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EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT MASS MEDIA ACTIVITY – SISIMPUR BANGLADESH

ACTIVITY BACKGROUND

In 2017, Sesame Workshop Bangladesh was contracted to implement USAID's *Early Childhood Development Mass Media Activity, Sisimpur* in Bangladesh. Based on the world-famous play-based children's television series "Sesame Street" which has been airing for over 50 years, Sisimpur was adapted to include context-specific Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) concepts explicitly embedded in every aspect of the learning curriculum. Launched in 2005, Sisimpur provides education and entertainment to Bangladeshi children ages 3-8 years, across social classes and regions.

KEY FINDINGS

DESIGN AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Sesame Workshop Bangladesh employed a collaborative and iterative approach to develop and pilot age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and engaging learning content that aligns with USAID priorities for early childhood educational outcomes. Rigorous formative research culminated in a strong understanding of contextual factors such as family, social and cultural environment, learning needs and opportunities, political and religious dynamics, and gender issues that surround children's lives in Bangladesh. A diverse group of stakeholders was engaged to inform thorough and thoughtful curriculum development, including government officials, child psychologists, early childhood education experts, Sesame Workshop headquarter and country staff, local implementing partners, and USAID.

Leveraging the global play-based curriculum developed over the last 50 years by Sesame Workshop as their foundation, stakeholders contextualized Sisimpur's curriculum to accommodate local education needs and introduce culturally relevant SEL concepts. Sesame Workshop created characters or muppets that embody key elements of the local culture and landscape. Critical thinking, decision-making, empathy, self-confidence, respect, cooperation, gratitude, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution are some of the many SEL concepts introduced through Sisimpur. For example, the concept of "need versus want" is included in the curriculum to help children evaluate their choices, prioritize their needs, and make responsible decisions.

In addition to promoting SEL skills, the curriculum is designed to simultaneously enhance children's knowledge in the areas of health, hygiene, nutrition, road safety, environment, gender equity, and social responsibility. While these topics do not necessarily relate to SEL in an absolute manner, SEL is perceived to be a critical tool for effectively communicating messages on the topics, improving children's knowledge, and impacting their attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, given the risk of child

BEST PRACTICES

- Sisimpur's design and implementation is informed by best practices and lessons learned from Sesame Street, a globally acclaimed play-based children's television series, airing for over 50 years.
- By adopting a holistic approach, Sisimpur not only provides a robust academic foundation by exposing Bangladeshi children to literacy, math and science education, but is also helping them build fundamental life skills for a fulfilling life by facilitating learning through play pedagogies.
- Sisimpur conducts rigorous formative research and pilot testing of learning materials to ensure adequate contextualization based on the local culture, educational needs and SEL concepts.
- Sisimpur uses complementary learning platforms to maximize reach and impact. These include TV episodes, supplemental learning material, and community engagement with parents and teachers.
- Stakeholder engagement has been a priority at every stage of Sisimpur, starting from curriculum development to implementation.

labor, child trafficking and child marriage in Bangladesh, Sisimpur carefully develops content to also sensitize children to these social issues in their formative years. For instance, *Tuktuki* – a young girl who is the main character, is taught to not engage in conversations with strangers, accept gifts from them, or let them touch her. Finally, Sisimpur is also mindful of ensuring equity and inclusion of marginalized populations – girls, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities – by including characters representing each of these sub-groups in the educational content.

“For example, the video is about healthy habits or nutritious food. But we keep one child with disabilities, one child from ethnic minorities and definitely gender is a cross cutting theme, just like SEL. Maybe the primary goal is not gender or SEL related information, maybe the primary goal is something else, but SEL and gender will be embedded there.” – Senior Manager, Content & Creative Services

IMPLEMENTATION AND MEASUREMENT

Sisimpur aims to enhance early grade reading and select life skills among Bangladeshi children by using three key entry points to incorporate SEL into basic education activities: mass media which includes TV episodes, live action films and radio announcements, supplementary learning material, and community engagement. These entry points were strategically chosen to maximize Sisimpur’s reach to children through complementary approaches, as well as meaningfully engage parents, caregivers and school teachers as key stakeholders in early education programming to ensure greater impact. Since Sesame Workshop is known for using innovative and unique platforms to deliver early education lessons, Sisimpur engages children through educational and entertaining TV episodes, commonly referred to as “*edutainment*”, which are broadcasted daily on national and private TV channels to include children in both, urban and rural areas.

“So, the television program is what most people associate with Sisimpur and Sesame Street around the world, and that is certainly in Bangladesh still a major way that people gain exposure to the content.”
– Vice President, International Social Impact

To further reinforce messages delivered through interactive audio-visual content, Sisimpur is distributing 40 original storybooks in 100 primary schools throughout Bangladesh, including the Cox’s Bazar region which is home to a large influx of Rohingya refugees.

“You can see almost all of the books that we produce have instructions for parents and teachers at the end of the storybook. Research shows that when parents read books to their children, the learning of the child just doubles. So, that is the reason whatever we produce regardless of audio-visual or print content, we always prefer that children use this content with the help of the parents.”
– Senior Manager, Content & Creative Services

Community outreach efforts extend beyond parents and teachers to also include local and national level government authorities who play a critical role in facilitating proper implementation, especially for distribution of storybooks. Finally, since teacher-student relations are often didactic and unfriendly, school environment is also used as a critical entry point to promote SEL concepts, and consequently, improve school retention. Teachers are being trained to effectively use the storybooks and delivery quality lessons.

“We work with the government in schools and having their consent is very important. We cannot even distribute anything in these schools without their approval. So, before finalizing the content of story books, we send them to the government office for their review. Before distribution, we do an orientation session with government officials to explain how children can be benefited from these materials.”
– Executive Director

In terms of measurement, activity staff have developed measures that align with educational outcomes of the TV show in a given season. However, although Sisimpur’s theory of change is grounded in SEL, the measurement framework does not include SEL-specific indicators because SEL is not perceived as an independent factor, and is instead, interlinked with various aspects of the curriculum. The most recent impact evaluation from 2010 found positive early education outcomes among children exposed to Sisimpur, but it is not representative of new learning content developed, SEL concepts introduced, and other modifications made over the last decade.

LIMITATIONS

Over the years, Sisimpur has become a brand and garnered widespread appreciation in the Bangladeshi community. However, activity staff encountered initial resistance from some key stakeholders including the government officials and Islamic school teachers who were hesitant to introduce SEL concepts into early education curriculum. Being a relatively new topic, SEL was perceived as a Western concept that interfered with the traditional way of teaching.

“Government officials do understand the need, but it is often times very difficult for them to integrate Sisimpur in their program. One of the barriers I would say is that Sisimpur, although it is popular, it has not been able to reach that kind of internalizing as part of a learning process that is supported by the education ministry and the government.” – Project Manager

Moreover, given the limited scope of Sisimpur’s measurement and evaluation plan, there is insufficient information on SEL outcomes within the broader context of early childhood education. In order to inform future programming and to ensure continued effectiveness of the activity, it is important to periodically conduct summative evaluations that comprehensively assess all aspects of Sisimpur, including SEL.

“Socio-emotional learning has always been a part of the show, but I don’t think it has ever really been singled out in Sisimpur as the absolute key reason for the show’s being. It’s been intertwined with many other things. So, broadly speaking, we are interested in having an independent evaluation of the learning outcomes that would help us understand what’s worked well, what might need to be shifted in future seasons, and how to emphasize it.” – Vice President, International Social Impact

More recently, distribution of storybooks has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic during which most schools are closed. However, the TV series is still airing to ensure children’s continued exposure to the SEL curriculum.