

# Pacific Island school education: what I learned

by Julie McLaren

24 March 2023



Primary school in Tuvalu

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From 2018 to the end of 2021 I had the opportunity to work on school literacy and numeracy education programs in Guadalcanal Province in Solomon Islands and in Tuvalu. I was fortunate in these programs to continue my interest in quality of teaching and curriculum development, and build on my experience advising on literacy and numeracy policy for the Australian Capital Territory government, and as a school principal including at remote Indigenous schools with highly disadvantaged children.

As an Australian volunteer, I was assigned to the Guadalcanal Provincial Education Authority Model Schools Program. This was a literacy-focused program that aimed to improve learning outcomes through student-centred learning, strengthening teaching practices, and enhancing the classroom environment. It was piloted in five village schools across the island, from near Honiara to the remote Weather Coast (at Lambi, Makaruka, Mboeni, Rate and Nguvia).

In addition to my volunteer assignment I supported New Life Christian School, which is run without government support by parents and a local church at Borderline (within the Honiara boundary), to provide schooling to children whose parents can't afford the school fees at other schools. Here I mentored teachers in early childhood and primary years practices, and provided modelled lessons, and program development and advice.

My subsequent work in Tuvalu was as a literacy and numeracy advisor. Most of the work addressed the Department of Education's requirements for a new Year 1–4 English curriculum and syllabus with detailed teacher guides.

I was particularly mindful when introducing new teaching methods to respect, and build on, the previous work and cultural expectations of the communities. I used my experience from working with Indigenous education in Australia and was mindful of the need to consult and understand effective ways of working.

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It took some effort to visit and work directly in the schools. Unreliable transport and poor communication infrastructure, combined with difficult weather, made the trips logistically challenging and time consuming. In Guadalcanal I visited schools located in the north, south, east and west of the rugged island. In Tuvalu, schools are located across all nine islands, with long sea voyages the only option available.

Time and effort were important to ensure each school's needs were met, and the variation between communities understood and valued. As an added bonus, personally, I was able to enjoy the amazing experiences of visiting the different remote communities, building a better appreciation of their culture, and working with teachers who – with very basic facilities and few resources – were determined to improve education outcomes for their students.

My regular visits gave me greater awareness and understanding of the children's lives, experiences and interests, which helped me select and develop more meaningful resources, and adjust lesson content and delivery.

When developing reading resources, for example, the use of legends that represented the different community groups was a particularly powerful way to connect with culture and engage the children with relevant and inviting content. Teachers were excited to translate texts to develop some bilingual books, as well as demonstrate their artistic skills in illustrating the texts to create visually appealing books.

The detailed units of work for the new English literacy curriculum were developed through extensive consultations and workshops with teachers and, importantly, trialled prior to publication. This process built teachers' interest in, and ownership of, the materials: all the schools requested permission to access and use the documents while they were still in the trial stage.

The documents were supported by a tailored professional development program for teachers, as well as modelled lessons and coaching in classrooms, delivered by Tuvaluan education officers. With input from school leaders, the education officers and I identified areas in school leadership that needed strengthening, and wrote and delivered training modules for head teachers, teachers and Department of Education staff.

We also developed a package of assessment tools to monitor and evaluate children's progress in reading and writing, and trained the teachers to use these tools, with an emphasis on how to analyse the data to inform future teaching. In addition, we developed a teacher observation tool, and trained school leadership teams on how to use it and support teachers to strengthen their practice.

During the COVID-19 lockdown we used weekly radio and television broadcasts to share information with teachers, parents and the wider community about supporting literacy development in the home – as well as providing a “story time”. These book readings modelled expressive and fluent reading to parents as well as students, and included a comprehension activity, again modelling a variety of suitable activities.

In both countries, where books are not generally found in homes or accessible within the community, and where school resources are limited, providing children with suitable texts is particularly important. With good funding available in the Tuvalu program, over 490 different titles for use in the Year 1–4 program were obtained. Teachers were trained to use these books productively, support with storage was provided, and a visual catalogue was developed to help with management and monitoring.

In both programs we tapped into previous programs that were valued by the organisations. Guadalcanal was keen to investigate and learn from an innovative transformation program delivered by an Australian volunteer in a school in Malaita in 2015 – and that I had stumbled across by chance when on holiday in Solomon Islands at the time. Three years later Guadalcanal staff and I were able to learn from this school which was demonstrating how student learning outcomes were improved by strengthening teacher practice.

Tuvalu was keen to learn from programs in Kiribati that were improving outcomes in their schools. A visit there with Tuvaluan Department of Education staff provided a valuable personal learning experience. Many of our resource management ideas came from there.

I expand on the work I did with and in Pacific schools and the conclusions I draw from it in a [recently published report](#). My overall take-away is that change takes time, and that persistence and consistency of approach are essential to achieve sustainable quality outcomes.

### **Disclosures:**

*In Solomon Islands Julie McLaren was a volunteer with the Australian Volunteers Program. The work in Tuvalu was part of the Australian Support to Education in Tuvalu (ASET) program 2018-21, funded by the Australian government and delivered through Tetra Tech Coffey. The views expressed are those of the author only.*

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Julie McLaren has held a range of education leadership positions in Australia including with the ACT Government Education Directorate, and a number of principalships in Australian schools, including in remote Indigenous communities.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/pacific-island-school-education-what-i-learned-20230324/>