THE SOUTH PACIFIC LITERACY EDUCATION COURSE

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The South Pacific Literacy Education Course has been developed to help teachers to:

· understand more about how their children learn;

· understand the nature and importance of literacy learning;

· relate these understandings to the development of literacy programmes that provide for different language needs.

The course attempts to deal with the problem described by Konai Helu-Thaman (1992):

"Today, perhaps the most important question which Pacific Island educationists are grappling with is how best to reflect their traditional education practices through the imposed structures of the school so that people are able to survive in a modern world and retain their cultural identities."

In this article the development of the course is described, an overview is provided and ways in which the content and the implementation principles of the course encourage teachers to consider tradition and schooling are discussed. Through the course teachers will become active participants in the curriculum development process.

Course Development

The South Pacific Literacy Education Course (SPLEC) is grounded in the co-operative work of many people. First among these are teachers who strive to provide the best possible education for their pupils. The SPLEC units reflect their ideas and experiences; examples of their children's work are also a feature of the course.

Second, Peter De'Ath in Niue, and Francis Mangubhai, Warwick Elley, Barbara Moore and Jane Ricketts in Fiji, conducted research into the use of storybooks and shared reading methods with children learning English as a second language.

Their work showed the powerful impact that the shared reading of interesting story books has on children learning to read.

Third, the literacy work carried out by the Institute of Education of the University of the South Pacific over the last decade has enabled education officers and teachers to share their concerns, and work together on ways of improving vernacular and English programmes and of providing appropriate books for children to read.

Much has been learned as a result of this co-operation and this has been incorporated into the SPLEC. Work on the course was initiated at the International Reading Association's 12th World Congress at The Gold Coast, Queensland, in 1988. The International Development in Oceania Committee, which consists of members from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, discussed ways of developing an appropriate in-service course, and provided the impetus for the development of the SPLEC.

Important issues and principles were then discussed by literacy educators throughout the region. The following summary of guiding principles was prepared:
· literacy is a basic human right, essential for human dignity and for participating fully in social and cultural activities;

· literacy development in the children's first language is preferable, whenever this is possible;

· literacy development in another language enriches the children's education;

· literacy develops in schools through integrated programmes which recognise the reading, writing and thinking processes.

In 1990 the ten units that make up the SPLEC were drafted with the assistance of regional literacy educators and invited advisers.

Following that, in 1991, the course was trialled in three schools in Kiribati and Fiji and evaluated by

Professor Warwick Elley (New Zealand) and Dr Richard Walker (Australia). Finally, the course was revised and published ready for implementation.

An Overview of the Course

The SPLEC consists of three components: (1) an introduction, (2) ten units of study, and (3) an audiotape. Additional reference material, exemplary reading material for children and videotapes will be used by the course tutors as part of the training programme. The course is designed for serial presentation by a trained tutor who will also provide demonstration and support at every stage.

The course recognises the learning and the "power-to-learn" that children bring to school as well as the complexities of the reading-writing process. It presents an integrated approach to the development of literacy that can be used in all language learning situations.

The course includes traditional language activities such as poetry, drama, and storytelling, and innovative activities such as experience writing and shared and guided reading. Purposeful experiences with whole language are recommended, provision is made for monitoring progress, and guidance is given for helping pupils with difficulties. The units are summarised below.

Unit 1 Developing Literacy in the South Pacific Islands: In this unit the life experiences, language, and power-to-learn that children bring with them to school are considered. The implications for the classroom and for literacy programmes are discussed and recommendations are made about ways in which teachers can build on the children's knowledge of the world around them and their ways of playing and working together.

Unit 2 Exploring the Reading Process: In this unit, Running Records of Reading are introduced. This is a technique for recording oral reading. Analysis of the results helps teachers monitor individual progress and understand the reading process. Stages in learning to read are described and the reading process is discussed as:

"... a message-getting, problem-solving activity which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practised." (Clay, 1991).

Unit 3 An Integrated Literacy Programme: The first two units help teachers think about their pupils, the ways in which they learn and the nature of literacy development. In Unit 3, personal experiences of learning to read are shared, and methods of teaching used in the past are discussed. This leads to the presentation of an integrated programme for literacy development.

The whole language approaches that form the programme are described. Subsequent units detail these approaches.

Unit 4 Poetry, Storytelling and Children's Literature: Every culture has a legacy of rhymes and poetry, songs and dance, stories and ritual, to be passed on to the next generation. In Unit 4, the role of poetry and storytelling in first language programmes is discussed, along with the importance of reading the best of children's books to children who are learning English as a second language.

Unit 5 Using the Environment to Develop Literacy: Life outside the classroom can be explored and used to develop language, knowledge and literacy. In Unit 5, a language - experience approach is described and examples are provided. When books are few, this approach is particularly important as pupils can work around a theme of social interest and cultural importance to create non-fiction and fiction material for sharing and learning.

Unit 6 Shared Reading: In shared reading the teacher chooses an attractive book or story to read with the children. The book is enjoyed, discussed and explored further through creative activities such as drama, art and writing, and through studying the text in more detail. The development of shared reading and the procedures used are described.

Unit 7 Guided Reading: Although a great deal will be learned from all the informal activities of an integrated literacy programme, individual guidance is still necessary to ensure that all pupils make steady progress. In this unit, group reading

introduces a new book to a small group and helps them "talk, read and think their way purposefully through the text." (Learning Media, 1985).

Unit 8 The Special Role of Writing: Writing is an essential part of an integrated literacy programme. Because of its importance it is the subject for a unit on its own. Through writing, children learn to express and order their thoughts; they learn about written language and the ways in which it can be used. In Unit 8 the role of writing in an integrated literacy programme is discussed, ways of developing writing in the early years are described, and ways of sustaining and enriching development in the later years are investigated.

Unit 9 Monitoring Progress: The ways in which children respond during their literacy lessons provide ample evidence of their progress. Their interest and enthusiasm for talking, reading and writing, and their willing participation in individual or group literacy events show their growing knowledge and skill. Their responses will alert teachers to problems that need attention. In Unit 9, ways of observing, collecting and assessing individual progress at emergent, early and fluent stages are described.

Unit 10 Providing for Individual Differences: An integrated literacy programme provides opportunities for all children to become life-long readers, writers and thinkers. There will, however, always be differences in ways and rates of learning. In Unit 10, ways of helping all children succeed are discussed.

The South Pacific Literacy Education Course is being implemented through the Primary and Literacy Education (PALE) Module of the UNDP/UNESCO/UNICEF/AIDAB Basic Education and Life Skills (BELS) Programme. National Resource Persons from each participating country will pilot the course and after review and consultation make adaptations for a national programme.

Teachers, the Community and Curriculum Development

In the first unit of the SPLEC teachers are encouraged to think about their own childhood and the lives of the children in their community - remembered and observed ways of being, doing, and knowing. Teachers remember the stories and rhymes of childhood, the work they did, the fun they had with friends and the expectations of their family. They relate these to their pupils' lives, which may or may not be similar.

They realise the need to "enlist the power-to-learn that children bring to school" (Clay, 1985) and the need to relate the learning that takes place in school more closely to traditional learning practices and the natural learning that takes place in the community.

The traditional culture of the community becomes a valued part of the literacy programme through stories and poetry and the exploration of cultural themes. Traditional ways of treating children are also important considerations. Ethnographic studies are described (Fillmore, 1990 & Heath, 1983) so that teachers see how important such studies could be for their communities.

These considerations are returned to as the course develops, and will hopefully lead to serious research into the cultural context of learning in Pacific Island communities.

The course is practical too, and provides examples and demonstrations to help teachers develop literacy programmes that help all children learn. Where there is a centralised curriculum, teachers can work in partnership with developers because of their knowledge, experience and growing confidence. If curriculum development should devolve to school level (Velayutham, 1992), teachers will be well prepared for this.

The Introduction to the SPLEC begins with a photograph of Sister Fehoko and children from St Christopher's Home in Suva, Fiji. This is followed by a quotation from Katherine Paterson which is equally appropriate in this context:

"... perhaps we (teachers) should see ourselves as children of Crusoe, working together to survive on this tiny island earth, spinning in the lonely ocean of space. But in the world as we know it, survival depends on loving and giving. So we must also be Friday's children, putting ourselves at the service of the world's castaways - helping them, not only to survive, but setting them free for

lives protected by justice, empowered by knowledge, and illumined by imagination." (Paterson, 1989)

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