Literacy and Reading in the South Pacific: Problems and Solutions

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This article presents the problems and successes that educators in the South Pacific face in the struggle to develop programs that encourage children to become readers. The studies carried out in the early 1980s were the basis on which the Oceania Literacy Development Program was organized. The Institute of Education at The University of the South Pacific has been supported in its work by Overseas Reading Associations and UNESCO.

Those concerned with the development of good reading habits in South Pacific island countries face a host of problems for which there are no simple or easy answers. Although all island countries have problems in common, some are unique to certain countries. In this article I attempt to point out some of the more common problems and outline the attempts that are being made to overcome them.

The island countries in the region have great pride in their rich traditions and customs that are strongly ingrained in today’s society. Nowhere is this cultural pride more noticeable than at the regional University of the South Pacific where students perform their traditional dances and songs at public performances. There is a rich and varied background of folktale that has been passed on through generations by word of mouth, and little has been done to capture these stories in print. The oral tradition also passed on essential information, whether it was about farming, fishing, or a meeting of the elders. Thus reading, whether it was for informational purposes or for recreational reasons, was often seen as unnecessary. In many instances this is still the way information is passed on. In a large percentage of homes in Fiji today little is found in the way of print material. The exception to this would be religious materials like the Bible and hymnbooks and the sacred writings of the Moslem and Hindu beliefs. Although the oral tradition is slowly being eroded in urban areas, it is still strong in rural areas. This is also true for the other island nations, and this has had a serious effect on the reading habits of children and young people.

The publishing industry in most island countries is not well developed. As the largest country in the region, Fiji has an advantage over other nations partly because the University is situated here and because there are more publishing companies in Fiji than in any other country. Most publishing companies are small and operate on limited budgets. Williams (1986) states...
that most publishing is done by governments, churches, educational institutions, and statutory bodies. Publishing by academics has been in their own fields of expertise, but writing for children, whether storybooks, poetry books, or reference books has been sadly neglected. Churches have produced some Bible stories for children in vernacular languages along with other religious titles.

Well over 95% of the children’s books that find their way into the local bookstores are supplied by overseas publishers. Although there has been some improvement in the stock of children’s books in Fiji, some of the other island countries do not have access to local bookstores. Children’s books that find their way into public and school libraries for the most part are gifts from overseas donors. Most of these gifts are used materials weeded from collections and often the gifts are textbooks and readers. Children and often teachers find it difficult to identify with the content because it is foreign to their environment. Most people in the South Pacific are far too polite to turn away gifts offered by well-intentioned overseas donors, but second-hand books that look unattractive put children everywhere off reading.

Chan (1978) in an unpublished paper presented to the second International Pacific Book Trade Seminar in Nadi, Fiji, pointed out that Fiji, like other Pacific Island countries, is isolated from the major book suppliers by thousands of kilometers of ocean. The cost of freight and customs duties affects the high cost of books. Added to this are the problems of internal transportation and communication once the shipment arrives. The lack of good roads into the interior of larger islands and the fact that inter-island transportation is expensive and often irregular are common problems. Thus the retail price of books is beyond what the average wage-earner can afford to pay.

The economies of all the island countries are fragile. With the exception of Fiji, the economies of most countries are based on agriculture and fishing and in some instances tourism. Fiji’s economy is more diversified. The mining of gold and the possibility of a large coppermine opening in the not-too-distant future plus a substantial tourist trade, a garment industry, and agriculture and fishing do give the country a stronger economy, but all countries including Fiji depend heavily on foreign aid.

Although the number of libraries in the South Pacific is growing, libraries are plagued by outdated collections developed to a large degree through gifts, small budgets (if indeed they exist), the lack of trained staff, and in many cases poor facilities. A 1992 study of secondary school libraries in Fiji by Rainey found that of the 109 schools that responded (139 were sent the questionnaire), only 55% had a yearly budget and 82% of those received less than $2,000 per year. Only 5%, or three schools, had a budget above $5,000. Forty-one percent of the schools depended mainly on gifts to develop their
collections. In the areas of both fiction and nonfiction materials, collections were woefully inadequate.

The percentage of qualified staff, those who were qualified teachers and had completed the Certificate in Librarianship, was 11%, although a further 9% were enrolled in either the Certificate program or the new Diploma in Library/Information Studies. Fifty-two percent had teacher training but no library training, and 28% had no teacher training or library training. Only 8% of the schools had full-time teacher-librarians, and 71% of the teachers in charge of libraries spent less than 50% of their time in the library. From these facts one might well conclude that libraries are a low priority in schools. In a large percentage of cases they appear to be used as study halls, and there was little indication that students were taught any kind of skills or encouraged to read for enjoyment. This was the sad state of secondary school libraries in 1991, and there is little evidence to show that there has been much if any improvement in the last four years. It is reasonably safe to say that much the same conditions exist in primary schools.

No one would disagree that the wealth and strength of a nation depend to a high degree on its literacy levels. Without a highly literate population the intellectual, social, and economic life of the people is seriously threatened. In the Fiji Times (Friday, March 3, 1995) the boldface heading "Literacy study reveals shocking results" caused considerable concern. This study is the first detailed regional study of literacy and numeracy standards in the South Pacific. The testing known as Basic Education and the Life Skills (BELS) was supported by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Australian aid. The survey covered 25,000 9- and 10-year-olds in 10 South Pacific countries, and according to the results 40% of the children tested in 1993 could not demonstrate a significant start in reading or writing in English after four years of formal schooling. These children were classified at risk. Although it is true that English is a second language in most countries surveyed, results in the vernacular were not significantly better.

In the numeracy test, 20% could not perform simple arithmetical tasks and were also considered at risk. Although there are no simple solutions to these shocking figures, several reasons for the poor showing are obvious. The study suggests that a combination of poor teaching, low government spending, lack of resources, bad management, and poor communication between educational authorities and isolated schools was partially responsible. With the many problems facing the Pacific Island nations, it is imperative that steps be taken immediately to solve these problems or island nations will slip even farther into the position of being have-not countries.

The problems discussed in the first part of this article no doubt give cause to wonder what has taken place that would encourage children to read. It is my opinion that research projects that took place in the early 1980s laid solid
ground work that began to make teachers and librarians aware of the importance of books and reading at the primary school level (classes 1 through 6).

In Fiji, English as a second language is introduced in class 1, although in most cases the medium of classroom instruction is Fijian or Hindi, and this continues to class 4. At that time instruction is in English; this transition is frequently difficult, particularly in rural areas where English is rarely used outside the classroom. In 1979 a national reading survey conducted by Elley and Manghubhai found that one quarter of class 6 children were unable to read simple English prose with enough understanding to cope with daily classroom tasks. A further study carried out in 1980 by Elley and Achal for the Ministry of Education found that a large number of students were unable to read independently the textbooks designed for them. Serious weaknesses were found in listening, speaking, and writing skills in English.

Elley and Manghubhai (1981) undertook a project called "Book Flood" in primary schools. The schools chosen were rural village schools. Attractive children's books were supplied to some classrooms, and teachers were given training in a workshop on reading to the class every day during English classes. Other classes were given books but teachers were not to read to the class; instead, they were to encourage children to read on their own. In a third group teachers carried on with their normal English lessons. In the chosen schools, the children in classes 4 and 5 were pretested and tested again after the project ended.

The results were what could be expected. In those classes that had teachers reading to their classes every day, the results showed that rural children exposed to a rich supply of high-interest, illustrated storybooks made remarkable progress in their reading, listening, and use of grammatical structures. After only eight months those children read to on a daily basis were shown to have made twice the growth that those in the control groups had made. To see if these effects were long-lasting, the groups were further tested the next year when they were in classes 5 and 6. A variety of standardized tests in reading, listening, vocabulary, and English structures was used, and it was found that those classes exposed to daily reading had maintained and in many cases increased their progress rates in comparison with the control groups.

Ricketts (1982) carried out a study, which involved three urban schools, an Indian school, a Fijian school, and a mixed-race school. Class 5 students took part in the study. A control group was set up in three similar schools nearby. The children in both groups were given a sentence completion test of reading comprehension and a listening comprehension test.

A selection of well-illustrated, quality storybooks was chosen, and the children in the experimental group were read to on a daily basis for 15-30 minutes a day during their English class. The control group continued with their regular English lessons. Teachers in the experimental group read to the
children daily and discussed the stories if the children wished to ask questions. Teachers were cautioned not to test the children’s knowledge of the stories. After eight months the two tests were repeated, and in both cases the experimental group had improved in their comprehension and listening more than twice as much as the control group.

These studies in the early 1980s have played a major role in showing the importance of reading to children on a regular daily basis. As well, they have been responsible for setting in motion a number of other positive movements that are taking place now.

The Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific has been actively involved in a variety of workshops throughout the region. These workshops have been on shared reading programs, writing stories in the vernacular, and children making their own storybooks. The Institute has also published a number of these first-language books. As stated in the Oceania Literacy Report (ca. 1990), there is a need to change many of the reading teaching methods and programs being used today because they are based on theories and principles that do not accord with what is now known about effective literacy development. These ineffective programs that rely on rote learning of sounds, words, and structures are firmly entrenched and can only be changed when teachers realize that children learn better and more happily if more flexible approaches are used.

The studies of the early 1980s and the dedication of the staff of the Institute of Education have led to the development of the Oceania Literacy Development Program. The program involves key literacy workers in the South Pacific countries and is sponsored by three professional reading associations: the International Reading Association, the Australian Reading Association, and the New Zealand Reading Association. Financial support for the program comes from aid agencies like UNESCO, Australian and New Zealand aid, and the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific.

The program has placed heavy emphasis on three projects:

- A teacher development program, which has developed and implemented courses in literacy education. It has prepared, tested, and evaluated inservice materials and is training tutors to conduct inservice courses.
- A Literature Provision Program, the aim of which is to increase the availability of quality children’s books in classrooms in South Pacific countries. This is being carried out in a number of ways such as:
  - encouraging professional reading associations to donate quality children’s books or funds for the purchase of such books;
  - encouraging schools in overseas countries to send their favorite books and develop a close relationship with a school in the South Pacific;
• developing a bibliography of books in English and French that have been used successfully with children in the region;
• providing support to and cooperation with institutions in the region where the study and use of children’s literature is encouraged.
• The Book Development Program whose aim is to facilitate the production of storybooks, poetry, and picture books for children to read in their first language and in English and French. In order to see that the Book Development Program has a chance to succeed, the Oceania Literacy Program is doing the following:
  • encouraging and supporting efforts to publish quality books for children;
  • holding writers’ workshops;
  • developing bibliographies of published books, including books for the early years and story books for children whose reading levels are more advanced;
  • working closely with publishers in New Zealand who are developing materials for early reading in the various languages of the Pacific island countries;
  • working in close cooperation with the UNESCO Publishing Project.

In January 1995, the Fourth Oceanic Reading Conference was held at the University of the South Pacific. The conference with the theme “Books Across the Sea: Multiculturalism in Reading” was an outstanding success and it has been a crowning achievement for the South Pacific in that it gave many grassroots workers in the field of education and librarianship the opportunity to listen to internationally known speakers in the area of reading and literacy. The keynote address on the final day was given by the children’s author Katherine Paterson, who spoke on the theme “Children of Hope.” The impact she made was tremendous, and her appreciative listeners gave her a standing ovation. People in the South Pacific rarely have the opportunity to take part in a conference of the caliber of “Books Across the Sea.” The conference no doubt has spurred people in the South Pacific to work even harder toward giving all children the chance to read quality children’s literature that offers both an international and a local flavor.

The Fiji Library Association has over the last 17 years sponsored National Library Week. A wide variety of themes has highlighted the week, but reading, literacy, culture, and libraries have always been an important part of the theme. The project has grown over the years, and last year nine major centers on the two major islands held numerous activities that particularly involved children. Character parades where children dressed as their favorite book character are led by marching bands. Storytelling and reading programs, quiz, oratory, and writing contests and film programs are held. Many schools in rural areas far from urban centres hold their own programs. The newspapers, radio, and television have cooperated with the Library Association to advertise the events as widely as possible, and children,
parents, teachers, and the public look forward to the event. It is, however, only once a year, and teachers, librarians, and parents must become much more involved on a daily basis by reading to children. Only then will children develop the habit of reading and come to realize that reading plays a vitally important role in their lives. Public and teacher-librarians need to develop and pursue a much more active children’s program as part of their overall library programs. A vigorous and active public relations program informing parents, children, and teachers about what is taking place in the library is badly needed in most centers.

The question we ask ourselves is, Are we making favorable progress in the struggle to help island countries improve literacy rates and reading habits of children? The answer is an unqualified Yes. It is a slow process, but more teachers are becoming convinced that the Oceania Literacy Development Program is on the right track. Governments need to become much more involved in supporting literacy programs in their countries, and more money must be invested in the literacy programs and in education in general. This means smaller class sizes, greater resources, better libraries, and more highly qualified people. Parents must become more involved and more vocal in their support for education. It is not easy to develop this attitude where the deeply ingrained tradition is against such involvement.

The future of the island countries lies in the children, who are their greatest resource. They will be the leaders of tomorrow, the doctors, teacher-librarians, technicians, farmers, and most of all the voters. They must be equipped to solve the problems that their countries will face. If they are to solve those problems, a highly literate population is a basic requirement.

In a paper entitled “Friday’s Children” given at the Twelfth World Congress on Reading 1989, Katherine Paterson sums up the problems we face in our struggle to empower children. She states:

Perhaps we should see ourselves as children of Crusoe, working together to survive on this tiny island earth, spinning in a lonely ocean of space. But in the world as we know it survival depends on loving and giving. So we must 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.

References
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