

Executive Summary

The Project: The Project is the *Mobile Kindy (Fiji)* Project sponsored by *Mary MacKillop Today* and implemented by *Child Benefit (Fiji) Mobile Kindy (MK) Program*.

1. Overview: The program is an Early Childhood Education (ECE)-based intervention for disadvantaged young children in three informal settlements in Suva, Fiji. Child Benefit (Fiji) is a not-for-profit organization that provides early childhood care and education services to disadvantaged children in and around Suva City. The program was implemented in partnership with Mary MacKillop Today, an Aid, and Development Agency. The development agency focuses on building dignity through its *Learning for Life* principles and through its education and life skills programs, essential skills are developed and knowledge gained is harnessed and valued for self-sufficiency.

2. Objective: In alignment with the principles, vision and mission of Mary MacKillop Today¹ and CB-Fiji, the project aims to provide children living in the three selected informal settlements, access to high quality and inclusive early childhood education, intended to provide children with an opportunity to hone their capabilities for the realization of their full potential. The MK early childhood program The MK early childhood project hopes to create opportunities and bring life-changing impacts of early education to these communities; alleviating poverty in the process.

3. Methodology: To ascertain the high quality of education services provided by Child Benefit Fiji (CB-Fiji), for children and teachers, the evaluation method used a mixed-method approach (quantitative and qualitative). Quantitative data authenticated the qualitative data findings through data triangulation². A validation workshop was also conducted by a reference group to validate the recommendations and contents of this EPE Report. The validation workshop was conducted through a virtual platform where the donors, academia, technical specialists, and ECE practitioners participated. Research methods and appropriate research protocols were developed for the three sites. The site visits and the scoping mission conducted; telephone discussions with staff at the three Mobile Kindy sites; a review of both primary and secondary data, informed this study.

4. Participants & Beneficiaries: A total of sixty-eight (68) women and men, between the ages of nineteen and seventy (19-70) years participated in the program. Forty-seven (47) or 69% were females, while twenty-one (21) (31%) were males. National stakeholders like the Ministry of Education Heritage and Arts (MEHA), international stakeholder - UNICEF, Academia - University of the South Pacific, University of Nations (Hawaii); Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Development (PRC4ECD), Child Benefit (Fiji) staff and the MK Project Team, the children, the parents and the community, including the landowner, participated in the four (4) months exercise. There were eleven (11) girls and boys below or are of the age of 5 years old, and an eight-year-old participated in the survey. For children who participated in the survey, their parents/caregivers had to adhere to child safeguarding principles and consents were obtained to ensure that exposure to risks of the younger children (3-8 years) were minimized. Most importantly, the process followed was to ensure that all the voices of all relevant stakeholders, particularly women, girls and young women and men and vulnerable community members were heard; groups of youth were targeted (19-35 years) too. A total of 3,151 women, men and children are both direct and indirect beneficiaries of the MK program, the total population of Savutalele, Veikoba and Korotiki Lane.³, where 46%, 1434 were females while 54%. 1717 were males according to the 2017 census. The beneficiaries at

¹ <https://www.marymackilloptoday.org.au/who-we-are/our-principles/> [Accessed 07/2021].

² Emerging Markets Consulting, Save the Children Myanmar (2016), Early Childhood Care and Development – End of programme evaluation.

³ Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, 2017 census.

the time of the evaluation could be more, as people from the villages in the northern and western divisions were stuck in Suva during the lockdown in April of 2021.

5. Findings:: The findings concluded that CB-Fiji has been able to achieve its target of providing equitable access to high quality and holistic early childhood education to the disadvantaged children in the three communities. A total of 169 girls and boys have been exposed to a level above satisfactory quality and holistic early childhood education. We can conclude that about 85% of the learners, 31 short of the targeted number of 200, experienced the MK program and were accorded the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services appropriately and properly. These children were accessible to quality and holistic education during the program duration of three years. Sixty (60) of these children graduated for school readiness within the same project period. A total of 3,151 women, men and children are both direct and indirect beneficiaries the project as this is the estimated population of the three sites.⁴ (FIBOS, 2017 census)

6. Results: Quality and holistic EC education require parents and caregivers to play active roles in ECCDE so they can prioritize their children's learning. For the three communities, sixty-eight (68) of the one-hundred (100) targeted parents/caregivers were trained, to recognize the value of early childhood education. A total of 3,151 women, men and children are both direct and indirect beneficiaries of the MK program, the total population of Savutalele, Veikoba and Korotiki lane informal settlements⁵.

While the quantitative targets were not achieved due to various reasons including the COVID-19 pandemic, it must be noted that the qualitative responses of parents/caregivers on the quality of service provided by CB-Fiji have been significant. We can conclude that these parents/caregivers understood the value of early childhood education and have realized the potential of these children and how they can be the conduit of families getting out of poverty.

7 Impact & limitations: The impacts of the MK program on the communities. All parents interviewed (100%) indicated that bringing the MK program (education) into their community improved the living standards, provided job opportunities, higher education was attained by the volunteers who were trained in the three years. However, there are limitations that the evaluators had to function within, including maneuvering around, about, in and out of COVID-19. It is assumed therefore that there exists certain pending issues that prevents the project from attaining the effectiveness level aspired. However, the potential to attain the effectiveness standard of Mary Mackillop Today is always there and is recommended. The lessons learnt (detailed in the EPE report) and the experience will make things bigger and better. Whilst the project is being evaluated under the dimensions given, the recommendations are compiled to address the gaps and challenges identified as best as possible.

8. Relevance & Appropriateness of Program: The program has been evaluated to be very relevant and appropriate in the given ECE context and circumstance of the project participants. The affordable quality ECE service (\$1/day) is now accessible to disadvantaged communities. It is also in alignment with the current government ambition to *leave no one behind* in all sectors and in building a *knowledge-based society* for Fiji for the Ministry of Education.

9. Sustainability and efficiency output for the program is debatable given the underlying circumstances, particularly with the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on learners and teachers and social implications on children under the age of 18, and particularly 0-8 years old. In terms of financial sustainability, community ownership and a community-based model of governance, and accountability would be required if the program needs to be sustained. To sustain the Mobile Kindy program in the next few years,

⁴ Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, 2017 census.

⁵ Ibid.

appropriate recommendations should be put in place for sustainability purposes. The recommendations are highlighted in sub-section 4.1 of the report End of Project Evaluation report).

10. Recommendations and conclusions: The CB (Fiji) has been able to achieve its target of providing equitable access to high quality and holistic early childhood education to the disadvantaged children in the three communities. We can conclude that the 169 learners, although 31 short of the targeted number of 200 were exposed to the MK program were exposed to a level above satisfactory quality and holistic early childhood education. However, the future of the project depends on the proposed initiatives that are recommended for implementation.

i. **Capacity building for staff and volunteers:** It is strongly recommended that capacity building opportunities through technical assistance are to be prioritized to target areas on gaps and challenges that have been identified. Evaluators recommended that CB-Fiji emphasize training and technical assistance to bolster areas where weaknesses were identified and that better data be kept for accountability purposes. This is important so that better data be kept for accountability and good governance principles in compliance with Mary Mackillop Today's standards and compliance practices...

ii. **Gender equality considerations:** Gaps and challenges faced by the community, particularly women and girls are primarily related to cultural and social norms and practices that are institutional barriers that women face in public life and also their private lives. As a result women and girls are often not given equal opportunities and have to always depend on the menfolk⁶ when trying to obtain financial support for themselves or the children (active decision-making). The communities will continue to face this problem unless steps are taken to identify entry points for women's participation in decision-making. Management committees are good sources of participation of women and girls (19-35 years old). It is proposed that staff/volunteers and community members use the Gender lens to implement the project effectively and ensure there is equal distribution of both women and men in project implementation, including the active and not passive participation of women and girls.

iii) **Policy changes:** Other recommendations include the role of partner agencies and policymakers for example changes and review of the national Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCDE) curriculum (2007)⁷ 'Na Noda Mataniciva – Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines for the Fiji Islands. The need to review the 14-year-old curriculum given the various socio-economic, political changes in the post-COVID-19 era.

iv) **Interagency collaborations:** It is strongly recommended that an engagement with government agencies who are serving the same community is necessary. For example the Education sector, Social Welfare will need policy interventions that require collaboration between NGO's, Civil Society Organizations and other non-state actors with the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts.

11. Conclusions: *If learning begets learning, then interventions at younger ages have great potential to generate cumulative benefits by altering a child's future developmental trajectory.*⁸

Learning now, investing in it now, investing in our younger aged children (0-8 years) is the best investment for the nation, parents/caregivers families can do in this challenging post-COVID-19 new norm. In concluding this research the CB-Fiji has been able to achieve its target of providing equitable access to

⁶ Vunisea, A (2014) the role and engagement of Women in Fisheries in Fiji, Women in Fisheries Network-Fiji, Suva. Fiji...

⁷ 'Na Noda Mataniciva refers to everyone having responsibility for nurturing our treasures, meaning our young children. Humare Moti has a similar meaning in Hindi'. Adapted from MEHA 2009, Na Noda Mataniciva – Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines for the Fiji islands, p. 11.

⁸ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9144.html (Accessed 08/2021)

high quality and holistic early childhood. The need to extend the project to provide evidence-based policy intervention to the learners and teachers of young children.

Further research will build on challenges/opportunities and the new knowledge found while undertaking

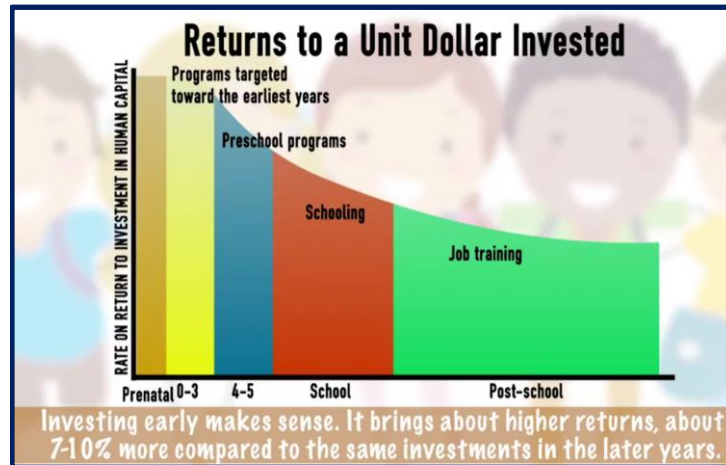


Figure1: “Invest in me” (Credit: UNICEF)

this work, especially in the middle of a severe crisis. Global and national reports have found that there is limited literature⁹ on impacts of COVID-19 on learning and research has also found that approximately 1.6 billion children in 161 countries were out of school during the lockdown¹⁰. To address this gap evidence-based policy is a need for Fiji, ever needed before in the ‘new norm’ post-COVID-19 agenda¹¹. The research findings will better inform policymakers and can give deeper insight into the teaching-learning of students and identify positive and possibly a lot of unintended outcomes. Furthermore, the exercise will provide an opportunity to address the ‘widespread concern and limited information available on children’s well-being during the pandemic, according to the recent *Save the Children* survey¹². The findings should enable everyone to make informed decisions about learning in the new Post Covid-19 era and creating safe spaces for teaching and learning to be meaningful to our little pearls ‘*mataniciva*’ our hidden treasures.

⁹ Dayal, H, Tiko L, 2020, ‘When are we going to have the real school? A case study of early childhood education and care teachers’ experiences surrounding education during the COVID-19 pandemic’ in Australian Journal of Education Early Childhood 2020, Vol. 45(4) 336–347

¹⁰ Saavedra, J. (2020). Educational challenges and opportunities of the Coronavirus (COVID 19) pandemic. World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/educational-challenges-andopportunities-covid-19-pandemic>, cited in Dayal et al, 2020, p. 337.

¹¹ Dayal, H & Tiko, L (2020) ‘When are we going to have the real school? A case study of early childhood education and care teachers’ experiences surrounding education during the COVID-19 pandemic’ in Australian Journal of Education Early Childhood 2020, Vol. 45(4) 336–347

¹² Save the Children. (2019). Changing lives in our lifetime: Global Childhood Report 2019. SavetheChildren. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15264/pdf/ch1338551_0.pdf

Save the Children. (2020a). Covid-19: 2 in 3 parents in the US worry about their child’s emotional & mental wellbeing. <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/covid-19-2-3-parents-us-worry-abouttheir-child%E2%80%99s-emotional-mentalwell-being>.