

Literacy and Children's Books in the South Pacific Region

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It is often claimed that the literacy rate is high in Fiji and many of the other islands of the South Pacific Region. In this discussion it will be suggested that the situation is not such a happy one and that many children are failing to learn to read in English or in their mother tongue. However, the provision of good books for children — the best of children's literature in English and books about the children's own lives in the children's own languages — could do a great deal to change the situation.

Before considering literacy levels and literacy issues it should be remembered that for hundreds of years the people of the South Pacific lived satisfying and satisfactory lives without being able to read and write. Knowledge and wisdom were handed down from generation to generation through a strong oral tradition that is still an important part of island life. Traditional storytelling, traditional folklore and traditional values will continue to play a role but the ability to read and write is equally important today.

There are many definitions of literacy. In Britain an illiterate person is said to have a reading level of less than 7 years, and a semi-literate has a level of greater than 7 but less than 9 years. In the United States, the Office of Education suggests that a Grade 4 level, (a 10 year old level), is the minimum level of literacy (Clay, 1980). If children have not reached a 10 year old level before leaving school they can become 'exliterate' because the reading material available for them in the community will be too difficult and they will not receive the practice required to sustain literacy (Clay, 1979).

It is difficult to find a satisfactory definition because it depends on the purpose of literacy. Some children may master the visual side of reading but fail to understand what they reading. Are they literate? Some children learn to read but fail to continue reading when they leave school. At times, everyone can have difficulties comprehending print if they try to read text about a subject they are ignorant of or text that is written in an unfamiliar or complex style.

Literacy was introduced to the islands of the South Pacific by the missionaries who converted people to Christianity and taught them to read the Bible. The missionaries learnt the language of the country and translated the Bible into the vernacular languages. Mission schools were the beginning of formal education.

Today most children in the region have the opportunity to attend school and in countries where there are no schools in remote areas, attempts are being made to build and staff schools. Most children are taught in the mother tongue during their first years at school and begin to read and write in the mother tongue. English is taught as a second language with the South Pacific Commission Tate English Programme providing material for oral drills and for reading practice.

The claims made for high literacy rates are based on the supposition that children who have been at school for four years will be literate because they have been taught how to read. In Fiji for instance the 1966 census figures showed that two thirds of the population were literate on the basis of four years at school.

A survey of what is actually happening in schools was carried out in Fiji in 1979. It was found that 25% of the Class 6 pupils tested were unable to read a simple passage in English. This is a high failure rate. The survey also showed that schools with libraries and books had better results and this was used as the basis for the Fiji Book Flood Project (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981).

The failure in English reading would not be of such concern if children were reading and writing well in their mother tongue. No equivalent testing has taken place in the vernacular languages but comments from teachers and experience in schools suggests that many children are failing to learn to read in either language.

In every education system there are children who find reading difficult. There may be neurological factors in severe cases; 2% is the figure quoted in an English study. There may be health problems such as hearing or sight deficiencies that are undetected. There may be emotional or social problems that cause tension and anxiety and prevent learning from taking place. There may be educational factors such as large classes, frequent changes of teaching staff and programmes that do not allow for individual differences.

Reading is a complex process that can easily go wrong in the early stages even when there are good methods and good books. Children may become confused about the reading process and if help is not given this confusion will be practised and failure will result (Clay, 1979).

If problems arise in circumstances where the programme provides a wide variety of books and other reading/ writing experiences one can expect a higher failure rate where resources are limited and the programme is a narrow one. Preventing reading failure is more effective than remedial programmes at a later stage of school life, but prevention is only successful if the classroom programme is a sound one. A variety of books at every level and a variety of experiences with books and writing will ensure that children have the chance to learn. Early intervention can help those who become confused and enable them to return to the normal class programme.

At this stage in the South Pacific Region however, it is only possible to change reading programmes gradually. Teachers need to know more about the reading process and how children learn so that they can see the need to move away from teaching isolated letters, sounds, and words to a programme that is text orientated (Reading in Junior Classes, 1985). In the meantime however a great deal can be done by providing good books at every level and ensuring that they are used effectively.

Learning to read depends on the oral language that has been developed before a child comes to school (Wells, 1981). This comes about through all the normal, natural interactions between children and their families, through talking, through stories, songs, rhymes and games. Babies also need books (Dorothy Butler, 1980).

Pre-school education is growing in importance with informal groups and organised groups in villages and towns providing children with opportunities to play together, and to be well prepared for school. Telling stories, reading to children and encouraging children to explore books for themselves provides the best pre-school experience possible.

The early reading programme at primary school is the basis for all future progress at school. Children learn through hearing the teacher read to them, by sharing books with the teacher and by reading books for themselves. Literacy develops most successfully when children have books and lessons in their first language but the books need to be

worthwhile and not just reading material to be recited over and over. Real books with a story to them, written in natural language rather than in a contrived form will help children read thoughtfully, seeking meaning from text, and solving problems for themselves (Clay, 1985).

Where literacy is developed in a second language or when children are also learning to read in a second language there is the same need for good books. The Fiji Book Flood Project showed the significant difference storybooks make when children are learning English. In this experiment Class 5 and 6 children in rural schools had a wide range of books to use for silent reading or for shared reading with the teacher. In another experiment in urban Suva schools it was found that children's listening comprehension and reading improved when books were read to them each day (Ricketts, 1982). This means that a reading programme can be improved without too much expense. A small collection of good children's literature, read to the class each day can bring about progress.

Suitable books in English are not difficult to find when funds are available, but books are needed in the children's own languages and about their own lives. The main need is for books for early reading as this will do more than anything else to prevent illiteracy.

Some efforts have been made to meet this need. Seminars and workshops have been sponsored by the UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific since 1983; many discussions have taken place and many reports have been written about the problems of providing textbooks and reading material for schools. Workshops have been held in Fiji, Western Samoa and Tonga. Teachers and writers have produced scripts and have learnt about editing, ways of trialling books with children and ways of using books effectively.

In many countries teachers have been making Handmade Books that can be used immediately with children for they realise that publishing is fraught with difficulties and delays. Handmade books have been made in many Pacific languages. For example, at a workshop on the island of Tanna, Vanuatu, Class 1 teachers made books in Lenekel, Whitesands, Futunese, Bislama, English and French. In Fiji books have been made in Urdu, Hindi, Fijian, Chinese and English. These books plus books in the Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and Tongan languages, and in all other languages of the South Pacific could be the basis for literature for Pacific children.

The Institute of Education's Primary Reading Project developed from the Fiji Book Flood Project and from the work carried out in Niue to find better ways of teaching English (De'Ath, 1980). Work in the USP Region has involved advising on ways of improving reading and language programmes in English and/or Vernacular and on ways of producing books. The New Zealand Ready to Read project has provided an excellent model for developing books for early reading as the principles apply to every language and give writers the freedom to be natural and imaginative.

It has been possible to publish several of the titles prepared at the UNESCO Children's Book Production Workshops and a great deal has been learnt through this experience. Help has been given by Margaret Mooney, Michael Keith and Lois Thompson of New Zealand School Publications on writing, editing and publishing. Peter Ridder of NZCER, Clare Bowes and Terence Taylor of School Publications have helped with illustration and design. Teachers and educational officers have been encouraged through this experience and are eager to do more.

A book production project to continue the work already started would be a timely development. There are teachers who write well for children, storytellers whose lore could become literature, artists who can capture the atmosphere of their own country and many children who need these books. A project that could provide the particular help needed by a country, whether it is with design or with the supervision of printing, or with the whole process from writing to printing would ensure that children have the books they need and that they will learn to read happily and well.

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