

ECD High Level Conference

Denarau, Nadi-September, 19-21 2017

At the 2017 Conference on Moving Forward with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Early Childhood, history was made when Pacific leaders pledged their support for early childhood development, to give every child in the Pacific the best start to life. For the first time in the Pacific region, government officials, including Ministers of Education and Ministers of Finance, from 15 Pacific Island Countries came together to declare their support for young children and provide them with the opportunity to grow and lead happy, healthy and productive lives.

The University of the South Pacific through one of its Strategic Research Theme (SRT) projects, in collaboration with the School of Education (SoED) and the School of Economics (SoE) was invited to present certain findings on a study entitled, '*Towards improving partnership in Education: re-examining the economics of education in general and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in particular for Small Islands Developing States (SIDS)*.'

Project Team Leader and PhD candidate, Ms. Kelesi Whippy, of the SoED, capitalised on five main findings that correlated with the Conference theme on 'The Pasifika Call to Action on Early Childhood Development'. Ms. Whippy relayed that the SRT project is based on the assumption that the SIDS regional policy makers will benefit through a study that looks at the economic perspectives of Early Childhood Education and Care, particularly on the demands, financing and the provisions of such education.

At the outset, Ms. Whippy acknowledged the University of the South Pacific Research Office for the tremendous support in mobilising the financial resources to carry out the study in the selected SIDS. In turn, a note of appreciation was extended to four of the 12 USP member countries namely the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Vanuatu, Kiribati and the Republic of the Fiji Islands on the unconditional support provided in enabling the Project team to carry out the investigation with the practitioners, who were involved in raising young children at the ECE level, at the time of the study. In attendance, the Dean of Faculty Arts, Law and Education, Dr. Akanisi Kedrayate was also acknowledged for her support as manager of the USP Edu-care Centre, being the model Centre for the Pacific region.

Initially, the research findings had revealed that there is a high demand for quality ECEC programmes that are based on the varying socio-cultural contexts of young children particularly to cater for the different age groups (below 3 years/ages 3&4 at preschool and age 5 at K).

Secondly, the extent to which preschools and K receive financial support from stakeholders to operationalise their day to day routines was significantly low. However, the low percentages are not indicative of non-support per se, due to the fact that most Centres in the respective contexts were receiving financial support from other agencies other than government funding.

Thirdly, without absolute doubt, ECEC needs more funding assistance. There is an echoed sentiment that public funding for quality ECEC programs is inadequate. In particular, it was revealed that a high-turnover workforce due to under paid workers impedes stability and quality of programmes. Next, a powerful message received is that effective early intervention strategies is crucial to improve the standard of living and overall well-being of society. The research participants fully agreed that the government, as the regulatory body, need to develop strategies to make quality ECEC accessible, affordable and sustainable.

Finally, there is a strong consensus (over 50%) of the participants strongly agreed that it is imperative to educate families and the wider stakeholders about the benefits of quality ECEC programmes which aid young children’s learning and development towards achieving desirable educational as well as economic outcomes.

The study findings resonated well with the Conference outcome statement, Pasifika Call to Action for Early Childhood Development:

- Recognises the importance of early childhood development;
- Acknowledges the progress and challenges in the region;
- Acknowledges the role of parents, families and communities for early childhood development and;
- Commits to the Sustainable Development Goal Target 4.2 that calls on member countries to ensure that 'by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.'

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