A Programme for

School Readiness and Success:
An Innovative Child-to-Child Approach
Nearly half the world’s children, particularly girls and marginalized populations, are unable to access good quality early childhood education (ECE). From 2007 -2010, the Child-to-Child Trust in collaboration with UNICEF piloted an ECE project: *Getting Ready for School* (GRS).

GRS was designed to contribute to the Millenium Development and Education for All goals by preparing children to enter primary school on time and improving the quality of the learning environment. Using Child-to-Child approaches, GRS provided cost effective, innovative and efficient ECE to children in communities without access to formal pre-schools or other early learning opportunities.

The project was piloted in six countries - Bangladesh, China, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Tajikistan and Yemen. It is now being implemented in Sierra Leone.
A Case for Early Childhood Education

Studies in developing countries have linked ECE programmes with higher levels of primary school enrolment, retention and performance. Children unable to access ECE are typically less prepared, with no basic foundations in literacy, numeracy and without the socio-emotional skills required for learning.

Completing primary school has a significant impact on later life-chances including enhanced academic and social behaviour outcomes. It provides significant benefits for girls (delayed marriage, delayed childrearing leading to smaller families and better support for children in the next generation).

To ensure children obtain these benefits, it is therefore crucial that they are adequately prepared for primary school, enrol on time and receive comprehensive, high-quality education.
What do we mean by school readiness?

Children’s readiness for school involves children acquiring basic minimum skills (pre-reading, wider vocabulary and greater disposition to learning) and the knowledge necessary to prepare them for primary education.

Families’ readiness for school focuses on parents and caregivers developing a positive attitude towards education; supporting children’s early learning opportunities; and promoting their on-time school enrolment.

Schools’ readiness for children focuses on schools providing an enabling and nurturing environment and encouraging teachers to use participatory, fun and developmentally appropriate teaching methods in the classroom. Children enjoy learning in such schools and are motivated to perform better.

All three dimensions are important and work together to promote readiness and good transitions in education.
What did we want to achieve?

The project was designed to increase children’s readiness for school as well as schools’ readiness to receive and foster optimal learning environments for its youngest pupils. It sought to:

- increase both girls’ and boys’ on-time enrolment in primary school;
- ensure that children arrive at school with a strong foundation in language, literacy and numeracy and the social and emotional skills needed for learning; and
- decrease early drop-out rates and enhance overall primary school performance.

Getting Ready for School was based on two interventions

- Preparing Children to Enter School using a Child-to-Child Approach; and
- Preparing Schools to Receive Children

These interventions work together to ensure that children arrive in school prepared, stay in school and achieve academic success.
Getting Ready for School: A Child-to-Child Approach

The initiative builds on the Child-to-Child concept of older children interacting with their younger siblings and peers to improve their health and general well-being. The concept is based on the premise that, in addition to being influenced by their parents and other adults, pre-school children are often cared for and impacted upon by their older siblings and peers.

Older children already in primary school (Young Facilitators) are trained to actively engage with pre-school children (Young Learners) in their community. They work with the young learners by taking them through a series of fun, interactive learning games and educative activities over a period of one year. As a result, the young learners develop early learning competencies, start school at the right age and achieve key learning outcomes.

This intervention was fully implemented in the pilot with UNICEF.
Preparing Schools to receive Children

Primary school teachers are trained in child-centred and developmentally appropriate activities so that they can improve their classroom practice and make learning relevant and fun for children. Teachers are helped to understand how to support children’s early literacy, oracy and later reading as these underpin the development of language skills for life and help children to enjoy their own learning. Parents and carers are also encouraged to read to and listen to children reading at home. This is important because the home learning environment has a long term impact on the development and later success of children (Sylva, K et al 2008).

Teachers are provided with materials including sets of stories and treasure baskets with learning resources including pictures, toys and games. Teachers are also taught how to make story books, puppets and toys from local materials to support their teaching and to make the classroom a meaningful place for the children. Teachers are trained on how to manage a classroom library so that children are able to take home story books, which can be shared with siblings. This also helps parents and families to get involved in their children’s learning and creates a relationship between home and school.

This intervention was fully implemented in Yemen, with additional funding from Comic Relief.
What difference did GRS make?

The six country pilot with UNICEF (which delivered the first intervention: Preparing Children to Enter School using a Child-to-Child Approach) was evaluated by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) using a randomised control trial methodology. The evaluation found that the initiative promoted significant and positive outcomes for children, parents, families, teachers and schools, as follows:

Outcomes for Older Children - they improved their educational engagement and performance; had enhanced self-esteem; acquired positive attitudes towards learning; and increased their understanding of school readiness. The children also showed significant improvements in their academic engagement (attendance and self-reported grades in academic subjects).

Outcomes for Young Learners - they developed early competencies, such as reading, counting, playing games, building relationships and so on. It led to increased levels of enrolment in primary one, as shown in the graph below. In addition, children enrolled at the right age and were learning as expected.
Outcomes for Parents and Families – they increased their awareness and knowledge about the importance of child development. The evaluation found that parents would benefit from further sensitisation about the project as this would encourage them to provide greater support for their young children’s learning.

Outcomes for Teachers – They increased their awareness about the importance of early childhood for later learning. They better understood the importance of school readiness, particularly for maths, motor skills development and social and emotional learning (which provides a critical foundation for academic success).

Outcomes for School Systems – There were increased linkages and partnerships between the school and home. Schools became more aware of the needs of their youngest learners and introduced plans to create child-friendly learning environments to contribute to raising educational standards.
The second intervention was also implemented in Yemen.

Early findings suggest that the activity-based teaching methods used by teachers in the classroom helped children to speak with greater confidence and improved their language and reading skills. The teachers are now using activity-based methods such as stories, puppets, role play, natural and low cost materials (twigs, seeds, leaves, stones) in their teaching. Consequently, classrooms are more interactive and fun for children, which is improving retention. One teacher acknowledged the increased levels of attendance and improved learning outcomes in his class, as a result of him applying the knowledge and skills he had acquired from the project.

“\nNo new entrant to class one tried to run home or cried at the beginning of the term. On the contrary, those that had taken part in the CtC programme helped those who had not taken part to settle down.\n”

In addition, the project has succeeded in building stronger relations between schools, families and community. A widow said that the programme has made her determined to support her older daughter throughout her education.
What next for GRS?

- Integrating hygiene and nutrition in the initiative

The Child-To-Child Trust believes that the project needs to take into account the reality and context of children’s lives. For many children, health, hygiene and nutrition are also significant issues which can impact negatively on school enrolment, retention and attainment, if not addressed.

The Trust is working in collaboration with UNICEF Ethiopia to develop new materials on health and nutrition to integrate into the Ethiopian GRS project.

- School readiness and lifeskills education

The Trust is currently implementing an adapted version of GRS in the Kailahun district of Sierra Leone. Kailahun is a traditional society with a high prevalence of FGM, early marriage and teenage pregnancy. In addition, child abuse and trafficking are significant issues. To address these challenges, the project in Sierra Leone includes life-skills education.
How can the benefits of the project be sustained?

The project has been very successful partly because it involved the direct and active participation of children as agents of change and not just communicators of health and education messages. The realities and capacity of children should be taken into account at the design stage of the project so that they can play their role effectively.

But the school readiness initiative cannot replace formal pre-school education. It is an interim measure to provide ECE to children in poor communities who would otherwise have no access to any form of provision.

Providing early years learning opportunities for young children is the responsibility of national governments. To ensure buy in, representatives from Ministries of Education (especially at district levels) should be involved in discussions about design of the project and throughout implementation. This will help them to develop a better understanding about the importance of ECE and hopefully to allocate increased levels of funding for ECE in their education budgets.

We are pleased to note that this has been the case in Bangladesh and Ethiopia. Both governments have committed to making Getting Ready for School more widely available.
We appreciate your interest in the Getting Ready for School programme and would be happy to receive any feedback. Please also feel free to circulate information about GRS via your networks.

For any questions, suggestions or to learn more about GRS, please contact us at ccenquiries@ioe.ac.uk

Seminar
9 May 2013
George Fox Room at Friends House
173-177 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ
9am - 4pm

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