asad Islam

Sector(s): Education**Fieldwork:** Global Development & Research Initiative (GDRI)**Location:** Khulna and Satkhira districts, Bangladesh**Sample:** 6470 students in grades 3, 4, and 5**Data:** Science Direct**Research Papers:** Parent-teacher meetings and student outcomes: Evidence from a developing country**Partner organization(s):** International Growth Center (IGC), Australian Government Overseas Aid Program (Australian Aid), Monash University

While a number of studies in high-income countries suggest that parental engagement improves children's overall learning, there is limited evidence on parental involvement from low- and middle-income country settings. To gather more evidence from low- and middle-income settings, the researcher evaluated whether randomly offering parent-teacher meetings led to improvements on student learning, parental engagement, and teacher efforts in primary schools in rural Bangladesh. Overall, the program led to improved test scores, increased parental engagement in children's learning, and improved teachers' pedagogical practices.

Policy issue

A number of studies conducted in high-income countries suggest that parents can play an important role in children's overall learning and education. Specifically, parental engagement has been shown to drive positive changes in test scores and attendance, and facilitate a smooth transition to higher grades¹. However, in low- and middle-income countries, where students are often first-generation learners, parents may struggle to engage with their children's education.

Parent-teacher meetings may improve transparency and accountability between both parties. Teachers' efforts and pedagogical processes may change as a result of encouraging teachers to give regular reports to parents regarding the performance of their children. At the same time, parent-teacher meetings may also encourage parents to be more engaged with children at home. Both channels may work toward improving children's overall learning and education.

While the impact of parent-teacher meetings has been studied in high-income settings, there is little research on this subject from other contexts. This evaluation seeks to determine the impact of parent-teacher meetings on parental engagement, teacher efforts, and student learning and attendance in a rural low- and middle-income setting.

Context of the evaluation

In Bangladesh, primary education (grades 1 to 5) is compulsory, and the government incentivizes it via various schemes such as the elimination of school fees, the free provision of textbooks, and cash transfers to low-income households and girls living in rural areas. In 2015, the net enrollment rate in primary schools was 98 percent for girls and 97 percent for boys. While enrollment

is high, quality of education remains a point of concern: nearly half of the students enrolled in primary school drop out before grade five. Research suggests that teacher absenteeism stands at 25 percent and student absenteeism ranges from 40 to 67 percent, which may explain low learning outcomes.²

The intervention was carried out in two southern districts of Bangladesh—Khulna and Satkhira—in 2011 and 2012. In these rural districts, most households include men engaged in either agriculture, self-employment, or labor, and women occupied with home-making activities. The average household income for one month was less than US\$150. Approximately one-quarter of the parents in the study did not complete primary school, and 80 percent of households did not have any members with education beyond grade ten.



A child writes on a blackboard at a school in Bangladesh.

Photo: Shutterstock

Details of the intervention

The program was carried out with the assistance of Bangladeshi NGO Global Development Research Initiative (GDRI), with the approval of the Bangladesh Department of Primary Education. The researcher partnered with GDRI to evaluate the impact of parent-teacher meetings on parental engagement, teacher efforts, and student learning and attendance.

The intervention and associated randomized evaluation took place over two academic years (2011 and 2012) in 76 primary schools in Khulna and Satkhira districts. Of these 76 schools, 40 were randomly assigned to receive the intervention and 36 were assigned to a comparison group. More than 4,000 students in grades 4 and 5 participated in the evaluation. In addition, 2,400 students in grade three were added to the evaluation in year two.

The intervention involved regular one-on-one meetings between parents and class teachers, without children. Meetings were held monthly for a total of 13 maximum meetings for parents who participated in both years of the study. Each 15-minute meeting saw the teacher provide advice on how to help students with homework, discuss behavioral issues (if any), and emphasize the importance of regular school attendance. Teachers did not encourage private tutoring. Instead, in some cases where parents were unable to help students, teachers offered to do so themselves outside of school hours.

Teachers also provided written feedback in the form of a report card. This contained information regarding student test scores and attendance and was prepared separately for each student while keeping in mind their specific circumstances. Report cards remained with the school after the scheduled meetings.

Prior to the program, GDRI held meetings with teachers in treatment schools in order to inform them of the purpose of the meetings, show them how to fill out the report cards, and provide an overview on conducting parent-teacher meetings. Similarly, schools organized information sessions to help parents understand the nature and purpose of parent-teacher meetings at the outset of the program.

Results and policy lessons

Results suggest that student learning and behavior in a low- and middle-income country setting can be improved by increasing parental involvement in their children's education through parent-teacher meetings. These meetings encouraged parents to assist their children with homework, and teachers to adopt interactive elements (such as diagrams and maps) in classroom teaching. As a result, students in program schools had better test scores and behaviors than students in comparison schools.

Parents attendance: Nearly 85 percent of parents in treatment schools attended the first parent-teacher meeting of the program. In the second year, parent presence hovered around 60 percent. While the presence of mothers at meetings gradually increased during the academic year, participation at meetings did not vary based on parents' age, education, or income, or based on the gender of their child.

Student learning: Results from the midline test conducted at the end of the first year indicate that students in grade 4 in program schools had higher scores in English and Math by 0.22 and 0.36 standard deviations, respectively. Similarly, grade 5 students in program schools scored 0.2 standard deviations higher than students in comparison schools on the PSC (a nationwide competitive exam that all students take at the end of grade five). Midline results also suggested heterogeneous effects: overall test score gains of the top third of the class were almost double those of the bottom third.

Endline results calculated after the second year of the program suggested that students in program schools who had also been in the program in year one gained in all subjects, with the average in test scores being 0.38 standard deviations higher in a subject. Interestingly, heterogeneity in score gains did not persist at the endline assessment: students in the bottom third gained almost as much as students in the top third. This suggests that the gains from ongoing parent-teacher meetings may have been greater for students who had lower academic performance at baseline. Grade three students (who joined the program in year 2) gained only in English and Science by 0.32 and 0.33 standard deviations, respectively. This may be due to the lower percentage of parents of grade three students attending the meetings, presumably due to relatively lower stakes at the grade three level.

Lastly, a follow-up survey conducted in 2014 suggests that effects of the program persisted: children in program schools were more likely to progress to the next grade and spent less time engaged in household chores than children in comparison schools.

Student attitudes and behaviors: Students in program schools self-reported having more positive attitudes and behaviors than those in comparison schools immediately after the intervention in 2012. They were also more likely to have a nutritious breakfast before school, and spent 1.1 hrs. more on self-study per day than their peers in comparison schools. In keeping with this, 70 percent of students in program schools claimed they were confident in sitting for exams compared to 59 percent in comparison schools. Teachers' assessments also suggested better student behavior in program schools: 83 percent of students in program

schools turned in their homework regularly, compared to 77 percent in comparison schools.

Mechanisms: The program included three components delivered together through report cards and oral guidelines to parents: an informational component (providing information about their child's performance), a behavioral component (advising parents on how to best help children at home), and an accountability component (which also allowed parents to influence teacher efforts).

- **Teacher efforts and pedagogy:** While it is difficult to isolate the effects of each component, there is evidence to suggest that teachers responded to the program by altering their pedagogy. Relative to comparison schools, teachers in program schools were 20 percent more likely to utilize maps, graphs and diagrams, and half as likely to rely only on textbooks for teaching. However, the evaluation found no significant difference between rates of teacher absenteeism between program and comparison schools.
- **Parental engagement:** Similarly, there is evidence to suggest that parents responded to the program. The follow-up survey suggested that students in program schools were more likely to receive help from parents and older siblings. The same survey also found that most parents felt parent-teacher meetings contributed to student learning, with 91 percent stating that they should continue.

Cost effectiveness: The total cost for each school in the program was less than US\$300 per academic year, which is roughly US\$3 per student. Teachers were paid US\$25 per year to conduct the meetings. Per the aforementioned effects on overall test scores, a 0.1 standard deviation increase per student costs approximately US\$1.58 for the program over two years. This suggests that the given program may be more cost effective in terms of improving student learning outcomes than a range of other education programs that have been rigorously tested in other low- and middle-income settings.³

Islam, Asad. "Parent-Teacher Meetings and Student Outcomes: Evidence from a Developing Country." *European Economic Review* 111 (January 2019): 273–304.

1. Hastings, Justine S., and Jeffrey M. Weinstein. 2008. "Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4 (November). doi:

<https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/123/4/1373/1933172>; Bergman, Peter. 2016. "Technology Adoption in Education: Usage, Spillovers and Student Achievement." Working paper, January 2023.

2. BANBEIS, 2013. Bangladesh Education Statistics. Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, Dhaka.

3. Kremer, Michael, Conner Brannen, and Rachel Glennerster. "The challenge of education and learning in the developing world." *Science* 340, no. 6130 (2013): 297-300.