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## ABSTRACT

A reason for failure at reading and writing of Pacific children may lie in the social behaviors which children bring to the classroom. A well documented example from America demonstrates that the uses of literacy in two very different communities were related to social factors: literacy was functional in character and enabled the members of the community to fulfill social and personal needs. The same sorts of literacy uses that were found in America are found in the Pacific, with perhaps a greater use of reading skills in the context of religious activities. Typical classroom activities in the South Pacific are frequently quite inimical to the development of literacy other than that of a very low variety. That children can have ownership over their writing is a foreign concept in the Pacific. There are also no social role models for these children in their society. Very few books are available in the vernacular to help children develop a love of reading. School practices can build on the need to make reading less isolating for Pacific children by using more group techniques. If students are not promoted to the next level until there is a sound grounding in literacy skills, there is a greater chance of more success at schooling. Pre-service teacher training has also to change, taking account of the present understanding about reading and writing. For such training to be successful, teachers of vernacular as well as of the second languages have to be involved. (RS)

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# TAKING ACCOUNT OF THE SOCIAL CORRELATES OF LITERACY

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# Taking Account of the Social Correlates of Literacy

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## INTRODUCTION

I would like in this talk to explore the social dimensions of literacy activities, by looking at some research and drawing implications from it for western as well as Pacific societies. Then I would like to discuss the social contexts and the constraints that exist in the Pacific and that have an impact upon the levels of literacy achieved in the formal school systems. Finally, some suggestions will be offered that might compensate for the lack of literate activities in the Pacific societies.

The whole language approach to teaching reading is now used widely in Australia and New Zealand. In teaching writing, teachers are familiar with the term 'process writing', if not the actual mechanics of it. Despite these developments the formal school system produces students whose levels of literacy operation are not high. In other words, 'proper' or 'modern' (or call it what you want) methods of imparting literacy are still not effective with some children.

Cambourne (1990) has suggested that students who fail to learn to read and/or write do so because of the following reasons:

1. They get faulty demonstrations of how reading and writing are done, and/or how they 'work'.
2. They get appropriate demonstrations but they don't engage with them.
3. They don't expect to be able to read and/or write because the expectations which are communicated to them convey the message that learning to read and/or write is too difficult and complex for them. (p. 291)

It would be interesting to explore further the reasons why some students do not engage with the demonstrations. Cambourne suggests four conditions which maximise deep engagement with demonstrations:

- o Learners have been convinced that they are potential 'doers' of whatever is being demonstrated.
- o Learners truly believe that engaging with what is being demonstrated will further the purposes of their lives.

- o Learners truly believe that engaging with what is being demonstrated will not lead to pain, humiliation, or denigration.
- o The demonstrations are associated with those who are 'significant others' to the learners. (p. 295)

At least two of the reasons, if not all four, can, I suggest, be attributed to social factors. Let me take an example from America, one that has been well documented and has become quite well known.

It is now a truism that children from a 'bookish' background are likely to be more literate than those who do not have this exposure before they begin formal schooling. Heath's work (1982, 1986) has particularised this truism even further. She found, for example, that while the Roadsville parents talked positively about reading, they did not actually provide many examples to their children of their own involvement in reading a wide range of genres. Writing was used for very functional purposes: as memory aid, as a vehicle for messages, and for noting financial matters.

Similarly the Trackton community, which was black, used reading and writing for very functional purposes: as means to achieve something (instrumental), for social and interactional purposes and for purposes of news dissemination and/or discussion. The purposes for which writing was used paralleled the uses made by the Roadsville community but also included keeping records related to church meetings. In short, the uses of literacy in both the communities were related to the social needs; they were functional in character and enabled the members of the community to fulfil social and personal needs.

For both these communities, literacy was not of vital concern in their daily lives. It served a purpose: it acted as a stimulus for socially exploring news (replacing 'Did you hear what Johnny had to say about ...'); it replaced a reliance on memory in some aspects of their lives; it provided an alternative means of sending and receiving messages.

The children from Trackton community come to school knowing how to read many of examples of instrumental environmental print but do not do well in their language arts classes

where the emphasis is not only on reading but also on talking about the language which is read. By the time they get to upper primary school they are even less well equipped to read in order to learn, to cumulatively build up the knowledge structure in various school subjects, to stand back from the subject matter and the language in which it is encoded in order to evaluate both the ideas and the form in which they are expressed.

The children from Roadsville, on the other hand, do relatively well at the early stages. There has been much talk about talk, even if there has been correspondingly little talk about the printed material except to emphasize the informational element in what is read. The transition to 'decontextualization' found in reading is easier for these children because they have some metalinguistic knowledge. But they too encounter difficulties at the upper primary levels when they are required to interpret texts and to abstract generalizable principles or observations from particular concrete events.

In the case of the Trackton children, there has been little social motivation to analyse language and to develop metalinguistic knowledge of their language. In the case of the Roadsville children, while there has been some metalinguistic development prior to the commencement of formal schooling, the uses of literacy in the community from which they come do not encompass those uses of literacy that lead to abstraction, analysis and synthesis of new knowledge and its resultant dissemination through writing.

Compare these two communities with the 'townspeople' Heath writes about. In this community there was also an emphasis on reading, but the parents went beyond the informational needs of children into questioning children to think beyond the content of the text into motivations of the characters in the stories, into predicting what was likely to happen and the reasons for their predictions. There was a constant thrust towards abstraction of general principles. The stories were simply not read for entertainment; they underwent analyses and the children were pushed towards analysis by means of scaffolded questions, very similar to the ways that good teachers operate in classrooms. In addition, in the daily lives of their parents, literacy was used to

acquire new knowledge, to disseminate it and there was an institutional requirement as well as support for these activities. In short, for these parents to function effectively in their subgroup, they had to use their literacy for a much greater range of purposes. These purposes were not all functional; or to put it in another way, the functionality of literacy for this subgroup was at a level where abstraction, analysis and synthesis were frequently also an inherent feature of these activities.

For these parents, as indeed with others who could be classified as members of the same subgroup in a society, all events in the life of a child are seized upon as literacy events or potential literacy events. Examples of this type of behaviour can be seen publicly in lifts or places where there are notices of one kind or another. By comparison, a child from a subgroup that does not value such events as potential literacy events is more likely to be told to shut up and not ask silly questions.

Karl Popper (1972) has put forward the idea of three worlds in which we can operate. The first world is the one of physical reality; the second world is the world of our experiences, and the third world is the world of ideas and theories, the product of human mind. For daily life, for existence, it is sufficient that people operate in the first two worlds. The third world is the world of academia, the world of schooling. Success at school is therefore contingent upon students operating in the third world also, and not simply engaging with the objective world outside and the subjective world inside. Where society as a whole does not place much importance on the third world, then the members of that society are less likely to engage with that world on a regular, on-going basis. Nor will such groups have socially institutionalised operation in the third world. A very simple illustration of this apparent lack of concern with the Third World can be found by looking at the educational systems of non-western societies.

Education in traditional societies was pragmatic and learning took place by watching and doing what the 'masters' did. So a young person learned to make canoes by working with a master canoe builder and learning the craft from him. A boy or girl learned how to fish by going out

fishing with fishermen or fisherwomen and modelling their behaviour on those of the experts. This was also the way the European society operated if one recalls the guilds of the Middle Ages and the system of apprenticeship that eventually produced the next generation of master craftsmen.

Modern western educational system - and one that is to be found also in those countries colonized by western countries - on the other hand takes children away from the daily life and puts them into institutions where much of the teaching and learning that takes place is divorced from the life outside the institutional walls and where particular personal experiences, especially those that are outside the mainstream middle-class values, are less important than broader more generalizable ones. Hence students who can only operate within the parameters of personal experiences, who only interpret what is read in the light of their own personal experiences find it difficult to cope with school tasks that ask them to look at knowledge as an artefact, to be discussed, evaluated and judgements made about it.

The lack of engagement that Cambourne (1990) suggests is one of the reasons for failure at reading and writing may, as I suggested earlier, also lie in the social behaviours which children bring to the classroom, and which most classrooms ignore because education is premised on particular types of literate behaviours and values those above all other types of behaviours. There are sub-cultures within any western society that do not value or practice particular literate behaviours to the same extent as other sub-groups. It is the latter sub-group, however, that tends to control the school curricula and determine both the nature of knowledge worth knowing and the means by which it is to be transmitted.

When one turns one's attention to the Pacific, one obtains the same sorts of literacy uses that are to be found in the Trackton community with, perhaps, a greater use made of reading skills in the context of religious activities. Notices and other functionally orientated print act as stimuli for discussion, as do other examples of printed information. The content of reading is related to their personal lives and the impact it is likely to have upon them.

There is, however, in the Pacific a marked difference between the opportunities for encountering print in urban environments than in the rural or isolated island environments. Most Pacific States comprise many small islands, isolated communities with limited opportunities for a variety of activities. In addition they tend to be cash-poor, so that material possessions are limited, and books and other reading matter are generally limited to their requirements in religious contexts. No newspapers reach them regularly except as wraps for items sent by relatives living in the urban areas. There is no, what one might call, textual community, and print plays a very small part in the daily existence of the people.

Children from such backgrounds therefore require both the opportunity to learn to read and then to actually use their newly developed literacy to read not just textbooks but also to read for entertainment and for information outside the prescribed textbooks. They also have to be provided with opportunities to think about the language, to talk about it and in the process learn to analyse, synthesise and generalise about the knowledge that is made available to them through the various curricula in the school.

When typical classroom activities in the South Pacific are analyzed, it is apparent that the situation is frequently quite inimical to the development of literacy other than that of a very low variety. For children in east Pacific, literacy is taught through the mother tongue. But in every Pacific country there is a dearth of materials in the vernacular so that the newly acquired reading skills are not consolidated through practice. With regard to writing, the vernacular curricula in the South Pacific do not reflect the considerable progress that has been made in the teaching of early writing in, for example, the neighbouring countries of Australia and New Zealand. As Biribo and Moore (1989) put it, vernacular programmes are "neither exciting in style nor sound in principle".

With regards to writing there is an added hurdle to introducing process writing, the philosophical underpinning of which is the question of ownership of the writing. That children

can have ownership over their writing is a foreign concept in the Pacific. An analogous situation to this lack of concept of ownership of writing is to be found in the manner in which children in the Pacific learn their first language. Parents do not expand children's utterances; in fact they do not pay much attention to their utterances because they are not adult-like and are therefore not regarded as language. Ochs (1982), for example, who studied Western Samoan children, says that children's "vocalizations or gestures [are not] typically treated as social acts" (p. 89) and are not regarded as intentional acts, as, say, the utterances of a middle-class western child are.

For children to accept that their writing is of value, even if their use of language hitherto has not been treated as examples of social acts by adults, they have to radically shift their perspective about themselves and their social universe. Five or six years of very intensive socialization cannot be replaced by a school-based socialization. Nor is time on their side, since formal school systems demand instant answers, instant changes and instant success. Those that do not keep pace progressively get left behind, tending to stall on very low forms of literacy and subject to ever increasing failure in the school system.

There are also no social role models for these children in their society. Literacy activities that are presented in classrooms are not present in the institutions of the society, so that their practice is not a part of the experiences of a growing child nor is it a major component of the social world that children internalize from the events around them. There is therefore no special value placed upon the literacy activities that take place in classrooms and unless a teacher is able to infuse and enthuse his or her students with the desirability of extensive reading, literacy activities are not likely to be highly valued.

The Pacific cultures place a great deal of emphasis on personal relationships. There is a constant need to relate to people; the worst punishment for a Pacific Islander would be to be placed in isolation from his fellow human beings. Reading and writing, on the other hand, are very personal events. It is an isolating event; in its practice it generally cannot also sustain an

interactional personal relationship with others around oneself. In a society where personal relationships and their maintenance are of prime importance, behaviours that are antithetical to that come to be regarded as anti-social. The author, for example, has witnessed the ostracization of students by their peers because they devoted more time to reading than to participating in social events.

Another cultural practice found in some Pacific society is the gathering of men after dark to sit around a bowl of kava and talk. Such talk may range over many topics and may discuss events that occur around them. This then becomes the model of behaviour for young men, not sitting down and reading or writing. This practice is not an occasional social event; it occurs with a great regularity. This cultural practice affects not only students, but also those who are in professional fields where reading and writing may be a necessary part of their profession. In these two seemingly irreconcilable forces, it is the social force that normally predominates, so that increasingly professionals become distant from the types of literate activities necessary for their continual professional growth.

Another factor that may inhibit the development of higher literacy practices eventually is that there are very few books available in the vernacular to help develop in children a love for reading. Early reading behaviour is not extended and consolidated in the way that it can be in many Australian and New Zealand classrooms. After the acquisition of basic reading skills, there is a shift to textbooks because of the unavailability of story books that seem so necessary in the early stages to consolidate early reading practice and to inculcate a love of reading. Pacific children, like children elsewhere, love stories but do not have the opportunity to read them in their first language.

When children learn to read and write in a second language (English or French) story books theoretically become available, but in practice there are few primary classrooms that have books. So in effect the same situation obtains as for the literacy in the mother tongue. Moreover, what few books are available can frequently be gifts of well-meaning people from

overseas - particularly basal books from America which deal with stories that have a very high cultural load which prevent Pacific children from relating to them. They lie in classrooms, or more often in the Headteacher's offices, collecting dust.

The implication of what has been said above is that it is the particular backgrounds from which children come that may, in a large measure, determine their eventual level of literacy. The school system therefore has to recognize that not all children come to the formal system with the types of literacy experiences that enables them to make progress in reading and writing, and in the types of tasks that are commonly set these children. In order to 'educate' all children and not only those who come to school with certain appropriate language experiences, the school system has to radically rethink the ways that it organises the early reading experiences for children.

Wells (1981) suggests that where the

skills associated with the representation of meaning in written language are not used or valued by parents and other adults in the home environment, children ... [are less likely to] persist with tasks that they may initially find difficult or lacking in meaning. However, even with lack of home support, it should be possible for a child to make progress commensurate with his intellectual potential, if *appropriate opportunities are provided at school*. (pp 264-265, emphases added)

School practices can build on the need to make reading less isolating for Pacific children by using more group techniques, as for example, by using the Shared Book Approach to reading. Besides the usual advantages of this method there is an added advantage in the Pacific context of incorporating a commonly found social behaviour, working together rather than in isolation.

Another way of promoting success is to consider re-organising the early years of one's schooling. Currently, children are promoted from one level to another regardless of whether the objectives of the curriculum for that year have been achieved by all, or even a majority of the pupils. The social promotion that is so typical of school systems is one of the contributory causes of eventual school failure. Those who fail to acquire the reading skills properly begin to

experience cumulative failure as future classes simply carry on with the curriculum for that particular grade in complete disregard for one of the maxims of learning psychology which states that further learning should be built upon what has been learned previously. The social reality for some children in the formal school system is that they are branded as failures and this sense of failure snowballs as more and more difficulties are encountered. (Japanese in Mining Town).

If, however, the early years are so organized that pupils are not promoted to the next level until there is a sound grounding in literacy skills, there is a greater chance of better success at schooling. Pupils are more likely to internalize the language uses that are so typical of school settings.

Earlier I mentioned the lack of role models for literary activities in the society. In the Pacific, the same lack is found in the school environment. Those who are entrusted to teach reading and writing are themselves infrequent practitioners of the behaviours. While teachers through in-service and through projects such as Barbara Moore is involved in, the South Pacific Literacy Project, can increase the value placed upon reading and writing by teachers, they may only parrot the value of these activities in the classroom. They may not set personal examples of engagement in these activities so that they cannot really enthuse students to engage in reading and writing.

The situation cannot be remedied simply by in-service training. Pre-service teacher training has also to change, taking account of our present understanding about reading and writing. In addition for such training to be successful, teachers of vernacular as well as of the second language have to be involved. There has been an unfortunate tendency for any innovation to take place in the area of second language teaching while vernacular teaching continues to emphasize formal corrections and fails to exploit the creative potential of the vernacular. One exception is Kiribati, where the changes in the vernacular programme instigated by the training college have had an influence on the ESL programme.

Nor can these changes be imposed from above. Teachers need to internalise literacy practices and the teaching of them. They need to understand the processes of reading and writing and incorporate this understanding in their theory of teaching if there is to be a hope of more widespread success. Otherwise even the newer methods of teaching reading and writing will eventually impose a barren tyranny on the teaching acts in the classrooms.

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