



Source: UNICEF

Early Development and Learning in **China**

Background

With a population of 1.35 billion, China had 82 million children under 5 in 2011 (UNICEF, 2013). Since its economic reforms began in 1978, China's economy has grown rapidly. Despite the substantial economic growth, many citizens still have a poor living standard with 11.8% of the population living on less than US\$1.25 per day (World Bank, 2009).

The gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education for children from 4 to 6 was 61% in 2011 with an equal ratio between boys and girls (UNESCO, 2014), but there is a significant gap between rural and urban areas in the provision of services (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2012). The enrolment rate in urban areas has been as high as 99%, while the enrolment in some rural areas is as low as 10%.

To improve the situation, the Chinese government launched a landmark policy that mandated one year of universal pre-school education in its national plan. The development of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in rural areas was particularly emphasised in its National Middle- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) (Ministry of Education, 2010). The government has invested over RMB 500 million in this effort and has also implemented steps to promote the professional development of early childhood professionals.

Objectives

China was one of 6 countries that participated in the East Asia-Pacific Early Child Development Scales (EAP-ECDS) project, supported by UNICEF- East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO), the Open Society Foundations, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC).

The main objective of this project was to equip stakeholders across East Asia and the Pacific with a common measurement tool to assess the holistic developmental progress of children from three to five years of age. The intent was that stakeholders in China including governments, universities, research institutions and donor partners, would be able to utilise the data garnered from this project to promote early development and learning, and prevent the loss of human potential by investing in the early years.

Methodology

As part of this project, direct assessments of the holistic development and learning of 3- to 5-year-old children residing in urban and rural settings were carried out in the second half of 2013. Children were administered the EAP-ECDS. The items on these Scales were developed based on the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) from countries in the East Asia and Pacific Region and through an iterative process. The EAP-ECDS includes seven domains and 85 items. Caregivers were also interviewed in individual sessions to obtain: (i) standard demographic data; (ii) reports on the child's early learning and development; and (iii) information about the child's health and habits.



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Chinese children reading books

Conclusions

- The EAP-ECDS are valid and reliable measures of developmental functioning in China. Older children performed better than younger children in all domains of the Scales.
- Participation in early childhood programmes had a significant positive effect on the EAP-ECDS. Children who attended such programmes scored about 7 percentage points higher than other children.
- Early childhood education in rural areas must be enhanced to improve the performance of children in rural areas.
- Parent training and public education in rural areas should be provided to enhance the development and learning of rural children.
- Steps should be taken to address gender differences in early learning and development.

Sample

Age	Rural		Urban		Total
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
3Y	60	59	214	188	521
4Y	51	58	214	197	520
5Y	67	47	199	238	551
Total	178	164	627	623	1592

A total of 1,803 children (908 girls and 895 boys) from five provinces or municipalities were administered the EAP-ECDS. However only data from 1592 children were analysed as some of the children were below three or over five years (19 children) or information on urbanicity was missing (192 children). Information on the age, gender and urbanicity of the final sample is shown on the left. Tests confirmed that the EAP-ECDS as a whole, and the different sub-scales (domains) were valid and reliable measures of the early development and learning of children from China.

Early Child Development

There were significant developmental differences in the EAP-ECDS. Older children performed better than younger children in all domains of the Scales. This finding is not unexpected as the EAP-ECDS is a developmental scale with adequate validity and reliability.

Cognitive Development

- Urban children performed significantly better than their rural peers in all age groups, and the disparity was the biggest among 4-year-olds and the smallest among 5-year-olds. This may be due to early childhood education.

Socio-emotional Development

- Girls showed significantly better performance than boys.
- Children from urban areas did significantly better than rural children.

Motor Development

- Unlike the other domains, children from rural areas did significantly better than urban children.

Language and Emergent Literacy

- Girls showed significantly better performance than boys.
- Children from urban areas did significantly better than rural children.

Health, Hygiene, and Safety

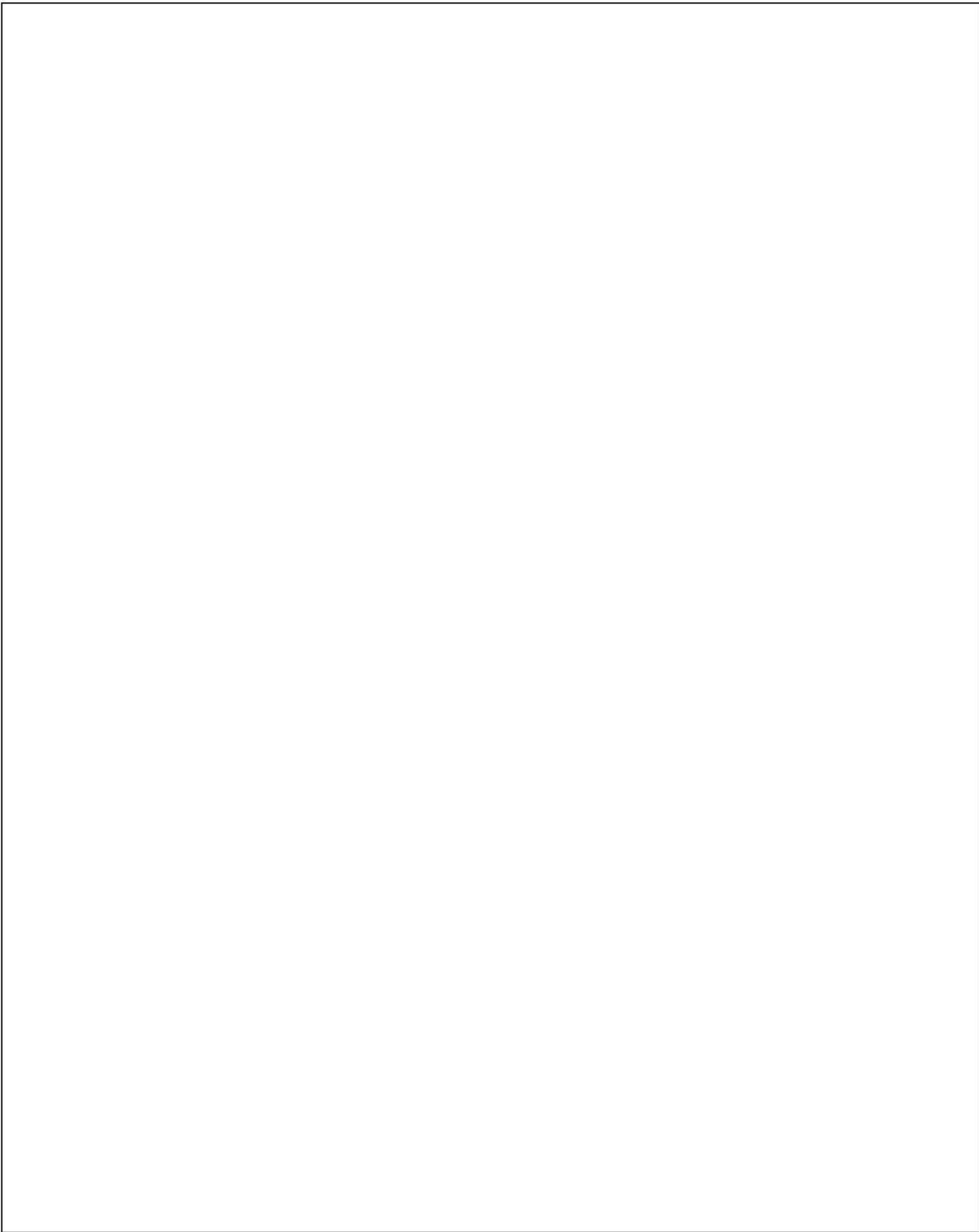
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Cultural Knowledge and Participation

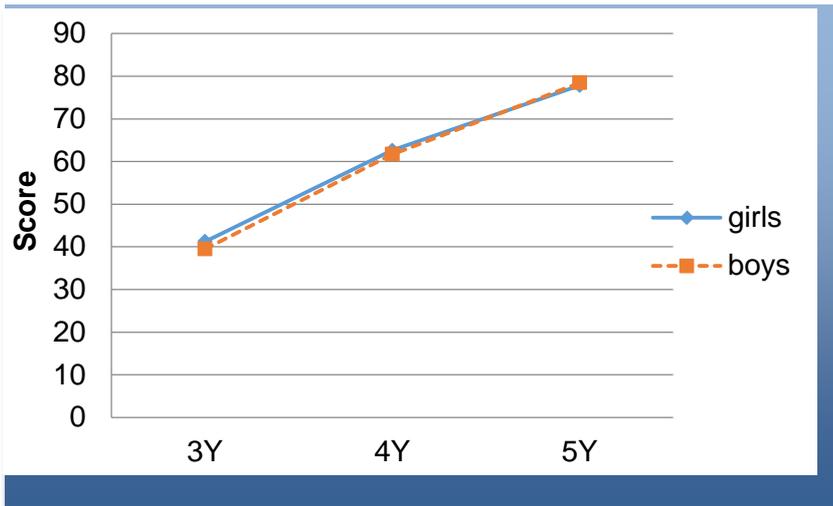
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Approaches to Learning

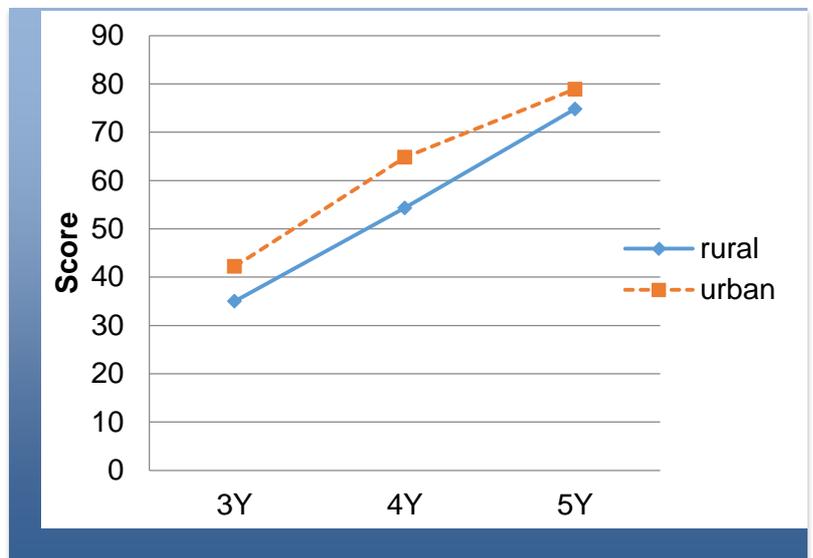
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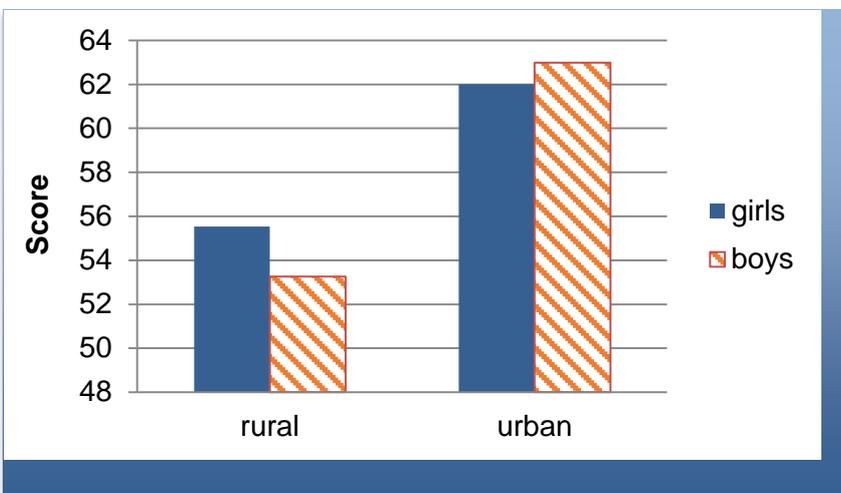
Age and Gender differences in Cognitive Development (China)



Age differences in Cognitive Development in children living in rural and urban areas (China)



Gender differences in Cognitive Development in children living in rural and urban areas (China)



Early Learning and Development

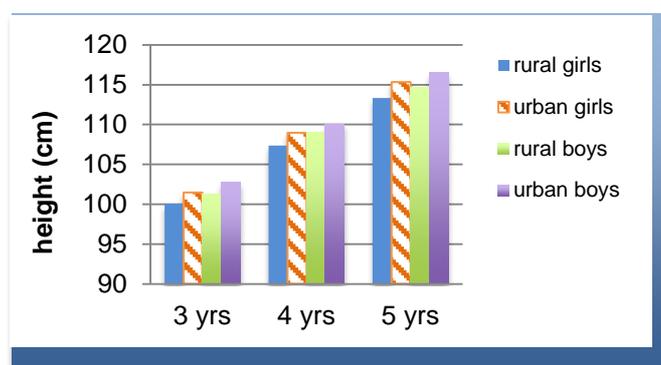
- All children in our Chinese sample attended some form of early education. However, the national gross enrolment ratio in early childhood education (4 to 6 years) was 61% in 2011. At that time, there were disparities within the country with relatively low coverage rates among the rural population. Children who were older or living in urban areas were more likely to be enrolled in an early learning programme.
- Almost all the children who attended an early childhood programme went to kindergartens, and nearly half of them including rural children (49.4%), spent 30 to 40 hours a week in the kindergarten.
- Most parents thought that their children were more competent in basic literacy and numeracy skills than other children.
- More than half of caregivers reported having involvement in early learning-related activities at home. Mothers were more involved in early learning activities than other family members, and educated mothers were more likely to support early learning at home than other mothers.

Health and Hygiene

- Almost all children (96.8%) had had their vaccinations.
- Father's education was the only predictor of health facilitation practices, for example, taking the child for a health checkup.
- Older children, girls, urban children, and those with more educated parents tended to have better health and hygiene habits (e.g., washing hands after using the toilet and before meals without adults' directions, and eating vegetables without adults' directions) than other children.
- Urban parents and better-educated mothers were more likely to report that their children had health problems. This is perhaps because they may be more aware of health issues.

Height and Weight

Age and Gender differences in Height in rural and urban areas (China)



Age and Gender differences in Weight in rural and urban areas (China)

