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Between two worlds:

taking control of our destiny through relevant literacy

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Introduction

This chapter is an attempt to evaluate literacy learning in the Pacific, identify shortfalls in the system and offer possible alternatives that will enable Pacific Islanders to be competently operational in two worlds: the global and the local. The chapter begins with a rationale for the title, a brief on the role of re-thinking initiatives, followed by a historical account of the introduction of literacy learning in the Pacific. Current practices in literacy pedagogy are then discussed, focussing on the use of vernacular languages in literacy learning. Areas of difficulty in literacy learning are related to differences between classroom practice and home cultures. Finally, the chapter offers some possible pathways Pacific educators may follow for the formulation of a relevant literacy curriculum and pedagogy for the Pacific learner.
The title *Between two worlds* encapsulates what is at the heart of most Pacific Islanders’ aspirations for their children. They want their children to experience the best of two worlds: the high-tech cultures of the western world and the culture and tradition of their Pacific world that distinguish them from the rest of the world. Culture in this context embraces everything that distinguishes us as a people: our languages, histories, epistemologies, myths, legends, dances, art forms, artifacts, world views, histories, values and skills. Thaman (1998 cited in Taufe’ulungaki 2003:17) expresses it thus:

[culture is a] shared way of life of a group of people, which includes their accumulated knowledge and understandings, skills and values as expressed and constructed in their language, which is perceived by them to be unique and meaningful.

The realisation of our uniqueness as a people should ignite our determination to uphold our indigenous identity. To ensure this happens, Pacific languages need to be maintained. Many Pacific languages have few speakers and are at risk of dying out. If the 9,727 (1996 Fiji Census) indigenous Rotumans, for example, do not speak and maintain the use of their language, then the mat on which they sit will be pulled from under them, for language is intrinsically interwoven with culture. The Rotuman language may slip into oblivion, for no other group of people in the worlds speak it. Curriculum writers, as powerful determinants of literacy curricula in Pacific schools need to reflect on what it means to be small in a big world (Crocombe, 2001: 628). If we value and treasure our roots and identity, we must prioritise their maintenance, and language is central to this.

The second part of the title, *Taking control of our destiny through relevant literacy*, reflects the re-thinking initiatives spearheaded by the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific (USP). These initiatives include realigning aspects of our education system in order to integrate our values, our beliefs about knowledge, the way we think, the way we relate to each other and the way we assess and evaluate learning in the formal education system. We cannot stop globalisation, but we can make literacy learning meaningful and relevant to the learner by considering the learner in totality in order to offer a commodity that
empowers learners to lead a productive adult life within their own communities. We need to determine what is relevant literacy to the learner in rural Solomon Islands or the learner in Kiribati, who will need to use literacy to survive in the twenty-first century while remaining on his/her native island. How can classroom learning recognise the needs of Pacific children and make learning feasible, relevant and enjoyable?

**Pacific re-thinking initiatives**

Emmitt, Pollock and Kommesaroff (2003:14) describe the sentiments of the re-thinking initiatives thus:

The more one engages in conscious action to understand and transform the world—one’s reality—through the interplay between reflection and action, the more fully human we become, that is, we have greater control over our destinies. If we accept the world as set by others we allow ourselves to become dehumanised—an object shaped and made by others rather than expressing our uniquely human potential to be involved actively in creating what we become. As human beings our shared vocation is to become active individual subjects engaged on an equal basis with others in the process of creating (or naming) the world. We should create history and culture rather than exist merely as passive objects accepting reality and the world as ready-made by other people. In creating history and culture we create our own beings in the process. This is the great challenge for literacy education.

The social constructivist philosophy of learning which underpins current pedagogical practice regards self-reflection as crucial to effective pedagogy. Self-reflection is internal questioning, a re-examination of the current which bears elements of the past and determines the immediate and distant future. It entails an attitude of critical evaluation and an internal dialogue in search of answers to pertinent questions. In this case, the pertinent questions relate to literacy and numeracy. Literacy teachers could ask: Literacy for what? Why do I teach literacy and why do I teach the way I do? Has my practice had a positive impact on most of my learners, has it met their expectations, fulfilled their aspirations in life or enhanced the quality of life? If my answers are mostly negative, where have I
gone wrong? Where are the gaps in the teaching and learning process? If I have made some headway, what are the contributing factors? These are the questions we should be asking frequently, for they form the underpinning principles of our work as literacy educators—they form the philosophy of our practice. However, my guess is we are so consumed with the perpetual cycle of planning, implementation and assessment that we are unable to see the wood for the trees.

It is imperative that as indigenes of the Pacific, we take up the call to create our world rather than allow others to create it for us. For too long Pacific learners have been coerced into learning practices incongruent with their ways of learning and knowing, one of the reasons being the sanctity of conventional schooling (Holdaway, 1979). It is time to liberate Pacific learners.

A brief history of literacy in the Pacific

Literacy was introduced some 170 years ago in the eastern part of the Pacific which includes Tonga, Fiji and Samoa, and about 120 years ago in the western Pacific. It was brought to the shores of the Pacific in the early seventeenth century to a people who, for centuries, had survived on an oral culture and tradition. It was introduced by missionaries for evangelistic purposes. In many cases, the missionaries learnt the local language of the people they sought to evangelise. Orthographic systems were subsequently devised in order to translate the Bible into local languages. Literacy was introduced firstly in the mother tongue of the indigenous people to enable them to read the Bible. In the case of Fiji, the first missionaries came from the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Tonga, where literacy had been introduced earlier.

In Fiji, the Catholic mission was established a decade after the Wesleyan Church, and both took an active part in education. While the Wesleyans emphasised the use of Fijian as the medium of instruction in schools, Catholic schools insisted on the use of English as the medium of instruction. This was also convenient in multiracial schools once the indentured labourers from India opted to stay after their contract under the indentured system ceased in 1920. In the 1930s the churches slowly handed over their role as the primary providers of education to the government. The policy initiated by the government required the use of the vernacular, either Fijian or Hindustani, as the medium of instruction in the first
three years of schooling and English took over thereafter. This policy still exists: ‘In Fiji, since the 1926 Review of Education that established the main language policy—the practice of instruction in the mother tongue in the first three years of primary school, and thereafter English replacing the first language—there has not been a major shift in language policy’ (GoF, 2000:290).

Literacy education in the language and learning styles of the coloniser gradually gained prominence. In the case of Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Tahiti, French literacy was introduced. Countries which were colonised by the USA and British featured English as perhaps the most important subject in the curriculum.

This trend has continued until today, especially where English as a second language is concerned. For those island nations where English is the language of education, business and official communication, a pass in English in public examinations is mandatory for promotion and scholarships. This presented a new set of challenges for a people who had lived in an oral culture for hundreds of years.

While literacy use in Fiji at its initial introduction was mainly used for reading the Bible in the Fijian language, writing was used for recording monetary contributions for religious purposes and a few other related matters. The following paragraph taken from Mangubhai (1995: 15) indicates that there was less emphasis on writing:

Clammer (1976: 164) cites from the report of a commission appointed to investigate certain alleged errors in the 1880 census of the population: ‘We remember them (births and deaths), some of us by writing, but others do not write them down’. And a quote from a scribe who kept a record of births and deaths in books, ‘There are some village teachers that cannot write. Those who cannot write use pieces of reed for the purpose of reckoning up the births and deaths that occur in their villages. They can read, although they cannot write.’

Gradually, competence in writing improved but it was never able to match the competence of reading. Writing was more or less confined to the classroom as its functional use outside was limited. Reading, on the other hand, was for educational
and religious purposes. Later, writing was used for other purposes such as keeping in touch with relatives who had migrated or gone to seek employment overseas. In the last fifty years or so, reading and writing have been used extensively for a variety of purposes which include education, commerce, government, judicial proceedings, entertainment, and almost all facets of daily life, especially in urban areas. With the introduction of high-speed technology, new forms of multi modal texts have expanded the scope of both reading and writing.

The Pacific community in general regards English as the most important subject in the school curriculum. Most scholarship donors and higher learning institutions require evidence of reasonable proficiency English (in the form of marks in national examinations). This is the immediate advantage of learning English from the perspective of the community, and this puts pressure on the education planners to prioritise English literacy teaching. Unfortunately this happens at the expense of vernacular literacy.

**Current practice in literacy pedagogy in the Pacific**

What happens in a language classroom is a reflection of a wider societal web that impacts children’s lives. In discussing literacy pedagogy, it would be preposterous to exclude these intimate connections. A range of societal institutions, such as government and business, as well as a dominant set of ideas or ideologies, such as culture, gender and economic development, may determine what we teach and the way we teach it.

In 2005 the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific was commissioned to carry out a study to determine whether the values, attitudes, skills and knowledge currently espoused and expressed in policy documents of the Cook Islands Ministry of Education are actively implemented in the field. After extensive field research it was reported that, while there are several key principles that the Ministry of Education (MoE), parents and principals are in agreement over, there are discrepancies and contradictions when these principles are transferred to the field. Interesting to note was the discrepancy between the MoE’s stated value on culture and language as a basis for learning and how this was transferred to the classroom and the community. Respondents from the
schools revealed that there is lack of systematic support for Maori education from the Ministry. Only 55 per cent of Cook Island students in the study could speak Maori well. The study also showed that there is a low literacy and numeracy rate for both Maori and English. Responses from parents indicate that, despite the Ministry’s stated claim to value culture and language, there is no direct transfer to active student participation (Fua, 2005).

While only one Pacific Island country (PIC) was studied (the Cook Islands), it is likely that the situation is in some way similar for other Pacific countries. While most official policy documents prescribe the use of the mother tongue in the first three years, actual practice sometimes differs. While the reasons for the mismatch may not have been studied extensively in the Pacific context, there are some possible explanations. One is the ‘language ecology’ of the Pacific Island nations. Many countries are multi-lingual and teachers have children speaking different languages under one roof. In Fiji, the teacher usually uses English in this situation, so learners have almost zero competence in the language of instruction at the beginning of formal schooling.

Another reason is due to a general misconception that proficiency in English is improved when the learning of English starts as early as possible. Despite the fact that research has shown that the amount of time spent on first language development is more beneficial to second language proficiency than time spent on second language development (Cummins 1981), literacy in the mother tongue is often regarded as unnecessary for second language learning. Many school principals, teachers and parents usher in English as early as kindergarten and, in doing so, marginalise vernacular literacy. Literacy learning in English is prioritised because it is seen as instrumental in the attainment of academic access.

There is ample evidence that literacy in the mother tongue provides an effective foundation for second language literacy (Taufe‘ulungaki, 2003:15). One such piece of evidence is the study of 17,000 British children learning French in a school context. The study revealed that, after five years of exposure, children who had begun instruction at age 11 performed better on tests of second language proficiency than children who had begun at eight years of age (Dutcher & Tucker, 1994).
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The other major justification, and possibly of greater importance, for a good literacy foundation in the mother tongue is cultural identity. Language exists only when its users exist. These users create the code used in communication, and language is always used in relationships. Our values and worldviews are reflected in the kind of language we use. For example, we generally identify ourselves first in terms of our relationship with our kin. In some parts of Fiji, adults who have children and grandchildren are rarely addressed by their first name; as a sign of respect they are referred to as, for example, father of his first born’s name, grandmother of the first grandchild’s name, etc.

Another reason for vernacular languages being marginalised is the public examination system which continues to drive what happens in the classroom. For example, despite studies indicating its benefits, physical education, according to Wright, McNeil and Schempp (2005, cited in Dorovolomo, 2006) ‘carries a stigma of inferiority as it does not match the perceived academic significance of other examination subjects’. Culture and vernacular languages may also carry the same stigma in our school systems.

Furthermore, teachers’ credibility and calibre are measured by students’ public examination marks. This puts pressure on teachers to focus on exams, often at the expense of non-examinable subjects such as vernacular languages. So, while a language policy prescribing vernacular language learning may be in the language curriculum document, some teachers ignore curriculum documents and teach only what is tested in examinations.

In some cases, the transfer of policies from one policy document to another is inconsistent. For example, while the policy appears in the nation’s strategic plan, it is missing from the curriculum document used by teachers. They are therefore ignorant of the fact that they are required to teach (in) the vernacular to certain classes.

The need for a change from autonomous to ideological

Where literacy is taught in the vernacular of the children, there needs to be a change in the way education planners, and hence teachers, regard literacy learning. Until the 1970s, it was regarded as the learning of a discrete set of skills such as
comprehension, word attack and word recognition skills. This is an autonomous notion of literacy learning—neutral and universal. The last twenty years have seen a shift to the socio-cultural or ideological perspective: a culturally sensitive view where literacy is rooted within cultural practices and concepts of knowledge, identity and being.

Relevant literacy learning and teaching for the twenty-first century, where both the ideological concept and the new literacies should be fostered, cannot be developed in a classroom where the autonomous concept of literacy is still the norm and discrete skills are still tested in examinations. While some policy documents (e.g. the *Cook Islands Curriculum Framework*, Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2002) are based on an ideological concept and may even state that all teachers are teachers of numeracy and literacy, actual practice is still skill-based or autonomously perceived and compartmentalised.

The changing notions of literacy have brought about changes in teaching approaches. Lankshear (1997) labels the three stages on the continuum of literacy teaching and learning as (i) traditional (skills-based, phonic based) (ii) progressive (whole language, process writing) (iii) post-progressive (genre-based, critical language awareness, multiliteracies). Where on the continuum is Pacific literacy pedagogy now? I believe we are still in the traditional, autonomous stage, although there have been a few attempts at introducing some ideological post-progressive approaches in certain quarters.

A possible explanation for adherance to the autonomous approach is that in most of the small and struggling economies in PICs, learning resources such as teaching aids, computers, classroom space, library facilities and reading books are scarce or non-existent. Furthermore, the teacher:pupil ratio can easily be 1:45 or worse in urban localities. Teachers who may have undergone in-service training in USP towards a Bachelor in Education, and have changed from an autonomous to an ideological and multi literacies view as a result of their studies, may find themselves reverting to the use of skill-based teaching once they are back in the classroom, due to overcrowded classrooms, lack of facilities and other systems-related factors, such as national examinations and ignorant school administrators.
A comparison between current school practice and indigenous cultural practice

The most recent indigenous perspective in literacy learning and teaching is the emphasis on Pacific ways of learning and Pacific values. This is the move to make schooling in the Pacific more relevant and effective for Pacific students. For the last 170 years or so, Pacific schooling has been heavily influenced by western approaches and this has been identified as causing the loss of culture and identity (Pene, Taufeʻulungaki and Benson, 2002; Thaman, 2003), and also poor learning outcomes (Puamau, 2005).

The ideological concept of literacy learning as a cultural practice calls not only for literacy learning to be done in the vernacular, but also for recognition of Pacific learning styles and the identification and inclusion of Pacific knowledges and ways of knowing into formal schooling. While some argue that to compact all of the seven million people in the Pacific islands, including Hawaiʻi, West Papua and New Zealand, under the one label of Pacific culture is too simplistic, recent studies point to more similarities than differences across the indigenous cultures of Pacific Island nations.

Taufeʻulungaki summarises some differences between school practice and Pacific cultures which can give rise to misunderstandings and communication gaps between classroom teachers and Pacific students. One such difference concerns beliefs about knowledge; in school practice knowledge is ‘validated through tests’ and is an ‘open system with change being a key value’, while among Solomon Islanders knowledge is ‘validated by external sources such as ancestors and dreams’ (Taufeʻulungaki, 2003:21). In other words, one does not create knowledge; it is handed down. When Solomon Island students come to USP, they are prepared to passively take in what the lecturer and other knowledge sources (e.g. books) offer them. However, active knowledge construction is expected at USP, and these students do not know how to do it; nor do they feel comfortable about doing it. This problem is compounded by the fact that most of them are learning in a second language. It is my belief that they cannot maximise their learning unless the mismatch is consciously addressed by both students and lecturers.
**Intervention: where to from here?**

We need to devise ways to build bridges in order to help Pacific students ease into the world of academia without alienating them from their culture, so that they can straddle back and forth between the two worlds when circumstances demand. This paper therefore concludes with some basic steps educationists, including curriculum writers, may take to begin to build these bridges.

We need to shift the paradigm of literacy teaching and learning away from an exam-oriented enterprise to one that addresses the needs of the learner who will live in the multiple contexts of Pacific reality. This is possible if curriculum developers are convinced that our culture and tradition are worth preserving and treasuring. They must also be sensitive to the needs of the people they serve. For example, if oral communication is still the main avenue of communication in the Pacific, why are we paying only lip service to oral language development in most classrooms? The most obvious reason is that oral language is not tested in national examinations. We must constantly remind ourselves that it is imperative to assess what is worthwhile, not what is convenient for administration purposes.

Secondly, we need to move from a strictly autonomous concept of literacy and literacy learning to an ideological one, with due consideration to what the learner brings to the learning act, which includes his/her culture and values. Models of literacy used in the Pacific, but originally culled from outside, impose a set of philosophies from their source onto Pacific cultures (See Chapter 1). It is these we must replace with Pacific philosophies. We need to create in our people a sense of ownership of literacy learning which entails researching, documenting and using their Pacific epistemologies, knowledge production, cultural practices and languages in the formal education system. In the 1980s, Papua New Guinea set up some successful vernacular literacy initiatives where the community and local teachers were responsible for the development of the curriculum, resourcing and teaching literacy skills using the mother tongue in the first three years of education. This example should inspire other PICs to attempt something similar.

Further, curriculum developers and teachers must be fully aware of the role of the mother tongue in literacy learning and cultural preservation. Thaman (2003: 78)
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states that: ‘if we delay or fail in our task we will continue to witness the erosion and/or disappearance of the worthwhile knowledge, skills and values that define us as a people, as well as help us to survive in a rapidly changing world, morally bankrupt and environmentally unsustainable world’.

Curriculum writers and teachers must also be at the forefront of policy formulation and implementation. We cannot be on the sideline and allow others to decide how our ball game is going to be played. Unless we make a move to be more informed about our supposed area of expertise, we will play this game from the sideline at the expense of our own identity and being.

Finally, what is urgently needed is the political and personal will and commitment to take up the challenge. I respectfully urge curriculum developers to learn as much as possible from each other and work with a sense of urgency to make a difference in literacy education.

References

Taufaga – Between two worlds: control through relevant literacy


