

CHAPTER 2

LITERACY ENDEAVOURS IN OCEANIA: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

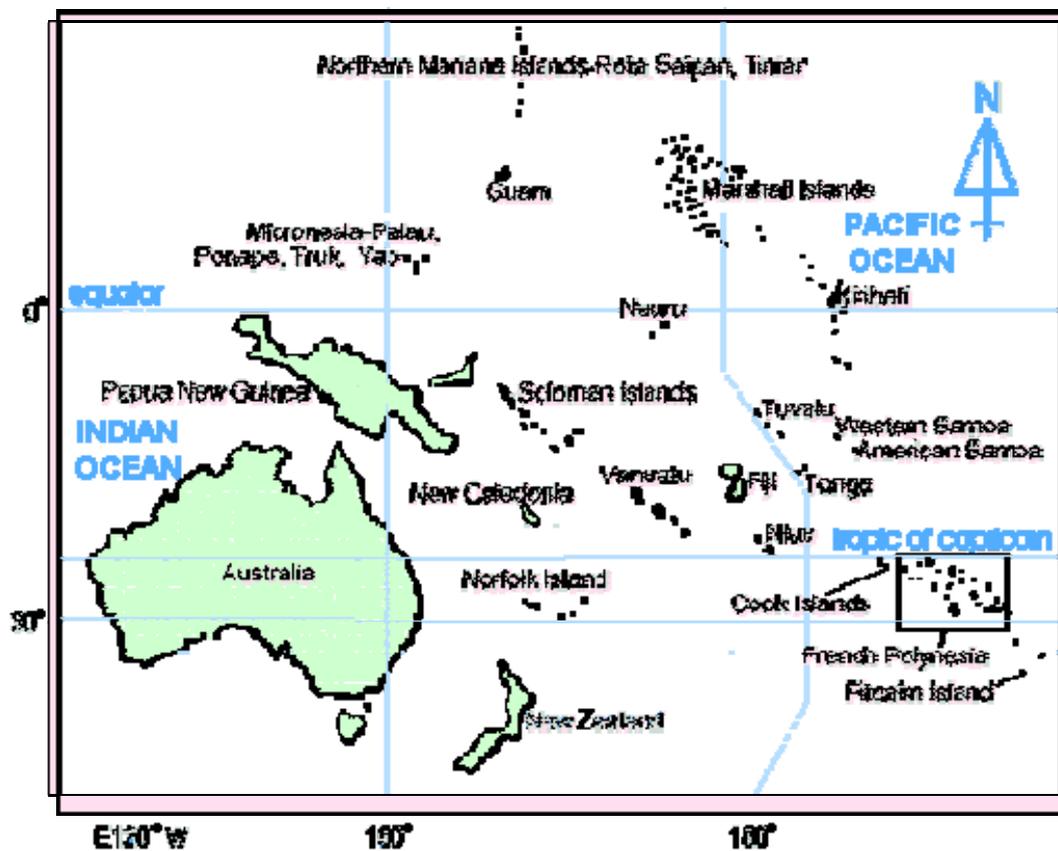
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In this chapter we describe the Oceania region and then present a brief history of literacy development in the region, first in the South Pacific, and then in Australia and New Zealand. We will show how present literacy practices have been influenced by these historical events. Finally, we will reflect on what has been learned about the development of literacy in Oceania and discuss some of the accomplishments.

What and Where is Oceania?

Oceania refers to the geographical area which includes Australia, New Zealand, and the island nations of the South Pacific. More precisely, the area we propose to write about is bounded in the north by the islands of Kiribati spread on either side of the equator, in the west by Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the islands of Torres Strait, in the east by Samoa and the Cook Islands, and in the south by New Zealand and Australia (see Figure 2.1). It is an enormous area, covering 7,686,850 km², and the isolation and distances involved in the smaller islands—and in the Australian outback—have important consequences for the way that education is brought to the inhabitants and the way they experience it.

The hallmark of the countries which comprise Oceania is their enormous diversity—in size, population, ethnicity, wealth, language, educational resources, literacy levels, and teaching styles, to name a few obvious characteristics. Thus, at one extreme, Australia has an area of nearly 8 million km² and a population close to 20 million people. Next in order of size are PNG and New Zealand, both of which have populations around 4 million people. At the other extreme, the island states of Niue and Tokelau consist of tiny atolls, each with fewer than 2,000 people .



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The ethnic diversity of the region is reflected in six main racial groups. *Melanesians* are found mostly in the west, in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. They include the indigenous people of Fiji. *Micronesians* live in the northern islands of Kiribati and Nauru. *Polynesians* are found in the east and south, in Samoa, Tokelau, Niue, Tuvalu, Tonga, and Cook Islands, and include the Māoris of New Zealand. *Aborigines* and *Torres Strait Islanders* are distributed throughout Australia, with *Europeans* making up the majority of the populations of Australia and New Zealand. In addition, nearly half the population of Fiji is of Indian origin, and increasing numbers of Asian immigrants, chiefly from Hong Kong, Vietnam, Taiwan, China, and South Korea have moved into New Zealand and Australia. In the past three decades there has also been a rapid influx of Pacific Islanders into New Zealand, particularly from Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau, to such an extent that Auckland is now the largest Polynesian city in the world. Substantial numbers of Pacific Islanders have also migrated to Australia, lending distinctive characteristics to some suburbs, as in Inala, a suburb of Brisbane, where there is a concentration of Samoan people.

Linguistic Differences

Not surprisingly, these various peoples exhibit distinct cultures and language patterns. While English is the first language of most of the Europeans, and one of the official languages of many of the island states, it is usually not the first language of speech (mother tongue) or of early literacy in many of the Pacific islands. In the north and east, each country has its own indigenous language (such as Kiribati, Samoan, Tongan, and Cook Islands Māori) and each is the main language of the home and the primary school.

In the west, the language situation is quite different. Papua New Guinea is home to over 800 languages, while the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu each have well over 70. Children in these

countries are typically introduced to literacy in one of the common languages, usually English, but sometimes French, as there are few literacy resources or qualified teachers in the students' first language. A notable innovation was the development of Tok Ples Pri Skuls in PNG in the late 1970s, which introduced, in those languages where possible and desired by the community, early literacy in the children's mother tongue (Siegel, 1997).

English is the first and main official language of the majority in New Zealand and Australia, but there is a recent emphasis on teaching and providing resources in the native tongue of minority groups, especially in Māori and Samoan in New Zealand. There are various state-led initiatives for the Aboriginal languages in Australia, but there is an overall lack of promotion of them (Nicholls, 2001). The 1996 Indigenous Languages Framework, launched to allow students to study indigenous languages in all Australian states up to the highest levels in high schools, could have heralded a change but a new government in 1996 had other priorities. English is also the major language of secondary and tertiary education throughout most of the region. Its use in schools in the countries, other than Australia and New Zealand, is reinforced because examination boards, whether in-country as in Fiji and PNG or the regional South Pacific Board of Educational Assessment, set standard papers (in English) for students who speak a wide variety of first languages.

Educational Participation Differences

In respect to wealth, Australia and New Zealand have relatively strong economies, and both provide aid to the rest of the region. Most of the islands of the South Pacific are not blessed with an abundance of readily tradeable natural resources and find it a challenge to cope economically in a global environment. Indeed, it is claimed that the South Pacific region is the most heavily aid-dependent, per head of population, in the world (Matthewson, 1994;

Thaman, 1993). These variations in wealth translate into huge differences in educational opportunities, literacy levels, and health status (Fairburn-Dunlop, 2000). While New Zealand and Australian students enjoy full participation at primary and secondary levels and between 20 to 30% of people aged 20 to 29 years attend a tertiary institution, the figures for PNG and Solomon Islands, for instance, are less than 50% at primary level, 20% at secondary, and only 1 to 2% at tertiary level (United Nations Development Programme, 1999). Few of the islands can afford a national system of education for all, and most governments have subsidized the establishment of schools set up by religious and private institutions, often with assistance from teachers from New Zealand, Australia, and England or France. Most countries still have selective systems of education, with secondary and tertiary places limited to a few of the academically more successful students.

Qualitative Differences

Literacy rates in New Zealand and Australia are virtually 99% by UNESCO criteria, compared with about 30% in Melanesian countries of the west. As for health, there are large discrepancies in such factors as access to clean water, doctors, and hospitals, and likewise in infant mortality rates and life expectancy (Thaman, 1993; United Nations Development Programme, 1999).

Variations in the quality of education throughout the region are reflected in such statistics as the number of suitably trained teachers, access to school and class libraries, computers, and science laboratories, to name a few. Classes in the poorer countries are often large and the teaching is authoritarian, with minimal participation by the students or group work. Curricula and examination systems frequently still reflect the colonial models introduced by English, French, and religious authorities from Western cultures, although numerous attempts have

been made to introduce locally relevant themes and resources into the schools of many countries in recent years. Some examples are the United Nations Development Programme Curriculum Project of the late 1960s, the South Pacific Literacy Education Course (SPLEC) of the early 1990s, the Pacific Science Series designed to help improve the quality of primary science teaching, funded by New Zealand and UNESCO **Apia Office** (Taylor & Alchin, 2001), special readers developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children in North Queensland in the early 1990s by the Regional Office of the (now) Education Queensland, as well as those described in the chapters of this volume.

By contrast, children in New Zealand and Australia typically attend well-funded state or private schools, with suitably-trained, well-educated teachers, and have access to good quality libraries and computers and locally developed curricula and resources. Teaching styles are student-oriented, interest-based, and student participation is widely encouraged. Most children learn to read using book-based (or “whole language”) methods, with locally published “real” books. Curricula are frequently revised to keep pace with new research developments. International surveys of achievement consistently show high levels of student performance (Elley, 1992; Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001; Thorndike, 1973) and students from many countries pay substantial fees to gain their education in these two countries. There is, of course, always room for improvement, but the differences in the outcomes of education between the two larger, metropolitan nations and the small island states have given rise to a regular flow of aid to provide support and innovation, including in the area of literacy.

History of Literacy in Oceania

The history of literacy in Oceania will be discussed in two parts. The first will deal with countries in the South Pacific and the second with literacy in Australia and New Zealand. In the latter two countries, the arrival of Europeans had a more profound effect upon the inhabitants of the two countries than in the island states.

South Pacific

The development of literacy in the vernacular languages in the South Pacific is due almost entirely to the efforts of Christian missionaries who first came to the region in the 19th Century. The chief motivation for acquiring literacy, initially, was to read the Bible and other religious writings. Fiji, which is widely regarded as the meeting place of Melanesia and Polynesia, saw the first missionaries in 1835. Their mission was to convert Fijians to Christianity and one of their major tools towards this end was literacy. They were specifically charged to

... draw up a comprehensive statement respecting the character of the language, and the difference between it and other Polynesian dialects, the principles on which you have settled its grammatical form, and the rules by which you have been guided in translating it into the word of God. (Cargill letters, 18 June 1839, cited in Schütz, 1972, p. 2)

The first missionaries, in fact, arrived in Fiji from the neighbouring island kingdom of Tonga where Christianity and its concomitant literacy (in the Tongan language) had been introduced by 1831 (Ward, 1932/1978). Literacy practices of one type or another in indigenous languages have therefore existed in countries such as Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa for over 170 years.

By contrast, literacy in the western part of the South Pacific, in PNG, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu is considerably less universal. The reasons for this are both historic and linguistic. The missionary activities in the Solomon Islands, for example, took a different turn from those in the eastern part of the Pacific for at least three reasons: the diversity of languages, the climate, and the indigenous Melanesian social structure which was more fragmented and egalitarian than the hierarchical structures of Polynesia. As there were no dominant indigenous languages, young Pacific Island Christian ministers were sent to New Zealand and Australia for training in English (Whiteman, 1983).

In New Caledonia, the London Missionary Society began the first schools for the indigenous population in 1849 and taught the people to read in their own language. The schools were conducted in the vernacular. However, in 1866, the French authorities banned the use of vernacular languages in schools, thus forcing the Missionary schools to close. French was then introduced as the language of education (Léonard, 1996).

Historically, the Melanesian countries did not have the same sort of educational opportunities prior to their independence as did the countries in the eastern part of the South Pacific. In Vanuatu, for example, the joint administration of this country before independence by Britain and France resulted in two parallel education systems, one using English as the medium of instruction, the other French, thus diluting the resources, human and material, available for education. In addition, children had to learn to read in English or French, rather than in their own language (cf. Tonga or Samoa where literacy was, and is, introduced in the children's first language), thus delaying their literacy development. The result of such lack of opportunities for education in the Melanesian countries has meant smaller numbers of students enrolled in secondary schools. In Solomon Islands, for example, gross enrolment at secondary level in 1994 was 35% of the age equivalent population (UNESCO, 1996).

As stated previously, these Western Pacific countries are very diverse linguistically. Papua New Guinea has over 800 languages (Siegel, 1996), Solomon Islands about 70 (Mugler & Lynch, 1996), Vanuatu at least 80 (Crowley, 2000), and New Caledonia has 28 languages (Léonard, 1996, **p.91**). The number of speakers varies a great deal across those languages and for many of them an orthography has yet to be devised. In light of such linguistic diversity and their past political history, the development of a more universal literacy has been limited in these countries.

Case Study: The Development of Education and Literacy in Fiji

As an example of the way literacy developed in the eastern part of the South Pacific, Fiji can be taken as a case study because, at least until the arrival of labourers from India to work on sugar cane plantations in 1879, similar forces shaped the development of literacy throughout these eastern islands. With the arrival of the missionaries in Fiji in 1835, formal schooling was introduced into a society where learning previously had been integrated into the everyday life of the people and where particular types of learning were the prerogative of particular groups within a tribe. One learned to become a fisherman by going fishing with the fishermen and learning from the actual practice of fishing. One learned to be a canoe builder by working with canoe builders. In short, traditional education was “practical, vocational and was concerned largely in maintaining the status quo” (Bole, 1972, p. 1).

The initial emphasis in the school system was on the teaching of reading in the Fijian language for which a Romanised alphabet had been devised, and to which some teaching of elementary numeracy was later added. The prime focus, however, remained the teaching of reading in order to read the Bible and other religious writings (see Mangubhai, **1987** for further details).

The Fijian language had many dialects and as the missionaries spread from Lakeba (where they had first settled) to other islands, the economics of printing forced the missionaries to choose one of the Fijian dialects as the main literary medium. The choice was most judicious on the part of the missionaries. The seat of the most powerful “state” at that time was the small island of Bau, so the Bauan dialect (or a close variant of it) was chosen as the language in which the Bible was to be translated. Moreover, this language was similar to the “Standard Fijian” which was the existing language of diplomacy (Geraghty, 1984). Hence the Bauan dialect was “objectified” and the written form became a standard against which language could be judged as correct or incorrect. It became an objective yardstick for what was to be regarded as literary Fijian.

However, this very process of objectification of one of the Fijian dialects is not without an irony that springs from the way the written word is viewed by a society that has moved into a literate state (cf. the attitude of educated English in the 19th Century to the English used in the James II version of the Bible). This language, which subsequently appeared in books and became the literary standard for the Fijian society was, according to linguist Geraghty (1984), different

... in a number of ways from the actual language of Bau ... What had become the literary Fijian was, quite simply Fijian as the missionaries spoke it; and they seem to have spoken it rather poorly for a number of reasons. Paramount among these is that they were under pressure, both from their superiors and from Fijian converts, to learn the language and produce translations quickly. (p. 35)

This particular codification of a spoken language into a written form has had a powerful influence over the Fijian people with regard to what is acceptable or not acceptable in print. In the early 1970s, for example, a collection of short stories (*Tovolea*) written in more colloquial Fijian was published, but it received a very cool reception from the leaders of

opinion in the Fijian society because, amongst other reasons, it did not use the “literary” Fijian, the language of the Fijian Bible. The 1990s have, however, seen a change in this attitude and more colloquial, modern Fijian is more acceptable now (Rejieli Racule from the Ministry of Education, personal communication, 1994).

The Wesleyan Methodist Church, to which the first missionaries belonged, established, soon after their arrival in Fiji, village schools run by pastor-teachers who underwent a rudimentary form of teacher training. These schools taught basic literacy and numeracy in the Fijian language. By the time Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874 and became a crown colony, reading was widespread enough for the first Governor of Fiji to comment that a “very large proportion of the natives can read and write and the amount of native correspondence would greatly surprise those who are inclined to sneer at native progress” (cited in Legislative Council of Fiji, CP No. 19 of 1970). Over 50 years after the above comments, Mann (1935) was to say that due “almost entirely to the efforts of the missions, most adult Fijians can read and write their own language” (p. 13).

For 50 years after Fiji had become a British crown colony, the churches—Methodist and Catholic (whose representatives arrived in the 1840s)—continued to play a leading role in the education of the Fijian people. The Methodist Church continued to emphasize the use of the Fijian language in their schools, but the Catholic schools, as far back as the 1890s, had begun to introduce some English. The introduction of English into the school curriculum, and the colonial government’s policies after 1916, when it established a Department of Education, was to change the emphasis of the language used in education settings dramatically (**for further details see Mangubhai, 1984**). Further, the establishment of a civil service required the employment of a small number of indigenous people with some literacy in English, a trend which developed in most of the island nations.

In one respect, however, Fiji differed from the rest of the region because of the presence of Indians after 1879. The colonial government brought in large numbers of indentured labourers from the subcontinent of India to work on the sugar cane plantations. By the time this system was abolished in 1920, over 60,000 indentured labourers had been brought to Fiji, many of whom elected not to return to India (Lal, 1983). With natural increase and some further migration from India, the country rapidly became multiethnic and multilingual. At present, the population of about 868,531 is made up of 51% Fijians and 44% Indo-Fijians, with the remaining 5% made up of Chinese, Pacific Islanders, and people of mixed ethnicity (World Factbook, 2003).

As early as 1926, it had been foreshadowed that more English should be taught to Fijians and Indians, and that English should be the medium of instruction at secondary level. In 1944, a report on the education system commissioned by the Governor of Fiji suggested that English should progressively become the medium of instruction, being introduced initially in Grade 6, then Grade 5 and so on (Stephens, 1944). By the mid 1950s, English was the official medium of instruction from Grade 5 (Report on Education in Fiji, 1955). In 1969, the Fiji Education Commission recommended that English should become the medium of instruction from Grade 4, and this policy was put into effect when Fiji became independent in 1970. This policy has ensured the predominance of English in the education system up to the present time.

Other South Pacific Countries

In Tonga (which has never been colonised) and Samoa, the use of the vernacular had been more secure and hence it has been used as a medium of instruction to the end of the primary schooling at Grade 6, with English becoming the medium of instruction from Grade 7. In

both these countries, however, higher levels of literacy in English have been restricted by the lack of high schools (Thomas, 1984a, 1984b) and there being fewer outside competitive pressures to change, such as had operated in Fiji.

Since the 1980s, there has been an increasing emphasis on vernacular languages in all the countries that make up the eastern part of the South Pacific. In Fiji, for example, both Fijian and Hindi are offered as a subject of study in high schools up to Grade 12. Samoa and Kiribati also offer Samoan and I-Kiribati respectively to Grade 12. In Tonga, the Tongan language is taught until Grade 11. Likewise in other countries in this part of the South Pacific (Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau and Tuvalu) vernacular languages are studied (Siegel, 1996). The regional University of the South Pacific, which was established in the 1960s, has also recently introduced the study of Fijian and Hindi, with occasional courses in Samoan and Tongan. It also set up a Pacific Languages Unit on its Vanuatu Campus and this Unit has worked for the development of Pacific languages.

In the western South Pacific, the situation is quite different. As mentioned earlier, these countries have a multiplicity of languages, as well as a pidgin lingua franca, called Tok Pisin, Pijin, and Bislama in PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, respectively. Estimates of the numbers of speakers of a pidgin language vary, but it has been suggested that “perhaps half a million people speak it as their first language; another two million or more may use it frequently as a second language” (Mugler & Lynch, 1996, p. 4). As many of the indigenous languages in this part of the world have no orthography (Mugler, 1996), literacy is frequently acquired in a student’s second or third language. Formal education occurs in an ex-colonial language like English or French, or in both languages, as in Vanuatu.

PNG has introduced a vernacular program for the first three years in the formal education system following the nation's 1995 educational reform. The program has been based on the model of community-based, non-formal vernacular programs, initially called the *Viles Tok Ples Skul*, but later re-named *Tok Ples Pri Skul*. They were remarkable programs in a number of ways, including the fact that they arose out of the initiative of the people themselves. Evaluations of these programs suggest that children who have participated in them are more alert, quicker to follow teachers' directions, more confident speakers in the classroom, better integrated into village life, better at reading in English, and show better language skills in their mother tongue (Siegel, 1997). These non-formal vernacular programs are currently being considered by Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, as discussed at a 1999 conference on education reform in the Pacific (Knowledge for Change: International Seminar on Education Reform in the Pacific Islands Countries, held in Fiji, 10-12 November, 1999). In New Caledonia, there is an option to study regional languages and cultures for five hours per week at the primary level, and five Kanak languages are taught in junior high schools (Léonard, 1996).

Literacy Education in New Zealand and Australia

For the past century, and more, the majority population and cultural traditions of New Zealand and Australia have been essentially European. It is true that both countries were inhabited by an indigenous population long before the arrival of British settlers. However, in the middle and late 19th Century, the immigrants flooded in, bringing their English language and educational traditions with them. So, when state education systems were set up in the 1870s under the colonial governments, English was the language of the school and the teaching of literacy followed the prevailing features of the schools of England and Scotland. Policies for curriculum, instruction, assessment, teacher education, and the provision of text

books were centralised, at the national level in New Zealand and at the state level in Australia. While private and church schools were established in both countries from the outset, the state took responsibility for providing formal schooling for the majority of inhabitants. Unlike the situation in the South Pacific, the schools were predominantly secular. Moreover, the language and customs of the indigenous Māori in New Zealand and the Aboriginal population in Australia were given little recognition.

In New Zealand, the first missionaries did make efforts to learn the Māori language, and some young Māori were able to learn to read in their native tongue. In the 1870s a “native” school system was established by the government, ostensibly to cater for Māori needs, but official regulations certainly did little to encourage widespread use of the language. There is much evidence that Māori children were discouraged from, and often forbidden, to speak their native language at school. Literacy in the Māori language thereafter became a rare accomplishment (Benton, 1979).

In both countries, education was strongly influenced by traditional policies and resources imported from Britain. The initial reading textbooks and readers, such as the *Royal Readers* (first published in 1867 by Thomas Nelson), were written and published in England. They were produced primarily for council schools which catered for working class children. Not surprisingly, they promoted such values as obedience, thrift, and passivity (Price, 2000).

Gradually, local writers and publishers saw the need for more local content and, after World War II, a more meaning-based orientation in the teaching of reading developed. In New Zealand, Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) pioneered the language-experience approach, to give children a personal voice in their own writing and reading experience. Don Holdaway (1979) showed the benefits of immersing children in interesting fiction and popularised the use of

“Big Books” in sharing (good) stories with a class. The research of Dame Marie Clay (1972, 1991) attracted world-wide recognition, as she drew attention to what can be learned from observing children’s errors while reading aloud. She went on to develop a popular model of how children orchestrate their strategies in learning the complex art of reading, and subsequently developed the Reading Recovery program to help struggling readers. This has now spread to a range of countries, including the US, Canada, UK, and Australia (Fawcett, Nicolson, Moss, & Nicolson, 2001; Swartz & Klein, 1997).

Parallel developments to these have occurred in Australia (Wilkinson, Freebody, & Elkins, 2000). Cambourne (1988), for instance, has been prominent in developing a Whole Language Approach, and state governments in Australia have been active in promoting Reading Recovery. In many Australian classrooms, literacy skills and literacy instruction are embedded in children’s general development, and classrooms exhibit holistic approaches or genre approaches and other effective methods of literacy instruction (van Kraayenoord & Paris, 1994). More recently in Australia social-critical approaches to literacy have also been promoted (Freebody, Muspratt, & Luke, 1995).

One of the unusual features of the New Zealand scene has been the strength of government publications in state school reading programs. The *School Journal* has been a regular source of high-interest reading material for primary school children for nearly a century and the initial readers, *Ready to Read*, first produced by the (then) Department of Education during the 1960s, have helped many children develop their reading skills. These government efforts have been well supported by commercial publishers in New Zealand.

In Australia, schools have long had the freedom to choose their own reading programs. In the latter half of the 20th Century there were a number of adaptations of overseas reading

schemes, but increasingly, students are being introduced to Australian writing, produced for Australian schools (Kidston & Elkins, 1992). Indeed, the widespread use of “whole language” methods and “real books” in initiating children into literacy, has encouraged the growth of a vibrant children’s literature in both countries. Primary school children in both New Zealand and Australia count among their favourite authors such award-winning writers as Margaret Mahy, Joy Cowley, Lynley Dodd, Tessa Duder, Nadia Wheatley, Mem Fox, Victor Kelleher, Hugh Montgomery, Ursula Dubosarsky, and Paul Jennings. Many of these authors’ publications are translated and exported to the European and North American markets, or are donated to the South Pacific schools, as their teachers attempt to emulate and adapt their own reading programs to those observed in most schools in Australia and New Zealand. Schools in both these countries generally provide children with a large, attractive school library and most have access to well-stocked book-corners or classroom libraries as well (Henson, 1991; Wagemaker, 1993).

Reading Achievement Levels in the Region

Reading standards at the school level are relatively high in both New Zealand and Australia, according to international surveys of achievement conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Assessment (IEA) (Elley, 1992) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2001). Whether their success is due to their rich resources, their pedagogical approaches, their long-standing traditions of literacy, or the fact that most students are learning to read in their native tongue, is still subject to debate. In both countries there is vigorous discussion about such topics as the role of phonic-based methods, remedial programs, the importance of formal testing, and how best to help indigenous and immigrant children, for whom English is not their mother tongue.

Indeed, the same surveys that showed high reading standards in New Zealand schools, also identified a serious shortcoming. The range of achievement is unusually large and many Māori and Pacific Islands immigrant children, especially, are not achieving as well as the other children (Wagemaker, 1993). As Māori make up 20% of the school population and Pacific Islanders over 6%, with both groups growing faster than those of mainstream Europeans, policy makers have been concerned to find ways to support these minority groups. It is estimated that by the middle of this Century, half the population of New Zealand will be of Māori or Pacific Islands ancestry (Long, 2001), with consequences for instruction as well as for materials used in literacy lessons. Publishers, however, have been very slow to meet the needs of such children for books with a Polynesian theme or character which are printed in their native tongue. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands children continue to perform less well than their counterparts from other sections of the community in the primary literacy assessments (in English) that take place at Grades 3, 5, and 7 (National Report on Schooling, 1999).

Debates about achievement are frequently related to debates about effectiveness of instructional practices. Some researchers have questioned the value of “whole-language” and book-based approaches with children who have not been brought up in a household where reading books to children is a regular tradition. Such researchers argue for more focus on phonemic awareness from the outset (e.g., Nicholson, 1999; Tunmer & Chapman, 1999 in New Zealand and Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1995 in Australia). Others have studied the kinds of literacy practices with which Pacific Islands children are familiar, and have tried to bring teaching practices into line with their strengths and conceptions about literacy (McNaughton, 2002) (see also Chapter 6 by Hansell, McNaughton, & Tagoilelagi-Leota in this volume). Many Māori leaders argue that Māori students will only reach their potential

when they are taught in their own language and with due attention to their culture and traditions (see Chapter 7 by Glynn & Berryman in this volume). A similar view is held by some for Aboriginal education and the need for greater Aboriginal influence over their own schooling (Harris, 1990).

Others, again, believe that Māori and Pacific Islands children can be “hooked on books” in much the same way as European children, if the same high-interest, culturally relevant resources can be produced (e.g., Elley, 1980). Certainly, the success of many book-based projects in Pacific Islands nations in the past 20 years, shows that it can be done (e.g., Elley, Singh, & Elder, 2000; Elley, Singh, & Lumelume, 1999).

One of the better known book-based projects began with this question: just how literate is a person who has completed primary education in a Fijian context? To answer this question, a group of educators set out in 1977 to determine the level of achievement in English reading in Fiji. A nation-wide survey of English reading of Grade 6 students showed that over 25% of pupils were unable to read simple English prose with understanding, despite at least four years of instruction in English (Elley & Mangubhai, 1979). Of course, the prevailing English curriculum in Fiji (and in most South Pacific schools) in the 1960s and 1970s was a rather rigid and uninspiring audio-lingual method known as the Tate Syllabus (Tate, 1971), which had little room for reading as a source of new language. Nevertheless, the survey raised serious questions about the assumption that four years of schooling equated with an acceptable level of literacy, though, admittedly, this was in a second language.

More recently, the South Pacific Board of Educational Assessment contracted an Australian researcher to design a simple test of literacy and numeracy, in order to survey achievement levels in primary schools across the South Pacific nations, in English and in mother tongues

(Withers, 1991). These tests, known as the Pacific Islands Literacy Levels Tests (PILL), have been used extensively to assess reading achievement levels and to identify schools with a large number of students with special needs. Once again, the levels of achievement are seen by authorities as inadequate to cope with the demands of a typical high school education, or of an increasingly global environment, where high levels of literacy are important.

Some Recent Developments in Literacy

A number of projects have been designed to address these widely felt needs for improved literacy. One line of research has been a series of book-based programs in which Pacific Islands children are immersed in a flood of high-interest books (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3) and their teachers trained in short workshops to make use of them more effectively in the classroom. Starting with the Fiji Book Flood (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983) and the Niue “Fiafia” Program (De’Ath, 2001; Elley, 1980), there has been a series of successful book-based projects, in which primary school children have been immersed in good-quality books, sharing stories, acting them out, re-writing them, and talking about them.

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Figure 2.2. Reading a teacher-made book together

Figure 2.3. Independent reading

One of the initiatives which followed from these projects has been the setting up of a Literacy Centre in the Institute of Education (IOE) at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Its staff have worked around the South Pacific encouraging more of a book-based Whole

Language Approach to the introduction of literacy in both the vernacular and in the English language. In the late 1980s, the Centre began pilot projects in reading at Grade 2 in Vanuatu, Kiribati, and Fiji, using selected readers from the New Zealand *Ready to Read* series (see Figure 2.4).

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Figure 2.4. Using readers from *Ready to Read*

In 1990 the International Reading Association, in association with the reading associations of New Zealand and Australia and its International Development in Oceania Committee, secured funds from the Australian Government and commenced what came to be known as the South Pacific Literacy Education Project (SPLEC). The main goals of this project were to (a) identify Key Literacy Workers in Pacific nations, (b) identify and assess the literacy professional development needs of teachers, (c) evaluate existing teaching initiatives, and (d) plan a pilot teacher development course in literacy education.

The SPLEC project built on the work of the IOE Literacy Centre. It highlighted the role of Shared Reading and Guided Reading and made extensive use of the *Ready to Read* series of children's rhymes and songs as well as books created by children. Phase 1 of this project was judged to be very successful, largely due to the efforts of the Project Director, Barbara Moore. An integrated literacy program was developed, an inservice course of 10 units was prepared, and many Key Literacy Workers and classroom teachers trained to use book-based teaching programs. The initiative gathered momentum under Phase 2 when teacher training

was extended throughout several Pacific nations, chiefly by Barbara Moore and Sereima Lumelume of the IOE at USP. An external evaluation of this phase (Walker & Elley, 1991) concluded that “Phase 2 of this project has undoubtedly been successful” (p. 9).

Succeeding phases of SPLEC were then subsumed under a larger UNESCO-funded project referred to as **BELS (or Basic Education and Life Skills)**, in which principals of schools were also involved in the training of teachers and in providing a more integrated and whole language literacy program in schools. A number of BELS literacy projects have recently been evaluated by the staff of USP and external consultants, particularly in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji (Elley, Singh, & Elder, 2000; Elley, Singh, & Lumelume, 1999; Gadd & Elley, 2003; Singh, 2001). All have a positive message to tell about the benefits that can be found when Pacific Islands children are provided with a similar level of high-interest resources and effective teaching that their counterparts experience in New Zealand and Australia. Children’s reading, writing, and oral language skills show important gains, and many become enthusiastic readers. It seems that it takes only a short training period to show teachers how to develop an effective program.

It is true that most of these projects have had to supplement the meagre local book supplies with additional books and readers created for children in other cultures, a situation which New Zealand and Australian children of former generations also experienced. Nevertheless, as book-based projects become more widespread, and school curricula are modified to take account of these developments, the demand for an indigenous literature for Pacific children has grown apace, and there are encouraging initiatives in local book production in Fiji, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands. Overseas book publishers (e.g., Learning Media, Wendy Pye Limited) are also designing more books for international and South Pacific contexts, and many teachers are making imaginative use of foreign texts as a basis for local revisions in

shared writing classes. In the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu another approach, known as the Concentrated Language Encounters (CLE), has been taken by the Rotary Foundation (Walker, Rattanavich, & Oller, 1992). Teachers are trained to use shared reading and associated methods, using a small number of books. The teachers and the class then develop their own new books together along the same lines and use them as a basis of their literacy program. As long as teachers are motivated and able to maintain students' interest, this method has the potential to produce locally relevant materials.

Such developments through the 1990s have changed the way literacy is taught in many schools. An encouraging development in book publishing has also occurred in the production of vernacular materials, especially in the eastern part of the South Pacific. Once again, the IOE Literacy Centre at USP has been at the forefront of this development, conducting workshops for writers and illustrators (UNESCO, 1995). The Ministries of Education in Tonga and Fiji have both encouraged vernacular story production, but progress is slow because funds for this activity are limited. There is also not the culture of children's story (or other book) writing in the South Pacific so that there is a limited pool of writers and illustrators to draw upon, most of whom hold full-time employment and work on their writing in their spare time. Despite these obstacles, the Literacy Centre at USP now lists over 100 titles in English and several indigenous languages, all produced by local writers. Some are now produced with accompanying audio-cassettes (Institute of Education, 2000). Many of these books have been adopted by South Pacific countries in their official school reading programs. Fiji, at any rate, seems to be on the verge of take-off in terms of producing locally written and illustrated children's stories.

Conclusion

In spite of these initiatives, and others to be described in this volume, it is obvious that many problems remain. All the Pacific Island governments are struggling to maintain balanced budgets. The advent of television in the South Pacific has done little to encourage young people towards adopting reading as a popular pastime. Too often reading is seen as an anti-social activity, in a context where the spoken word is paramount, and books are mostly written by foreign authors, in a non-native language, for readers in other places, with other values. The dearth of places in higher education, and the limited number of job vacancies for those with more education, does little to encourage some Pacific Islanders to extend their education and take their place in an increasingly literate world.

This historical outline illustrates the forces which bring about change in language use and educational opportunities. In a monolingual context, literacy can be achieved more easily in the native tongue than it can in a multi-lingual one. Indeed, the fact that the majority of Pacific Islanders have most of their education in a second language is a major factor in retarding their development in literacy. Few nations with this situation can boast of high literacy standards (see e.g., Elley, 1992).

The situation of the Māori in New Zealand provides another lesson for those with the welfare of Pacific Islanders at heart. For too long, the Māori language was neglected. It took second place in schools to English, the language of the colonial masters and, consequently, it was almost lost for all time. At present, the language of most of the mono-lingual nations of the Pacific is relatively secure (e.g., Sperlich, 1995 talking about Niuean), but the practice of using English for an increasing range of purposes—in schooling, in government, in trade and the ever-increasing growth of travel, tourism, and communication—means that those who

value their mother tongue should be vigilant. The Māori experience also has much to teach us about policies for preserving languages under threat of extinction.

The indigenous languages situation in Australia is in somewhat of a hiatus and the school systems have yet to come to grips with the ideas put forward by Harris (1990) regarding the learning styles of Aboriginal children. The current situation can be best summed up by an article called “Theorising Aboriginal Education: Surely its Time to Move On” (Nicholls, Crowley, & Watt, 1996) and a rejoinder which asks what does one move on to (Malin, 1997). These two articles, in a sense, illustrate a dilemma of Aboriginal education and, by implication, the dilemma of Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islands) languages education—what is it that needs to be done in order to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children get the best education that they need and deserve?

We have seen that there have been some bold efforts made to improve the levels of English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy achieved in primary schools. We have learned that the highly structured audio-lingual Tate Syllabus of the 1960s and 1970s was largely ineffective in producing fluent English speakers and readers (Mangubhai, 1982), and that Pacific Islands children can be “hooked on books” with appropriate high-interest materials and enthusiastic teaching. We have learned that books alone, without such teaching, have little impact, but we have seen that it takes only a short training period to show teachers how to develop an effective program.

We see, too, the value of encouraging the development of indigenous children’s literature. Niuean children, for example, love to read stories about Niuean children performing typically Niuean activities. They will soon lose interest if the cultural context is unfamiliar. They will learn even faster if the language is also familiar.

It is clear to us that one of the major reasons that only limited forms of literacy are evident in the South Pacific is that only certain literate behaviours have been incorporated into the social and cultural lives of the people. Reading God's word was relatively quickly adopted by the cultures because they represented another form of behavior which was analogous to the oral behavior of the traditional "priests" (see Kulick & Stroud, 1993). Other forms of literate behavior have not found similar analogues in the oral Pacific cultures. In the smallness of the village settings social obligations and the open nature of housing provide few incentives for reading for private purposes.

Another reason that more developed literacy is not widespread in the Pacific is the relative distance of some of the smaller islands from the seat of administration and the concentration of population. Printed matter is not easily available and therefore print plays a relatively limited role in comparison with, say, the radio. This is yet another characteristic of the rural/urban divide that is becoming increasingly marked in the islands.

In the Melanesian part of the Pacific a key issue revolves around the question of which should be the language of initial literacy. While not all the Melanesian languages have materials written in them, those languages with substantial numbers of speakers do, and they can be used in the early primary school (Crowley & Lynch, 1985). The lingua franca in these countries is a pidgin, but there is a reluctance to teach early literacy in such languages. By default, many children begin to acquire literacy through their second language, English or French, a language in which they have no, or extremely limited, proficiency thereby making the acquisition of reading more difficult.

Literacy achievement levels still leave much to be desired throughout the Pacific Island nations. However, just as universal education in the eastern part of the Pacific has largely

eradicated absolute illiteracy, so greater access to education in the western part of the Pacific should produce a similar situation. In the short-term, however, such an expansion will continue to require considerable outside assistance in the form of regular funding, insightful consultants, and dedicated teachers. Only then will Oceania's literary voices be heard abroad.

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