

CHAPTER 8

Culturally and Linguistically Relevant Resource Development for Literacy in the Pacific

Dr Ruth Toumu'a

*Fellow in Curriculum and Literacy, Institute of Education,
The University of the South Pacific*

Abstract

The chapter begins by proposing that improving the national print literacy assessment outcomes of Pacific school children cannot be achieved by a simple single-pronged or single-focused approach, but instead requires the systematic and interdependent efforts of stakeholders in all sectors of society. After outlining the key factors in a holistic and multi-pronged approach to nationwide literacy outcomes improvement, it then focuses on one of these aspects: the development of a steady supply of culturally and linguistically relevant and meaningful, affordable, durable and attractive reading materials and materials to supplement the literacy and language curriculum delivery in classrooms and in homes. The chapter looks at the range of research-based benefits of books for children, and the importance of children's exposure to books as both mirrors and windows. It then briefly describes the work that the publications unit of The University of the South Pacific's Institute of Education is undertaking towards the aim of getting such books into the hands of Pacific children, and thereby contributing to print literacy outcomes improvement.

Introduction

When assessing the current overall state of print literacy skills (reading in particular) in children of the Pacific, we note: firstly, the recurring underperformance of our children in literacy benchmarking assessments; and secondly, situations in our schools of either a significant and persisting paucity of books for our children to read, or an abundance of unused and/or unusable books. With regards to the first, I do not wish to dwell on the persistent search for negative statistics beyond presenting a few findings regarding print literacy within the last decade.

In the Kingdom of Tonga, where The University of the South Pacific's Institute of Education (IOE) is based, the Tonga Early Grade Reading Assessment (TEGRA) Baseline Survey 2009 report notes that whilst most students are able to develop fundamental skills in years 1, 2 and 3 of primary

school, “only 3 in 10 students at the end of Class 3 are able to develop fluency in reading, ability strongly related to reading comprehension” (MEWAC, 2009, p. 5). The TEGRA report continues with a recommendation:

Based on the analysis presented in this report, it is recommended that Tongan educators address reading deficits through interventions that provide additional support to teachers to improve their practice, increase the exposure of children to books and other reading materials beyond the classroom, and promote greater parental involvement in the reading development of their children. (p. 5)

In the wider Pacific region the patterns are similar, with the Director of the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme noting in an interview on World Literacy Day 2015, that results from assessment carried out in English, French and seven other Pacific languages and targeting children in years 4 and 6 were “fairly stark”, with only three in 10 year 4 and 6 children meeting basic competencies in literacy (Dr M. Belisle, Radio New Zealand, 10 September 2015).

So, what is needed to improve national literacy outcomes? There is no simple answer to this question. Literacy itself is a multifaceted and contested concept. Its various definitions have evolved through numerous conceptualisations over time internationally, ranging from literacy as discrete sets of technical skills, to literacy as a human resource commodity for economic growth, to literacy as capabilities for sociocultural and political change (Adult and Community Education (ACE), 2014, p. 7). It is now widely accepted that literacy is a social practice, and that an individual’s identity is constructed within the various discourses present in their sociocultural environment. This view of literacy holds that, given “time, experience, and apprenticeship, the literacy practices of any individual come to reflect the group norms and values” (Kucer, 2014, p. 240).

This chapter relates to literacy in the narrow sense of print literacy – reading and writing in the first and other languages – and if a highly print literate society is desired, then the conditions for the apprenticeship of children into this practice must be established. I do, however, believe literacy encompasses much more than print literacy, and that the day of a fuller and more complete acknowledgement of the rich and valuable literacies of Pacific peoples is on its way. For a wider discussion of the ways in which Pacific peoples conceptualise “literacy”, see a report I wrote for New Zealand’s ACE Aotearoa (2014). However, whilst the focus of schools remains predominantly on literacy as reading and writing, it is helpful to maintain a focus on print literacy. Print literacy is generally held to represent a first important step for Pacific peoples

in enabling access to certain desirable things: formal education, employment, and civic empowerment through access to Western-based civic structures and services.

Currently, however, in a number of Pacific Nations the standardised print literacy testing in both first and second/subsequent languages indicates that clear challenges exist. This chapter proposes that raising literacy achievement will require collaborative commitment and joined-up thinking and efforts by all stakeholders, at all levels of society. What follows is a very broad initial overview of the potential roles of various literacy stakeholders in society, before moving to the chapter's primary focus on the role and importance of developing culturally and linguistically relevant resources for literacy in the Pacific, and the IOE's response to this need.

The Need for Collective Commitment

It has been said many times that it takes a village to raise a child. It may also be said that it takes a nation to raise the print literacy outcomes for its children. Having largely accepted that print literacy is a desirable attribute for a Pacific child to acquire in today's world, it behoves us to understand print literacy, to have a knowledge of how to create the conditions for this form of literacy to develop, and to be aware of the multiple roles we can play in enabling print literacy to develop.

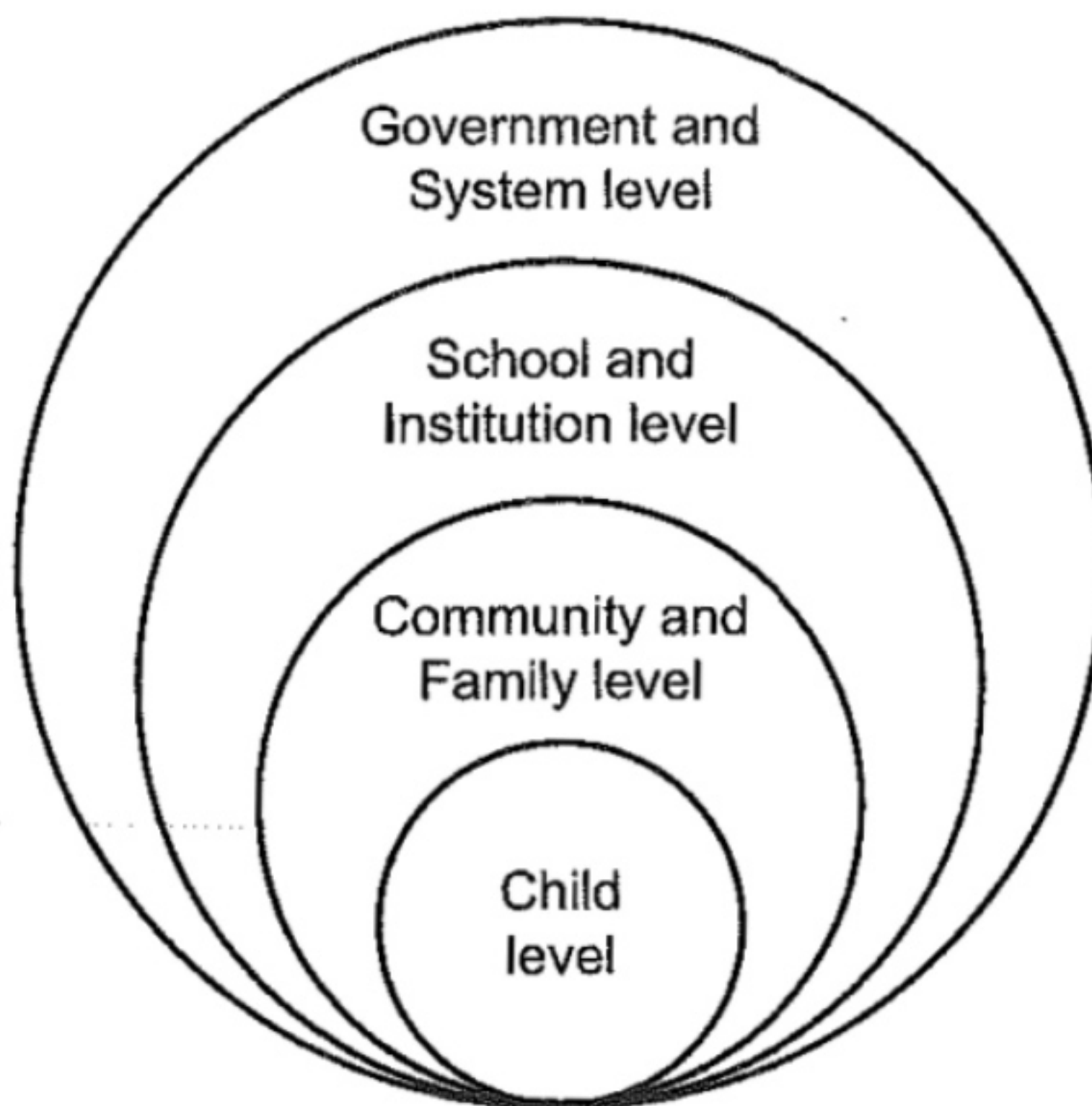


Figure 1. Levels of society responsible for literacy outcomes.

The figure above shows a simplified but useful representation of the way in which a nation supports the literacy development of each child. At each level within Figure 1 there are key focus areas that can contribute to improving the outcomes of print literacy for children.

At the government and education system level in the Pacific, educational leaders are responsible for educational planning, policy making, and national assessment programmes. Some key focus areas for improving literacy outcomes include:

- Funding and management practices, including strong links to development partners
- Strengthening policy through the capacity building of in-country policy analysts and writers
- Ensuring an adequate supply of quality teachers, by building teacher capacity through both pre-service and in-service training, carried out in robust and contextualised teacher education programmes that firmly value Pacific epistemologies and pedagogies
- Appropriate literacy curriculum development, evaluation, and reform cycles
- Establishing structures, processes and capacity for national assessment of literacy and the provision of reliable data that lead to attention to, and accountability for, learning outcomes at all levels
- Research to identify a repertoire of effective instructional models for the nation (i.e., what works in the nation's own sociocultural and linguistic context), and research that supports informed dialogue between stakeholders. Additionally, research efforts to analyse the impact of policy changes on student learning and the associated needs for subsequent teacher in-service and pre-service training
- **Resource development** – the timely development and publication of sufficient quality resources, both print and electronic, for supplementing the literacy and language curriculum.

At the school/institution level, the focus needs to be both general and specific, ensuring the general quality of educational opportunities provided, and specifically supporting strategies that ensure a focus on, and accountability for, the literacy outcomes of each and every learner in the school. The general school quality issue typically comprises actions towards:

- Access/Preparedness/Enrolment (links to early childhood care and education providers)

- Retention
- School leadership
- Institutional funding and management
- School facilities, infrastructure, and resources, including **books and print instructional materials**
- Affordability
- Community engagement and support
- Pedagogy: knowledge and appropriate use of effective instructional methods
- Sufficient assessment for learning at all levels.

Each of the above general quality indicators can be systematically examined and strengthened in light of what it takes to develop print literacy. Of key importance is ensuring the training of staff in effective instructional methods for their specific linguistic and cultural context. This would be paired with the establishment of strong and efficient systems for assessment for learning and the training of teachers in its use, and strong focused direction and support for the literacy focus from school leadership. Ensuring that teachers are equipped with both readymade **instructional resources**, and the knowledge skills and dispositions to create their own is also crucial.

At the family and community level, it is now strongly held that “literacy education should involve families so that literacy development is a three-way interaction between school, child, and family” (Dunn, 2001, p. 685). International research points to the “significant role” that parents play in “mediating reading as a cultural practice in the everyday context of the home,” particularly for boys, wherein such “reading relationships” are believed to “help the parents and their sons learn more about each other and themselves” (Hamston & Lowe, 2003, p. 44, 51).

Pacific contexts have a great deal in the way of support resources which have not yet been fully tapped into. Even in communities with limited adult literacy rates and in which there are simply no written resources in the home to draw upon, there is a wealth of resources which can, with imagination, ingenuity and goodwill, be tapped to support print literacy development. The importance of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships for “apprenticing” children into valued literacy practices is stressed (Hamston & Lowe, 2003, p. 46). To build and productively utilise these relationships and resources, schools can focus on: determining culturally and linguistically appropriate means of home support for print literacy development; collaborating with parents and