

Research Brief

Australian Development Research Awards Scheme

2012 Funding Round

ADRAS #66394 “Developing a collaborative community approach to support preschoolers’ vernacular and English language and literacy development in Fijian communities without access to early childhood services”

Research Team

Professor Pauline Harris, Dr Anne Glover, Dr Elspeth McInnes, Dr Jenni Carter, Ms Alexandra Diamond, Professor Cynthia Brock, Dr Bec Neill

Research Focus and Approach

This ADRAS Project set out to investigate and develop sustainable whole community approaches to fostering preschool children’s literacies in their home languages and English. This participatory action research was located in urban, rural and remote communities that did not have access to early childhood education and care services. The Project’s approach framed each community’s families and children as co-investigators with university researchers – recognising and fostering their capacities for action and reflection germane to developing strategies that foster children’s literacies. Data were collected through observations, dialogic encounters and artefact collection in children’s homes and communities; and semi-structured interviews with EC stakeholders to align development of community approaches with key policies and priorities. Authentic dialogic encounters were at the heart of this methodology; and have seen all co-investigators learn from one another.

Research Activities and Outcomes

1. Building local capacity for fostering children’s literacy in their home languages and English

We collaboratively developed strategies with children and their families through an organic approach, creating books with and by children, using their words, images and worlds as the material of their literacy learning and participation. Doing this work made literacy and ways of fostering literacy in young children very visible, and mediated our conversations about such topics. This work moved away from problematic practices that impose imported literacy materials from outside, ensuring these strategies were inclusive of communities’ social and cultural norms, practices and values. This work was then carried forward in collaboration with communities and involved the creating of multilingual books, developed with and for the children in our study. These books were developed with each child in our study on an individual basis, and contained written text in the child’s home languages and English. Images were provided through photos taken in the child’s lifeworld – that is, their homes, neighbourhood and community at large. The Project’s communities embraced and integrally contributed to this work.

We are now compiling a resource package includes many of these books, with the children’s and families’ consent to so disseminate. These books will be accompanied by a guide for educators, families and others working with children, which explains and illustrates the principles and processes whereby the books were developed, to guide others’ actions in doing similar with children.

More recently, each community (pseudonyms here) has initiated ways of sustaining the Project’s work:

- Wavu community deciding to establish a preschool, which was up and running by the time of the project’s last visit, with mothers volunteering time to support the educators while the community applied for government funds and other resources to formalise the pre-school service.
- Duavata community established a play group. Children’s recorded attendance has been excellent; and once the group can show it has had consistent attendance, it will be officially registered. In addition, the leader of the group has applied to the Australia Pacific Technical College (APTC) in Suva to become a certified early childhood educator.

- Dovubaravi community's temple committee is investigating avenues and partners with which to establish a library service so that children and families have access to books in home and English languages. At the individual family level, the co-constructed knowledge about how to support children's home and English language and literacy development is being shared and carried beyond the project's participants through relational networks.

2. *Developing understanding of early years literacy policy, practice & contexts in Fiji*

Document analyses, stakeholder interviews and community fieldwork have generated understanding of language and literacy practices in Fiji communities that we have applied to developing collaborative community strategies for fostering children's literacy re: aligning strategies with early childhood language and literacy curriculum and children's transition to school, with reciprocal acknowledgment between children's early childhood and school settings.

3. *Developing an evidence-based model of a sustainable and collaborative community approach to fostering pre-school children's language and literacy learning*

We have developed an evidence-based model for developing sustainable community approaches to fostering young children's literacy in their home languages and English, applicable to Fiji communities and the Pacific more broadly, as detailed in ADRAS#66394 Policy Brief attached to our Final Report.

4. *Contributing new knowledge to the sociocultural study of early years literacy in community settings*

This Project has generated new knowledge about:

- Complex written/spoken language relationships in and across children's multiple language systems, and implications of these relationships for fostering children's literacy.
- Conducting collaborative cross-cultural research in an overseas context, in which children and their families, along with community mentors and university researchers, participate as co-investigators and engage with research partners.
- Innovative methodologies for authentically engaging with children's voices in a range of cultural and language settings.
- Sustainable community approaches for fostering children's literacy in multilingual settings.

5. *Building sustainable relationships with the Project's colleagues and participants in Fiji to ensure the Project's success and sustainability*

Relationships developed with Project partners, mentors and participants have been sustained throughout the life of the project. Project Partners Ufemia Camaitoga (EC Consultant) and National Council of Women Fiji (NCWF) worked with the university research team and community mentors to support and advise all aspects of the Project, as documented throughout the Project's Reports.

6. *Building capacity of researchers and other professionals in Australia and Fiji to undertake early years literacy and community-based research and to use research findings to inform and strengthen early years literacy policy and practice*

Capacity was built through the Project's participatory action research approach, wherein we worked working with Partners, community mentors, in-country research assistants and communities as co-investigators. Further, we ran key workshop events with Fiji Early Childhood Teachers Association (FECTA) and NCWF Affiliates working with families. These workshops built capacity for using research findings to inform practice as detailed in our Reports.

7. *Engaging with the Project's key stakeholders, including local communities participating in the research; early childhood educators in Fiji, the Pacific and beyond; early childhood education policy-makers; and the Project's External Reference Group*

Stakeholder engagement was promoted through various means that have been detailed throughout the Project's reports. As a case in point, we remained in ongoing contact with Fiji Ministry of Education (MoE) through direct meetings with key personnel, through our Project Partner Ufemia Camaitoga, and through the Project's External Reference Group. MoE have expressed strong interest in the multilingual children's books we collaboratively developed with and for children and their families in their home and community settings. We met with key personnel at MoE headquarters to progress the mass production and dissemination of a resource package that would comprise these books plus a guide

written for educators, families and others working with children on principles and processes whereby the books were developed. This work is in progress, with a view to publication some time in 2017.

We also ran community workshops at the beginning and end of each in-country visit. These workshops were dialogic and contributed to local capacity for developing and sustaining the work of the Project with respect to community strategies for fostering children's literacy in their home languages and English.