
It's Never Too Late.....Or Early

Doris Davidson²

It was still quite early in the morning. I was just finishing the few chores necessary in a simple life style teaching vernacular literacy in a remote village. The shuffling of feet on the hard clay path outside the door and the ritually polite cough told me I had a caller. I put the brushwood broom behind the door and went out into the sunshine to speak to Jalambing. Before we had time to exchange any sort of small talk he began, "Third daughter, I want to dig in my book." He so aptly described the way he would hold and use his pencil as a digging stick when he unearthed his precious yams. The writing went deeply and firmly into the paper.

Our literacy classes were not due to begin for several hours yet as most of the 'students' went to their gardens in the best part of the day before returning with food, firewood, sacks of coffee or bamboo tubes of water from their own springs. Then they would bathe under the pandanus pipes of icy water, separate for males and females, before collecting their literacy materials and making their way to the old Lutheran school building. So, with plenty of time to spare Jalambing and I sat down on a now sun-warmed rock to chat. "It's very early yet," I said, "and the class won't be starting for some time. Maybe we should wait for the others to come back from their gardens."

"But Third daughter, I'm old, I need to work fast because my time is short now, and there is so much to learn about the writing and reading of my language. My father and brother who have gone to sleep missed out. They were too early, but I am still here so I must do it now."

I went inside the house to get his reading primer, pencil and exercise book. It was cool and dark under the grass thatch with little light from the push-out windows. I took his materials out. His face glowed as he lovingly took them. He produced a small piece of plank for a flat writing surface and opened his exercise book. From his pocket he took a pair of spectacles from the eye department at Lae hospital, and put them on. A withered, elderly man, hands shaking, chesty breathing slow, loud and measured, he began to dig in his book. He wrote the simple sentences from our lesson of the day before and then read them to me with enormous pride.

"You know Third Daughter, I went to the Wau area to carry for the gold seekers and I missed out on school. I was too young but I went anyway and didn't even get the chance to learn the Jabem language. That's why you don't see me with a Bible and hymn book. I can't read English, and I can't read Tok Pisin but now, in my late afternoon, I am reading and writing my own language! I'm so pleased that you came before it was too late for me."

Jalambing was silent for a while as he contemplated his writing then he took off his spectacles, put them carefully in their case and began to chuckle. "Third daughter, last night I used all the kerosene for my lamp because I was reading my nephew's book. He's already paid for his book but I haven't because I'm waiting for the money from my yams which were sold at Lae market. I hope my daughter will come back soon and bring my money so I can buy these things and keep them in my house."

By now the morning mists had cleared completely from the valley below the village, and voices could be heard from the gardens and the coffee house where the beans were

²Doris Davidson, who now lives and teaches in Nulu'alofa, Tonga, was previously a vernacular literacy teacher in Papua New Guinea. This is a personal account illustrating the motivation and the social obstacles in one old man's reach for literacy.

his voice carrying well in the stillness. He gave the sad message that there had been a death at the hospital in Lae and that the body would be arriving in the late afternoon on a passenger truck. Jalambing sighed and wiped a tear from his eye. He closed the books and

gave them to me with the pencil. He said, "Third daughter, you heard the message."

"Yes," I replied, "I heard it."

"There'll be no classes today then," he said. "Pity about old Gwee Atov. He didn't learn to read and write our language."

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