

Helping children prepare for school in Tajikistan

KULYAB, Tajikistan, 10 March 2011 – With a concentrated expression, six-year-old Navruz follows his teacher’s lead, faithfully reciting the words to a poem about spring. After finishing with the poem, he begins drawing red and yellow spring flowers on a piece of paper.

Navruz is one of 25 children attending the early learning centre that opened last September in School No. 7 in Tajikistan’s southern town of Kulyab. Organised in a regular classroom, the centre is unusual in the country, providing a part-day early learning programme for children in communities where there were no such facilities before.

“I am very happy that my son attends this centre,” says Navruz’s mother, Zulfiya Kabirova. “He learns to read, write and draw here. Navruz just loves coming to the centre every day.”



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Every morning, Zulfiya Kabirova brings her six-year-old son, Navruz, to the early learning centre that helps him prepare for school.

Another similar centre in Kulyab is organised in an unused room in a local kindergarten. Unlike in a traditional kindergarten, however, children do not stay in the centre the full day. They stay three to four hours, with most of this time spent on learning and development activities. This allows the centre to work in two shifts, serving twice as many children as a traditional kindergarten.

“This approach is more efficient than the regular kindergarten model,” says Mavlonbi Vosieva, the director of the kindergarten housing the centre. “In the kindergarten we need several rooms for children to play, study, sleep, and eat. In the centre, we need only one room for children to study, while they can sleep and eat at home.”

Early learning situation

Boys and girls attending these centres in Kulyab are luckier than their peers throughout most of Tajikistan. Soviet-era kindergartens remain the only form of organised early learning opportunities funded by the state, but these are expensive to staff and maintain, and suffer from poor quality. These kindergartens serve less than seven per cent of children in the country which is much lower than in other countries in the region.

In addition, most parents in the country are either unaware of the importance of stimulating the cognitive development of their children or cannot afford to buy books and other resources. A recent survey has shown that only 30 per cent of households in Tajikistan have books and only 12 per cent of mothers read books to their under-5 children.

As a result, many children in Tajikistan start primary school unprepared and this affects their education outcomes.

Alternative early learning models

The Ministry of Education is now actively seeking to identify alternative, cost-efficient early learning programmes, including community-based early learning centres housed in schools and kindergartens.



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Boys and girls learn the alphabet in a kindergarten-based early learning centre in Kulyab.

With support from the Government of the Netherlands, UNICEF has helped to establish 28 school-based and three kindergarten-based, two-shift early learning centres in five districts across the country. More than 1,000 boys and girls now attend these centres, primarily in rural areas where there were no such facilities before.

“Supporting children’s early learning is one of the best investments that a country can make in its human capital development,” says Hongwei Gao, UNICEF Representative in Tajikistan. “Alternative early learning models are a more feasible way to expand preschool access than building new kindergartens.”

Walking home with Navruz after all activities in the early learning centre finished, Zulfiya Kabirova says the centre has already given her son the skills he will need in school.

“I am sure my son will be prepared to go to school next year and perform well there,” she says.