

Story Books And Story Buses: Helping Children's Literacy In The South Seas

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Ever since the Book Flood Project in Fiji Schools in 1980 and 1981, and even before that for teachers who have always valued stories, teachers in the Pacific Island region have wanted to make Shared Reading a part of their language programme.

Shared Reading is a kind of Language Approach to reading, where an interesting story in picture book form is read to a class of children and used as a basis of discussion, creative activities and writing. It originated in New Zealand as a way of providing book experiences for children who had missed out at home, but was found to be helpful at all levels and with all children. The Fiji Book Flood Project (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983), provided evidence of the effectiveness of the approach with children learning English as a second language.

In the majority of schools in the South Pacific Islands reading in both first and second languages has been taught through a structured approach for the last twenty years. The rhymes, songs and stories that were part of Pacific traditional learning had not been used or valued. A small literacy project at The University of the South Pacific has been working with teachers to bring about change, and individuals throughout the region have been doing what they can to improve the situation, often in very interesting and innovative ways.

What has been happening in Tonga is one example. The Kingdom of Tonga is a group of tropical islands in the South Pacific with a population of 104,000. The main island of Tongatapu is the most densely populated with Nuku'alofa the main town and centre of government. There are 104 government primary schools and 5 government secondary schools as well as schools run by religious groups. Classes are large in the schools on Tongatapu and resources are limited in all the schools because the per capita income is low.

Siutaula Cocker, the Acting Senior Education Officer for the Ministry of Education has developed a special form of 'Book Flood' for Tongan elementary schools and is now extending the message that "story telling" and "story books"

are a vital part of a reading programme. The message is brought by way of a "Story Bus".

Siu trained as a teacher at Ardmore College in New Zealand and taught at elementary level for eight years before joining the Tongan Teachers' Training College as a lecturer in English and Methodology. This entailed helping students with their own studies as well as helping them learn how to teach reading through an integrated approach.

Throughout her career she has valued programmes that are child centred in that they provide opportunities for learning rather than instructional exercises to be drilled. She believes that children need more time to talk, to learn and enjoy rhymes and songs, to draw and model and write about their experiences, and, of course, to listen to and read books for enjoyment and education.

Teachers in the South Pacific, however, have become intent on instructing - teaching English through the rote learning of grammatical names and syllables. Stories, art and music have been regarded as frivolous. Writing has meant copying rather than composing and attractive books in Tongan and English have not been readily available.

This situation is common in the region and understandable when material resources are limited, classes are large or of multiple-level, and an examination looms that selects those who will have the privilege of secondary education.

When Siu joined the Ministry of Education in 1983 she began working with other education officers on ways of improving the Tongan and English language and literacy programmes. Another problem became evident, however. Many children were not hearing traditional Tongan stories at home, firstly because their grandparents were either working or involved in community affairs, and secondly, because video and television were taking over the storyteller's role.

Every effort, therefore, was made to develop programmes that included storytelling and storyreading as part of a well balanced programme and to write and publish more books in Tongan. The Book Flood and the innovation of a Book Bus were part of this development.

Also in 1983 Siu was asked to seek funds for a Book Flood for Tonga following the model provided by Fiji. In the Fiji Book Flood Project, eight classes in rural schools were provided with a 'flood' of picture books, about 250 books for each class, to be used for either Sustained Silent Reading or Shared

Reading. Progress was measured and compared with the results from classes which used the formal approach to learning English. It was impossible to raise the funds at this stage but Siu was not daunted. She discussed the idea with Head Teachers who in turn consulted their Parent Committees. When these committees were convinced of the worthiness of a Book Flood, (Siu sometimes helped persuade them), funds were raised.

The School would hold a Parent's Day when the children would perform dances and dramas and then donations were made. Amounts between \$100 and \$500 were raised, not enough for a real 'flood' but a good beginning and a fine way of involving everyone in a worthwhile enterprise.

Siu would order the books from overseas publishers and once they arrived she and her colleagues would work with the teachers in the schools on how to use the books effectively. One class would be used as the demonstration class and a careful ten day programme would be worked out as the teachers felt they still needed some form to the programme.

Enjoyment was a priority and the children were encouraged to choose their favourite stories for enlargement. Teachers became more confident when children responded well to the books and they began to be more adventurous. One school, for example, developed 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' into a dramatic presentation in Tongan and performed it to the delight of both the local community and education officials alike. There was a musical accompaniment, a talking mirror, a vain and beautiful Queen, a sweet and innocent Snow White, comical dwarfs and a handsome Prince that would not kiss Snow White because the audience would be too enthusiastic about it! It was a wonderful blend of cultures and a sign of the universality of so many traditional stories.

There is a serious side to the Tongan Book Flood and that is testing is carried out before and following the year's programme; a way for teachers to understand where they are going. News of the Book Flood has spread and until now forty schools on Tongatapu have been "bookflooded" and sixteen on the northern island of Va'vau. The programme is enhanced through teacher education in the form of: booklets in Tongan on Shared Reading and Language Experience; radio talks on the importance of a balanced reading programme; education in the reading process and way of recording oral reading. The schools are encouraged to continue building up their collection of suitable books. This year the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB) and the Canterbury Reading Association of New Zealand have provided books for Shared Reading and this is greatly appreciated.

Problems do arise when teachers are transferred and the new teacher is unfamiliar with the scheme, and when books are not cared for or too well cared for and kept in locked cupboards. But on the whole these special Book Floods are brightening up the English reading programme for both teachers and children and leading to increased interest in the teaching of reading.

Another innovation came about as a result of two buses being donated by the Japanese for educational purposes. One is now being used as the "Book Bus" - very few books as yet but a chance to see how a visiting library might be organised and the other the "Story Bus". Siu and two of her colleagues from the Curriculum Development Unit visit schools regularly to tell stories and read to the children in English and Tongan. They are demonstrating the importance of storytelling and storyreading at every level of the school so that teachers will change from drills and exercises to a more balanced approach. If education officials and visitors come especially to read to the children, and if the children are so intent and appreciative perhaps it is of value and not just a bit of fun!

The Story Bus is also used to take groups of children to visit other schools where they can share their learning. They enjoy the outing itself as some don't get the chance to see other parts of the island. It is also an opportunity for talking and recording experiences on the outing. The main purpose, however, is to perform for the other school - to sing and recite and act out a story that has become a favourite. The children from Class 2 at Nuku'alofa Primary School came to Tokolomo Primary School and dramatised "Brown Bear, What do you see?" by Eric Carle and several stories from the Ready to Read books they have been enjoying. Parents made costumes and came to enjoy the show.

There may always be controversy over approaches to the teaching of reading but the importance of stories - the traditional stories of a culture, the traditional stories of other lands, and the stories from picture books that appeal to everyone - cannot be denied. The children of Tonga have programmes that are enriched giving them the chance to become lifelong readers and writers.

Reference

- Elley, W.B. and Mangubhai, F. (1983) 'The impact of reading on second language learning'. *Reading Research Quarterly*, Volume XIX Number 1, Fall.