Early Childhood Education Impact Evaluations for the Middle East and North Africa

Summary of workshop discussions for the United Arab Emirates
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Participants\(^1\)

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Policy problems

The delegates from the UAE identified a number of programmatic and policy concerns as they improve and expand the country’s early childhood education and care (ECE) system. Among these concerns are:

- Updating an ECE landscaping report for the entire country (last one done in Dubai in 2009);
- Developing a single national strategy and philosophy for the entire ECE system;
- Create a process for smooth transitions from nurseries (childcare) to kindergarten (KG) to primary school;
- Determining the best-practice and affordable model of bilingual instruction in kindergarten;
- Updating quality standards and licensing requirements for ECE nurseries;
- Considering approaches to increasing public funding for nurseries;
- Revising and evaluating the KG curriculum including learning environments and outcomes;
- Improving the professional development and instructional approach of ECE staff.

One of the most pressing issues facing the Ministry of Education (MOE) in this sphere is the operationalization of a recent decision to define ECE to cover children from 0 to 8 years of age. In order to facilitate smooth transitions of children from KG to the early primary grades, the UAE authorities are looking to implement a more developmentally appropriate curriculum in grades 1 and 2 than is currently being used, based on the current kindergarten model for four (KG1) and five year old (KG2) children. The Ministry of Education wishes to test whether aligning the curriculum in grades 1 and 2 with the more developmentally appropriate and play-based strategy used in KG1 and KG2 would have a positive impact on a wide range of child and other outcomes.

Summary of evaluation design

For the impact evaluation exercise, the team chose a randomized control trial (RCT) design in which access to the new ECE model is randomized for students in grades 1 and 2. The population in question consists of all 39,891 grade 1 and grade 2 students in cycle 1 government schools in the UAE, as well as the 6,985 teachers who teach them. The randomization would be done at the school level to avoid cross-classroom contamination. The sampling frame would consist of all cycle 1 government schools with at least 6

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\(^1\) Participants in the working group discussions with the UAE delegation included additional representatives of the Ministry of Education, the Abu Dhabi Department for Education and Knowledge, several UAE universities, and other organizations.
classrooms in grades 1 and 2 (combined) in the UAE. These schools account for the majority of all government primary schools, thus making the results of the evaluation generalizable to the population as a whole. Treatment schools would be selected using stratified random sampling with the 6 sectors of the UAE serving as the unit of stratification. A total of 30-50 schools would be selected to receive the treatment in year 1, with the rest serving as control schools. The exact sample size will be determined by MOE statisticians who will carry out the necessary power calculations.

The MOE team listed a number of relevant outcomes on which they would like to assess the impact of the new curriculum. These include:

- Child outcomes: improved socioemotional, literacy/numeracy, physical development, engagement, happiness
- Teachers outcomes: improved teaching practice
- Parental outcomes: awareness
- Classroom outcomes: improved classroom quality (structural and process)
- System outcomes: smooth transition (school readiness)

The baseline and endline information on these outcome measures would be collected using existing standardized external assessments of child development, classroom observations, parental surveys, and a school transition tool currently under development by the OECD. This information would be supplemented with pre-baseline data from the MOE’s administrative sources, including descriptive statistics on schools, students, teachers, school leaders, and students’ family background. Implementation data will also be collected through teacher interviews, focus groups, compliance checklists, academic vice-principal surveys/interviews, and training questionnaires.

The implementation of the new curriculum and the impact evaluation would take place in several phases:

- Planning phase (April – September 2018)
- Pilot phase (June 2018 – June 2019) – grade 1 only
- Implementation phase (June 2019 – June 2021) – grades 1 and 2
- Analysis phase (ongoing through Dec 2021)

During the planning phase, the UAE authorities would write down the philosophy for the new policy, develop the learning standards and complete the curriculum design, ensure adequate resource for updating the learning environment, finalize the assessment tools, prepare training for teachers and support staff, and initiate an awareness campaign. During this phase the evaluation team will also do further analysis on the population, sampling frame, potential sample, and any logistics for recruiting the study sample. This will be followed by a year-long pilot phase during which the awareness campaign will be rolled out to stakeholders, the learning environment will be updated, teachers and school leaders will be trained, and the new curriculum will be rolled out to grade 1 students in the pilot schools. For the evaluation, data collection instruments would be tested and baseline assessments will be carried out. In year 2, the implementation phase would include studying the results of the pilot phase and making the necessary adjustments, rolling out the updated curriculum and learning environments for grade 2, continuing the awareness campaign, and conducting the baseline assessments for the second cohort of schools. The analysis phase would be ongoing, culminating in the collection of the necessary data; computing the impact on students, teachers, parents, schools; conduct the cost-effectiveness analysis; and preparing report with study findings and policy options along with other communication materials.
It is expected that based on the results of the impact evaluation of the new curriculum on two cohorts of students, UAE policymakers would be able to decide whether to scale up this model to all grade 1 and 2 students in government schools throughout the country.

**Relevance to ongoing World Bank operations**

At the moment, the Bank’s engagement in the UAE education sector is at a nascent stage. There is a possibility of two parallel engagements being carried out during FY19. The first would involve updating a public expenditure review (PER) of the education sector conducted by the Bank in 2015. The second would provide the MOE strategic guidance on the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of various reforms across different levels of the education sector. If the latter program materializes, it will likely include advisory services covering the ECE sector, which may or may not include assistance in carrying out the proposed impact evaluation. (Alternatively, the Bank may be requested to assist the MOE with this impact evaluation through a separate RAS engagement.)

**Client interest**

The UAE sent a strong delegation to this workshop and it was a real pleasure to work with them. The MOE’s interest in the proposed ECE reform was strong and the understanding of the various impact evaluation methods was impressive. It is highly likely that the MOE will increase the use of these types of evaluations when rolling out future education reforms (with or without the Bank’s assistance).

**Next steps**

The Bank team will continue to engage closely with the MOE in developing the future RAS program. Given the high-level commitment to strengthening the country’s ECE policies, it is likely that at least some part of the future engagement will focus on this sector. The Bank team will gauge the feasibility of collaborating with the UAE authorities—including those outside MOE—on possible impact evaluations throughout the public sector.