Ensuring Equitable Access to Preschool Education: Kazakhstan’s Experience

Preschool education in Kazakhstan, which concerns both care and education of children between 1 and 7 years of age, is delivered through nurseries, kindergartens and Pre-Primary Education Classes and Groups, all referred to as Preschool Organisations (POs).

Before the post-Soviet transition started in the early 1990s, all children in Kazakhstan, regardless of their regional and social backgrounds, enjoyed universal access to state preschool services. But with the transition, many POs were closed, along with the plants, farms and industrial organisations to which they were attached. Hardest hit were the rural areas that are home to 51% of children in the preschool age group. In 2003, the gross enrolment rate in POs among rural children aged 1-6 years stood at 6%, compared with 32% of urban children and a national average of 19%.

The Government introduced various measures to tackle regional inequities in preschool education. This had a visible impact but raised issues regarding the more deeply rooted differences between urban and rural children in their access to quality preschool education. This brief examines the impact of the country’s regional equity measures for preschool education and the remaining challenges.

One of the services the Government introduced to support rural children’s participation in preschool education was the Mini Preschool Centre. Unlike regular kindergartens, which have separate groups for 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds and are open 10 hours a day, Mini Preschool Centres are operated flexibly, with fewer age groups and shorter hours. They can be established in a variety of settings, including private homes, community buildings and schools. This helps cut costs, a key factor contributing to the service’s expansion in poor rural communities. Sixty percent of Mini Preschool Centres are situated in rural areas.

However, a detailed analysis of urban and rural Mini Preschool Centres reveals that the Mini Preschool Centres in rural areas tend to have fewer age groups than those in urban areas (Figure 1). Nearly half (48%) of urban Mini Preschool Centres have three age groups, and only 18% have just one. But in rural areas, only 20% of Mini Preschool Centres have three age groups — the majority (46%) have only one age group.

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The availability of more age groups can translate into less mixing of age groups. With more age groups available, urban Mini Preschool Centres can function like small but complete kindergartens, allowing children to make a more smooth transition through different stages of development.

Another gap between rural and urban areas is observed in pre-primary education services. In 1999, the Government made one-year pre-primary education for 5- and 6-year-olds free and compulsory. This measure was aimed at mitigating the impact on primary education of the collapse of preschool education — which was particularly pronounced in rural areas.

Two services were identified to implement the policy – Pre-Primary Education Classes (PPE Classes) and Pre-Primary Education Groups (PPE Groups). PPE Classes are 32-week crash courses to prepare 5- or 6-year-olds who have never attended preschool education for formal schooling. They are half-day school-readiness programmes set up in secondary schools.

PPE Groups, on the other hand, are not a new service as such but the already existing final year of kindergarten. As

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1 Children enter primary school at age 6 or 7. In 2003, about 35% of rural and 29% of urban 6-year-olds were enrolled in primary schools.
2 Nurseries are attended by 1-3-year-olds, kindergartens by 3-6-year-olds, and Pre-Primary Education Classes and Groups by 5-6-year-olds.
3 With a GINI index in 2001 standing at 31.3, Kazakhstan is not a country with glaring disparities. Yet, significant regional disparities are observed in accessing preschool education.
5 The more precarious status of Preschool Organisations in rural areas is also corroborated by the fact that the majority (78%) of the country’s permanent services are located in urban areas, while rural areas are home to 88% of seasonal services.
6 In Kazakhstan, 11 years of compulsory secondary education, starting at age 7, comprise three cycles – primary education of grades 1-4, basic education of grades 5-9, and upper secondary education of grades 10-11. The three cycles are integrated and called secondary education, while there is no preceding level of primary education, other than the primary education cycle already integrated into the concept of secondary education.
they are offered by full-time kindergartens, PPE Groups, unlike PPE Classes, are all-day pre-primary programmes. Both PPE Classes and Groups are provided free\(^7\) and follow the national curricula.

The policy has been effective. The enrolment rate of 5- and 6-year-olds in pre-primary education grew steadily from 45% in 2000 to 51% in 2003. It also helped reduce the regional gap, particularly among 6-year-olds; in 2003, the gross enrolment rate among rural 6-year-olds in pre-primary education stood at 54%, not far from the 59% recorded for urban 6-year-olds. The regional gap among 7-year-olds in primary education is almost negligible - 98% of urban children vs. 97% of rural children, attesting clearly to the impact of the policy on enrolment in primary education, regardless of where children live.

But a close examination of the types of pre-primary education attended by urban and rural children reveals that rural children are far more likely to attend half-day PPE Classes offered in the school setting, while their urban counterparts are predominantly in all-day PPE Groups in kindergartens (Figure 2).

Thirty-six percent of urban 5-6-year-olds are in PPE Groups, as opposed to 20% in PPE Classes. But among rural children, enrolment in PPE Classes reaches 43%, as opposed to 3% in PPE Groups. Globally, 56% of urban 5-6-year-olds are in pre-primary education, as opposed to 46% of their rural counterparts.

But more striking than the global difference is the difference in the kind of pre-primary education that urban and rural children are receiving.

Urban children are more likely to receive full-time pre-primary education as part of a continuing and evolutionary process of preschool education. For rural children, the 32-week crash PPE Classes available at the age of 5 or 6 are more or less their first and last encounter with preschool education. Their experience of preschool education, therefore, comes late and is brief.

The difference originates early in life, as urban children are far more likely to enrol in preschool education at earlier ages (Figure 3). At 4 years, 28% of urban children are already in kindergarten, while rural children’s enrolment rate at that age is limited to 4%. Furthermore, participation among rural children does not increase steadily with age as much as it does among urban children.

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