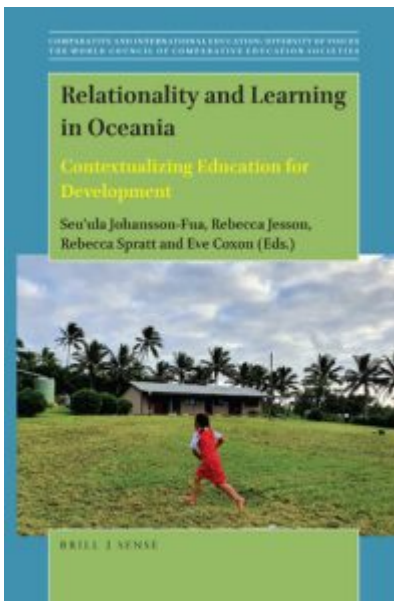Students learning in a Tongan government school

Oceania, education and promoting change from within

By Hilary Tolley
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Relationality and learning in Oceania: contextualizing education for development is an important and timely publication. Important in that it offers an alternative approach that challenges conventional approaches to development aid projects; and timely because, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now a valuable window of opportunity for development aid agencies to rethink aid delivery mechanisms and reassess reporting systems – an opportunity to do things differently.

The edited volume draws on four years of research findings and experiences from two aid-funded education interventions launched in 2014: the Temotu Literacy Support (TLS) program in Solomon Islands and the Literacy and Leadership Initiative (LALI) in the Kingdom of Tonga. Funded by the New Zealand Government, in partnership with the governments of the countries involved, and implemented by a consortium of the University of Auckland and University of the South Pacific, the interventions aimed to enhance primary level literacy knowledge and skills in Oceania.

The success of the overall program design is verified to some extent in the footnote on p.128. This notes that in preference to other pilot study programs being trialled around the same time, "the approaches developed through LALI, in particular the formative assessment practices, are now being mainstreamed across all Tongan primary schools under the leadership of the MET [Ministry of Education and Training]".

Notably, however, showcasing the specific outcomes of each program is not the aim of this

narrative. Rather, it seeks to provide insight into how an intentionally nuanced, inclusive and adaptive design approach engaged school leaders, teachers, ministry officials and community members with collaborative communities of practice. Within these spaces, co-designed interventions emerged that were both credible and helpful for teachers because they were designed for their children and "woven *with* rather than *for* their school communities" (p.161; emphasis added, original quote found [here](#)).

The iterative solutions that emerged generated change in teachers' practice. This in turn clearly validated, legitimised and strengthened interventions on the ground. For example, "teachers shared illustrations of change, reflecting on how they might increase student engagement beyond rote and recitation" (p.112) and, in providing more text comprehension opportunities teachers noticed the children "were engaged for a higher proportion of the time … and participated much more in *talanoa* [conversation] during reading" (p.113).

By and large, the authors deflate past development paradigms that regard literacy teaching as imparting basic knowledge for the achievement of a 'basic skill'. Instead, they highlight the intrinsic complexity of literacy and language development, particularly in bilingual and multilingual contexts. They seek to highlight and embrace learners' highly contextual surroundings influenced by their own language experience and – crucially – by the cultural and linguistic social relations that surround them, their teachers and communities. Conceptually, context is framed "as a lived dynamic which is inherently relational" (p.7). That is, interactions, ideas and institutions are constantly influenced by dynamic sets of relationships between social actors at various levels, at different phases, and within or across spaces.

To embed such a notion of relationality within an educational intervention that also satisfies donors' results-based management conditions required a robust theoretical and methodological framework, and a tenacious research-practice team. Central to the design was to instil a 'learning for all' approach for all parties involved and at every level in program delivery. By motivating school leaders and teachers to view themselves as learners, classrooms were turned into productive co-learning environments and resource development spaces. Products to emerge from these spaces included early grade mother-tongue literacy resources to support vernacular learning, and locally developed, easy-to-use assessment and monitoring tools. Documenting insights from this approach not only informed later developments, but also provided important indicators for project reporting.

Divided into three sections, the book takes the reader first through the context of each intervention site, discusses 'the context behind the context' in terms of domain of social relationships, and explains how the design methodology framed the interventions. Part 2

provides valuable insight into how literacy and language are inextricably entwined within learners' cognitive, social and cultural experiences. Part 3, Learning for International Development, describes some of the inevitable reporting tensions that arose between the program implementation team and the principal funder.

The authors describe how an adaptive monitoring, evaluation and learning framework centred on indigenous epistemologies and methodologies can successfully tackle tensions relating to validating evidence (what justifies reporting?); notions of accountability (accountable for, to or by whom? relational vs independent); resourcing priorities (resourcing learning or results?); and integrating indigenous epistemologies and research methodologies (whose knowledge and ways of knowing count?).

The lessons learned in overcoming these tensions are particularly pertinent in today's travel-restricted world. Several Devpolicy posts have already highlighted windows of opportunity opened by the pandemic, in terms of progressing the localisation agenda (e.g. here, here and here) and challenging traditional models for monitoring, evaluation and accountability, and integrating research learning into aid programs at all levels (see here, here, here and here). This book adds voice to these calls.

The core message of this Pacific-centric book is to challenge the positioning of aid 'recipients' as reliant on external experts imparting knowledge. Instead, it calls for creating facilitatory conditions that allow emergent local solutions to generate change from within, based on partners' mutual understanding and learning. In viewing development through a relational lens, it positions partnerships as two-way learning opportunities where, to draw on a quote from Kabini Sanga used in the book (p.159):

> It is not the forms of aid that matter … but the relational space created within and through relationships of aid. From this perspective, it is the relational processes that are involved in the 'business' of aid that leads to change, not the entity of aid itself.

Relationality and learning in Oceania: contextualizing education for development is edited by S Johansson-Fua, R Jesson, R Spratt and E Coxon and was published in 2020 by Brill.

Disclosure

Hilary Tolley's doctorate in Development Studies was supervised by Dr Eve Coxon (2009-12) but she has not been involved in the interventions described in this volume.

About the author/s

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Dr Hilary Tolley has researched education in Oceania since embarking on her master's studies at the University of Auckland in 2002 and now is an independent researcher and editor.