Guyana’s remote regions have faced several disadvantages in early childhood education. Schools didn’t have learning materials, and teachers were using donated materials or just making their own. Not surprisingly, these materials were not aligned to the curriculum. The problem was made worse by a lack of trained teachers. More than half of early childhood teachers in remote regions were untrained; and the instructional methods of those that were, did not follow best practices.

In a first move to remedy this situation, the Ministry of Education, in 2013, assessed 700 children entering grade 1 in remote regions. About 60 percent couldn’t read and only 10 percent understood what they were reading. In addition, 40 percent showed very little or no ability to identify numbers from 1 to 10.

A commitment to improve early childhood education

Given the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of investing in early childhood education, the government decided to prioritize education spending on this area to improve literacy and numeracy for children in remote regions from preschool to grade 1. GPE supported this effort with a US$1.7 million grant for 2015–2018. Integrated interventions were an important facet of the program that focused on upgrading teaching skills, increasing learning materials, and training primary caregivers. GPE’s support to Guyana is wider than grant funding. The partnership helped the government formulate a robust and evidence-based education sector plan for 2014 to 2018, and to take a more comprehensive approach to early childhood education by moving away from the fragmented interventions used in the past.

As a result, according to the Ministry of Education, 88 percent of children in early grades living in remote regions have acquired basic reading and math skills compared with 37 percent in 2016.
Strengthening the teaching force

To improve teacher effectiveness, more than 520 teachers from the remote regions—most of whom had weak or no academic background—attended a compulsory training program that covered pedagogy, phonemics, and the use of resource toolkits. This aspect of the program used experienced teachers whose role was not just instructional but included mentoring and monitoring.

Monitoring and evaluation was a key element of the training program’s success. Trainers visited the teachers up to twice a semester to observe them taking classes and to help them put in practice what they learned in the program.

Promoting more experience and inquiry-based learning for children, the materials help students learn independently and in small groups through play. The user manuals help teachers develop learning materials from locally available resources that are culturally specific to the learning environment.

Training programs for primary caregivers

Few parents in Guyana are exposed to methods to support their children’s learning, and they are often unaware of the interventions that can help their children succeed in school. Yet, parents and caregivers play an essential role in reinforcing lessons from school at home.

In recognition of this, the Ministry of Education, with support from GPE, made primary caregiver training a component of the program for early childhood education. Training sessions for primary caregivers at school and during parent-teacher association meetings, in learning centers, and in-home visits contributed to the success of the program.

A sustainable investment in learning and equity

Ensuring sustainability after the GPE-supported program ended in 2018 is a priority for the Ministry of Education. To achieve this, teachers and trainers will continue to build their skills under the ministry’s continuous professional development program. And the replenishment of the learning materials toolkits is already budgeted in the government’s next education budget.

The partnership has also helped the government of Guyana to make long-term investments to ensure that children have equal learning opportunities to prepare them for the job market.