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## UNLOCKING INFORMAL INNOVATION: THE EARLY LEARNING CONTENT BOX PROJECT

POLICY BRIEF

November 2023

### **CO-CREATING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY MODELS**

*Demonstrating equitable access to learning development for children in low-income households, including children of vulnerable groups like the kayayei. A policy brief on lessons learned from evaluating the model and outcomes from a solution co-created with the kayayei and community youth.*

## CONTEXT

One of the significant challenges facing vulnerable young women employed in the informal sector, such as head porters—referred to in Ghana as kayayei (singular: kayayoo)—and hawking mothers is access to childcare services while they are busy at work. It is not uncommon to see these mothers carrying loads with their babies strapped to their backs or young children roaming their mothers' place of work without appropriate care, exposing them to harm. These marginalized children, therefore, miss out on deliberate development during their early childhood years, from birth to kindergarten at about age 6. They miss the opportunity to develop learning and other skills best developed in those years.

To address this gap, the Kaya Childcare Center (KCC), in partnership with the MasterCard Foundation, initiated the “*Unlocking Informal Innovation: The Early Learning Content Box Project*” between May 2022 and December 2023. The project sought to engage the kayayei community to contribute solutions to their childcare needs in a manner that could potentially develop into small businesses given further support. It engaged kayayei and community youth to explore the feasibility of a flexible, accessible solution for childcare and learning. This was implemented through a community-based model that developed the entrepreneurial capacities of youth and kayayei.

Over 17 months, the project engaged kayayei and hawking mothers to design and create early learning content boxes filled with simple handmade manipulatives for children aged 1 to 6 for independent learning through play in a flexible, inclusive, and sustainable manner without using digital technology. A content box distribution and childcare (babysitting) service model was also designed and implemented. The project was piloted in five communities in Madina, Accra: Redco, Melcom, Kenkele, the Social Welfare Area, and the Madina Market. It ran two facilitated babysitting kiosks and distributed content boxes to children at their mothers' workstations through mobile facilitators within a 1.5 km radius.



## KEY OUTCOMES

A total of 508 children, comprising 257 boys and 251 girls, benefitted from childcare and child learning services using 17,500 independent early learning content boxes created and distributed by 115 youth aged 18 to 35, including kayayei, engaged by the project. The innovative 14-week curriculum was an extension of a 10-week curriculum initiated in 2020 by KCC to ensure that its enrolled children remained on track with development and learning during COVID-19 school closures. The 14-week curriculum was implemented in multiple cycles during the project period and drew on children's inclination for playful activities to address a good proportion of early childhood developmental areas. The varied activities and focus on independent learning allowed children to use their imagination and creativity. They developed a strong sense of self-worth, cognitive strength, and problem-solving skills. Independent learning also helped develop other vital qualities such as patience, concentration, and self-discipline.



The evidence of improvement in the children's development over the 12-to-14-week use of the content boxes was outstanding. It showcased the effectiveness of using a learning-through-play approach to foster a learning culture children need to be school-ready. Additionally, the project established a scalable creation and distribution model that partners with the youth, particularly the kayayei, in a productive manner to innovate solutions for their peculiar childcare and child learning needs. This approach piqued the interest of the youth



and kayayei in Early Childhood Development (ECD). It provided them with a dignified source of income, thus fostering social empowerment and economic independence. This pilot confirms the need for policy to explore formal education standards and regulations to bridge the learning gap between birth (pre-kindergarten) and kindergarten. It offered an opportunity to study the effectiveness of co-created innovative solutions in addressing the childcare needs for pre-kindergarten-aged children of marginalized and low-income populations; and doing this while creating dignified jobs through productive engagement of women.

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

To measure the outcomes of the model and project activities, the study team conducted a rapid appraisal to allow triangulation of data gathered from the project. This consisted of 11 key informant interviews, three focus group discussions with 21 project beneficiaries, and a structured direct observation of what happened at the two babysitting kiosks and the workshop where the learning materials were created. Data gathered from project actors was triangulated with quarterly tracking data of assigned performance indicators to observe how the project evolved. These methods were instrumental in understanding the motivations and attitudes affecting the behavior of the kayayei and urban poor youth towards the project, childcare, and child learning services in general. Additionally, they helped interpret available quantitative data on the project, such as punctuality, varied income levels of participating youth and its effect on assessing the project's viability. The study is subject to selection bias for non-random samples (key informants especially), respondent recall and desirability biases, restricted generalizability of findings due to relatively small sample sizes, and the duration of the pilot project.

## EVALUATION FINDINGS

### *Provision of childcare and child learning services*

Of the 508 participating children, 76% were reached through mobile learning facilitators, while another 122 were reached through two babysitting kiosks. Of the children reached, 75% were 4 years old and below. Overall, 36% of the children participated in the program for the entire period. Specifically, the retention rate was about 58.3% during Term 1, which decreased to 43% in Term 2 and 28.5% in Term 3. Factors that accounted for this drop in retention included the frequent movement of mothers, either through forceful eviction from places they slept or in search of more lucrative areas to carry load or hawk. There was also movement during seasonal periods when they would travel up north to farm. All of the above factors accounted for the drop in Term 3, in addition to introducing a user fee of GHS2 a day per child. While the retention rate dropped with the introduction of the user fee, the limited testing period renders any inference therein inconclusive.

Each of the children received an independent learning box with content developed based on a customized play-to-learn curriculum. About 17,500 separate play-to-learn content boxes were made and distributed. The project used a graduated approach to stagger the boxes' content, guiding children through a growing set of skills from easy to more complex. In addition to the learning tools, 122 children received childcare services from two babysitting kiosks near the market where the kayayei work. Trained and mature caregivers managed these kiosks. Upon realizing their children could learn formally, some mothers enrolled them in school. A content box distributor shared this with the study team:

*“The project exposed many children to varied learning activities through play, and supported them in using these learning objects appropriately. Many parents did not believe in the importance of early childhood education and complained about it being expensive. So, they'd rather their children stay home until they are at least four years old. However, some of my clients saw their children's progress and enrolled them in preschool. I am now very popular in my neighborhood as the children call me by various names, such as “Color Yellow” and “Madam Balloon.”*”

The data above highlights the project's vital role in providing early learning services to children pre-kindergarten who might not have otherwise had the opportunity, as their mothers could not access appropriate, available, and affordable childcare services or simply considered their children too young to learn. The project effectively addressed this gap, ensuring that these young children accessed appropriate childcare and child learning services near their mothers' places of work. All children reached by the project achieved the targeted minimum daily use scenario per box, indicating the effectiveness of the graduated curriculum in improving their learning and skill level over time.



### ***Engagement of kayayei and other youth in childcare and child learning services***

The project engaged four categories of youth actors, namely, the content box creators (107), content box distributors (5), kiosk facilitators (2), and a project supervisor. The overall retention rate of the 115 youth engaged by the project over its life was 94%. These youth were trained to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness to play their roles in the care and development of children per recommendations of the Government of Ghana for caregivers and daycare institutions. Approximately 98% of them increased their knowledge of concepts behind early childhood development through the content created. They also mastered the skills needed to manage their operational areas.



### ***Development of the interest of kayayei and other youth in early childhood development***

This income, combined with the skills acquired, led to heightened interest in early childhood development, as the youth saw it as a sector offering employment opportunities and potential job stability. For the kayayei, this sector represents a vital source of additional income and opportunity, contributing to their overall well-being. These findings indicate the potential for programs like this to benefit children’s development and empower and engage the kayayei and youth in meaningful ways. One of them shared her perspective on the project, as captured below:

*“The project was impactful for the children and us, and the income was good, especially given the flexible nature and number of hours we worked. We learned many things that have made us better mothers and skilled people. Now I can work very well even at schools for toddlers or use the skills I have learned in other areas.”*

### ***Earning additional income on a flexible basis***

The youth engaged in the project earned additional income on a flexible basis by combining the project engagement with other work opportunities. The content box distributors and kiosk facilitators worked four hours daily and five days weekly. They doubled their monthly income by flexibly exercising their agency on the project, allowing them time to engage in traditional hawking and load-carrying activities. Currently, three of the youth have been engaged by a child care institution as caregivers, with one formally enrolled in an institution to earn an early childcare development practitioner certificate.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **Proximity and affordability matter for equitable access.**

1. Financially vulnerable mothers with low and irregular incomes cannot afford the actual cost of childcare or child learning aids. This suggests that alternative mechanisms for funding, such as government subsidies or grants, are necessary to ensure these vital services are accessible.
2. Childcare services should be conveniently close to the workplaces of kayayei women, to ensure accessibility without disrupting their work routines.
3. Childcare and child learning services are critical needs for marginalized women, especially kayayei mothers. Understanding the importance of these services to the community and aligning programs with these needs is crucial for success.

### **Let children be children: The power of structured play.**

4. During the pilot, 75% of the children that received child learning services and demonstrated improved outcomes were under age four; that is pre-kindergarten. In 2007, renewed focus on improving early outcomes in education led the government of Ghana to make Kindergarten a compulsory part of basic education (UNESCO-IBE, 2010). Thus, acknowledging the critical importance of the early years in forming the foundation for later learning (UNESCO-IBE, 2010). The years prior to that though are seen as a time for convenient childcare for which provision is predominantly made by families or private organizations. Longer work hours, migration away from family, and busy households has increased the demand and need for convenient childcare. For the low-income and poor households, however, access is not always possible. It is therefore important to explore innovative ways to provide equitable access that complements the mother or guardians work schedule and livelihood to ensure that the child's development in the critical foundational years before kindergarten is not left to chance.

It is worth re-looking at pre-kindergarten standards through an education lens to bridge the learning gap to ensure a well-prepared child enters kindergarten ready to learn and succeed.

5. Structured play activities that encourage creativity, problem-solving, and social skills offer a natural and effective way for children to learn and develop, particularly those aged 18 months and above. This should inform the curriculum and activities of future programs.
6. Noticeable improvements in their children's performance during the project inspired some kayayei and other mothers to enroll their children in basic school. This highlights the importance of small engagements to provide evidence of success for informal, low-income, often low-educated populations.

### **Community partnership drives interest.**

7. Collaborating with the community to innovate and co-create solutions for early childhood development can sustain their interest in this field and ensure that services are contextually relevant.
8. Community-grown solutions for childcare and child learning services can be provided informally and still generate income. This suggests that future programs can explore flexible service delivery models co-created with community-based caregivers, local women, or youth.
9. Children often roamed the community after the babysitting kiosks closed for the day, emphasizing the need for support beyond childcare hours. Future programs should consider extending services for longer periods.
10. Monetary incentives and employment opportunities in the childcare and child learning sector were crucial in cultivating the interest of youth in early childhood development. Future projects can sustain youth interest by offering competitive compensation packages and opportunities for professional development.

## **LEARN MORE**

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