

Success stories for ECE system strengthening in Tonga, 2023.

By Maile Ogosa, Head of ECE Unit, MET.

What initiative(s) has your government/Ministry of Education implemented for early childhood education over the past 5 years (2018 – 2022) that you are extremely proud of?

In the history of ECE in Tonga, church-based, community and private sectors had been the sole provider of ECE services for the early childhood generation of Tonga since 1974. However, in pursuance of providing quality universal basic education for Tonga (Kingdom of Tonga, 2013, p. 14), MET took the initiative to establish the first government ECE center in 2019. To date, there are 46 government ECE centers spread out in Tonga, with 24 in the main island, Tongatapu, 12 in Vava'u, 7 in Ha'apai, 2 in 'Eua, and 1 in the farthest island of Niua Fo'ou. Government ECE centers ensure that children between the ages of 4-5 are provided with free quality education stated in our Education Act. Significantly, children in rural areas and the outer islands of Tongatapu can access formal education from an early age in readiness for primary schools. In addition, a new play-based ECE curriculum was developed in 2021 as part of the joint initiatives with UNICEF. This play-based curriculum is titled 'Learning Through Play the Heilala Way,' and was launched in 2022. Learning Through Play the Heilala Way encompassed the essence of the Four Golden Pillars of a Tongan; Loyalty, Reciprocity, Respect, and Humility. Inculcating our cultural values in this early age through play-based activities guaranteeing our unique Tonganess is prolong from generation to generation. Why 'heilala'? Heilala is one of the traditional flower but the most valuable in Tonga. It signifies noble and kingship. It takes special care to plant and look after the heilala tree before the flowers are picked for necklace threading. Even the threading required special skills. Not anyone can master these skills. The heilala flower embodied the child. Therefore, the concept of using heilala in our curriculum denotes the significant of young children to our future and the ECE educators that care and nurture them. Moreover, Teacher's Registration was initiated in 2021 free of charge by MET. This allows all teachers, government and non-government to register in the ministry as evidence of professional competence in the profession. This ensures qualified work force within the ECE profession. Furthermore, an increase in the Tonga School Grant Management and Monitoring (TSGMM) for ECE subsidies has been acceded from \$50 to \$200 per head to start this year. This assist provider to cater for more resources needed in the ECE centers. Also, prompted by Executive Summary on Child's Poverty in Tonga (2015, p. 2), in correlation with the 2021 census, the government last year spearheaded by MET Minister who is also the Prime Minister, initiated a 'Breakfast Project' to every primary schools in Tonga for free. Prioritizing children's health to a sound mind, this project promotes active learning. Last but not the least, the ECE Unit in its continuous partnership with UNICEF produced reading books for ECE level. This latest project will roll out this year. There are 10 sets of reading books according to the 10 themes in our ECE program. Each theme has a story book to guide the teachers in introducing and talking about the theme. What's special about these books are its inclusive approach.

Because of this initiative, how has ECE as a sub-sector advanced in your island nations?

Convention on the Right of the Child is in-directly promoted country-wide. Though MET focuses on the educational development of children, Early Childhood Education emphasized the holistic development of children, encompassing all relevant sectors related to the wellbeing of the child. As a result, community's mindset on children's welfare are changing for the betterment of children. Their voices are

heard, their ideas are acknowledged and future impact are considerate of children's welfare when adults make decisions, leading to parents enrolling their children in these government ECE centers. Evidently, in reference to the 2021 census by the Statistic Department, approximately 51.4% of children between the ages 4-5 are enrolled in ECE centers. This is a significant increase from the 35.3% reported on the MIC Survey in 2019. This is a clear indication of parents awareness that starting early in a formalized educational setting has a positive impact on children's holistic development hence a successful future generation for Tonga. Moreover, the play-based curriculum 'Learning Through Play the Heilala Way' provides an insight to parents on how children learn. That children learn more in a play-base program, detracting the common view that children's playing are a waste of time. Because of that, parents are more sensitive to their roles at home and in the community. They invested more in their children's activities such as the community fun-fair, Children's White Sunday, sports activities, field trips, and other outdoor activities. Play is seen as a mechanism for children's development. The teacher's registration elevates the community's view on this profession. It also attract candidates for this profession and a clear roadmap for the provider (TIOE) and the receiver (MET). Last year, Teacher's Training College (TIOE) under the umbrella of the Tonga National University (TNU) has established the first Advisory Committee for ECE Bachelor of Education Tonga Early Childhood Teaching (B.Ed TECT) of which ECE Unit, MET is a member of. This committee ensures alignment of program between TIOE and ECE curriculum in a unified approach for more competent ECE teachers. The increase in ECE subsidies from the TSGMM ensures a quality education for all ECE centers, resource-wise. However, due to the increase understanding of children's learning through play, almost all centers are strongly supported by their PTA. Parents offer different types of assistance to their children's center. Such as toys, reading books, art materials, sewing utensils, different types of dough, blocks, free clean-up services, etc. It brings everyone together as a community. Providing free breakfast to every primary schools where ECE centers are under guaranteed an increase in children's attendance and participation in schools. The Inclusive Reading Books primarily aim to help the early literacy skills of children in ECE centers. However, another function of these books are its mechanism for learning at home if school lockdown occurs, ensuring that children's learning never stops. Parents' tips and guidance are included at the back of these books, encouraging parents' assistance when they are brought home. Each book has a clear and hidden characters and concepts about children with special needs. In ECE, children are guided that everyone is unique and should be loved by all.

Share one story or experience from your experience OR monitoring visits when you experienced a proud moment for ECE resulting from these changes. (It could also be something that parents, teachers or children have said to you)

Among the many proud moments I encountered as an ECE coordinator in Tonga are the responses from parents of children's who are enrolled in ECE centers. One particular comments that stands out was during my monitor session to one of the central center in Tongatapu. Grasping the opportunities to talk to one parent who were at the center at the time, I threw out some questions to initiate our conversation. These questions were; "Is there any difference you noticed about your child since attending this ECE center?", "What change?", "What advice would you give to parents whose children are not enroll?" The responses were clearly in favor of our program. This parent noticed many changes in her child's behavior since entering the center. Such changes include grooming behaviors where the child washed his hands before and after a meal, washed his face and brushed his teeth when wakes up

to get ready for school without being told. Requesting to say a prayer before their meal and using respectful language such as 'thank-you, sorry, excuse me, etc.' at home. He also displays a more helpful attitude at home like wanting to help out with simple chores such as picking up the rubbish, running errands for the older siblings, wanting to tag along with his father to feed the pigs and going to the plantation to gather coconut for the pigs. She emphasized how this child's behavior is very different from her older children who were not in any ECE center before. Though they were simple things at home, but to her, they are important behaviors she liked her children to possess. With a smiling face, she commented that he is her model child at home which she advised her older children to learn from. Apart from his personal attitude, she recognized how he would always ask questions about things that are happening at home. At times he would come up with funny explanations such as; 'Mummy, Satan is under our house because the tap water is hot. I think he is trying to get into our house.' On a heavy rainy day, he said, 'The angels are not happy with us and they are crying in heaven.' Such testimonies from parent signifies the good job the ECE teachers are doing according to our age-appropriate playful program.

From the following 5 core functions for the development of the ECE sub-sector such as planning & financing, curriculum, workforce development, family & community partnerships, monitoring & evaluation, which core function is your government thinking of strengthening next? What is their aspirations (goal/objectives) and vision for this?

Significant improvements have been done by MET/government within the 5 core functions of development of ECE sub-sector for the past 5 years. However, the Monitoring and Evaluation Function need strengthening for informed decision-making. Data and information on ECE activities from the ground level needs to be reliable, valid, and accurate. An effective system for monitoring quality, access, attendance, learning indicators and teacher performance guarantee an effective and evidence-driven policies and actions.

How do you want to see the story of ECE unfold in your country in the next 5 years?

In the next five years, I envision more successful stories in the strategic directions for ECE in Tonga in alignment with its Policy Framework. In other words, a 100% coverage of the Heilala Curriculum throughout Tonga, 80 – 100% diverse resource centers to cater for the individual needs of children, 100% ECE teacher registration, 100% teacher competency, 100% teacher retention, 100% accountable and valid monitoring system for effective management and compliance to policies and last but not the least, a 100% enrolment rate in ECE centers with 100% parents and community's engagement in ECE.

Reference.

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