

Pre-School Education in Tonga

A Report from a Delighted Visitor

Miss Lyla Wills

Trained at Sydney Teachers College as a Primary/Infants teacher, specialising in the 5-8 year-old group. Taught in New South Wales schools for 11 years. Went to Northern Territories with Church Missionary Society in January 1966 to work in Aboriginal schools. After completing the Advanced Studies in Education Diploma in 1972, returned to the N.T. as Pre-school Adviser and travelled to almost all N.T. schools over the next six years. Was Principal of Denpelli Aboriginal School for three years and presently is Assistant Principal of a very large urban Primary School in Darwin.

Summary

Lyla Wills, who has long had an interest in OMEP in Australia has written this account of Pre-School Education in Tonga, which she visited during a period of Long Service Leave. Tongans are very keen on education for their children. Most of the Pre-schools receive no funding so buildings vary according to what the village can provide and many of the teachers also give their services voluntarily. A few Pre-schools are attached to schools or churches and one to the Police Department who supply buildings and pay wages.

Résumé

Lyla Wills, qui depuis longtemps s'intéresse à l'OMEP en Australie, a écrit le compte-rendu suivant sur l'Education pré-scolaire dans l'archipel de Tonga où elle s'est rendue pendant une période où elle bénéficiait d'un congé pour ancienneté. «Les Tongans désirent fortement que leurs enfants soient éduqués. La plupart des centres préscolaires ne bénéficient d'aucun fonds si bien que les bâtiments varient en fonction de ce que le village peut fournir. Beaucoup d'enseignants travaillent à titre bénévole. Quelques centres préscolaires sont rattachés à des écoles ou des églises et l'un d'eux au Département de la Police qui fournit les bâtiments et les salaires.

Resumen

Lyla Wills, que por largo tiempo ha estado interesada en la OMEP de Australia, ha escrito este informe sobre la educación pre-escolar en Tonga, que visitó durante un largo período de licencia del servicio. «Los tonganos son muy celosos de la educación de sus niños. La mayoría de los centros de pre-escolar no reciben financiación, de modo que los centros varían según lo que la aldea puede aportar y asimismo muchos de los maestros prestan sus servicios voluntariamente. Unos pocos centros de pre-escolar dependen de escuelas o iglesias, y uno del departamento de policía, que proporciona los locales y paga los salarios.

A whole year on Long Service Leave! What to do? How best to fill it? What could be fitted in from all the possibilities? It was while I was pondering, that a letter arrived in Oenpelli, Northern Territory, sent by the Tonga Pre-school Association to A.E.C.A. Branches and I answered it, tentatively offering my services. The outcome was two glorious months in the Kingdom meeting with teachers and children and being humbled by the love and generosity of my hosts.

Miss Susi Taumalolo, President of the Association and Mrs. Pohiva Vaiomo'unga, Field Officer, were waiting to greet me at the airport on my arrival and from that moment on, cared for me and made sure I took part in everything that went on — and October and November seemed to be very busy social months with the Queen Salote College Bazaar, World Food Day, the official opening of the Red Cross' Deaf Unit, the closing ceremony of Parliament etc.

Having fortuitously arrived on a Saturday, I was able to experience the peace and delight of a Tongan Sunday before starting any work. It was an ideal introduction to the people and place. The motto of the Kingdom is 'God and Tonga are My Heritage' and it is taken seriously.

Within the first few days I was taken to visit all the twenty-three affiliated Pre-schools on Tongatapu the main island, and later in my stay crossed by boat to Eua where there are six centres and spent twenty-three hours on a larger boat to reach Vava'u where we visited about eighteen centres that could be reached by road. Tongans are very keen on education for their children. Most of the Pre-schools receive no funding so buildings vary according to what the village can provide and many of the teachers also give their services voluntarily. A few Pre-schools are attached to schools or churches and one to the Police Department who supply buildings and pay wages. It was most impressive to see the keenness to learn and the dedication to teaching that was evident everywhere I visited.

Here are some of my observations — starting from the outside:

Playgrounds

The annual teachers' conference in August had concentrated on playgrounds and it was obvious that the teachers had acted on what they had learned and put a lot of effort into providing playground activity areas. Tyres, sandpits, water troughs and some ingenious home-made climbing equipment, swings and seesaws were very much in evidence wherever possible. Pohiva's playground was particularly creative and had won her an award. She had built a horse (Hoosi), a taxi and even a boat deck in the sand-pit. She had some child-sized buildings for shop, bank and band rotunda with percussion instruments to play. The children played here before the formal start to the programme.

The groups held in Community/Youth halls were unfortunate in that permission to construct playground equipment seemed to be sometimes difficult to obtain. A great deal of Community Education to help the village leaders become aware of the benefits and needs of pre-school education still needs to be done in some cases but on the whole everything is done to assist those who take on the job of teaching the young children. One of the aims of the Association is to help the villagers realise the advantages of pre-school education and they seem to be attaining it as the number of centres continues to increase.

Buildings

No two buildings were the same. Susi, with funding from America had a beautiful concrete block building with wide verandah and toilets. It was well used, not only for the pre-school groups, but for after school activities and for senior citizens' regular monthly get-togethers.

The Police Department had allocated a house for their children. Each room was organised for a different type of activity.

The verandah of one headmistress' house was used for another group and some were held in community halls, but most had a small Tongan type building using coconut leaves, corrugated iron, wood or whatever was available.

The inside of the buildings were mostly very stimulating with pictures, shapes, numbers etc. on display around the walls and on the ceilings, some of which consisted of sheets of brown paper. Woven coconut mats made the floors very comfortable in most of the centres. Storage was a real problem in some centres especially when the building was owned and used by other groups. Of course, it was not as great a problem as in some of our Australian centres in similar circumstances because there was so little equipment to be stored but when a teacher had manufactured or acquired some books or other materials, the difficulty of keeping them safe for use when needed was a definite consideration.

Teaching Materials

A lot of equipment used in the centres was home-made as there is little money to buy toys and books. I think the lack of books and paper was what I noticed most but again each centre varied as to the extent of the lack. Problems of display and storage did not encourage the teachers to keep too many things anyway. The cultural characteristic of sharing everything with others frequently meant that materials were loaned out and never recovered necessitating a constantly renewed supply.

One of the things I tried to emphasise in my sessions with the teachers was searching out and using locally available materials — such as cardboard cartons — to make a variety of equipment to extend the children's learning experiences. We had lots of fun collecting and creating blocks, puppets, books, etc.

The parents want their children to speak English, so much of the labelling, story writing and cutting out used English words and pictures as well as Tongan, and action songs and rhymes were taught in both languages.

Much of the teaching was direct instruction, understandable with the dearth of concrete materials. I was amazed at how many Tongan and English songs and jingles the children knew and how clear was their diction. Oral repetition and a good memory are highly prized skills. The teaching in the Primary schools is very formal and both teachers and parents see Pre-school as a time of getting the children ready to do well at school — and they succeed by all accounts so that Primary Principals encourage the formation of Pre-school groups in their villages.

Training of Teachers

New teachers are encouraged by the Association to enrol in the New Zealand Playcentre Correspondence Course and I was able to take about seven sessions with the group doing the first year of this course. Some of those in charge of centres were trained teachers or had studied at the University of the South Pacific or had done other courses as well. The on-going inservice training occurs mainly at the annual conference and these were very much anticipated and appreciated from the comments I heard.

The Pre-school Field Officers also try and visit regularly to encourage and advise teachers. Money and time put limits on this activity. Pohiva schedules one day a week for visits and one for the teacher training class of first year Correspondence Course students so she can only run her pre-school for three days, Monday to Wednesday.

Any extra education is eagerly sought although sometimes money for fares to attend stopped some from participating. The usual monthly teachers' meeting in Nukualofa was waived so that I could have some sessions with them while the brevity of my visits allowed only a single (very full) morning session with each group of teachers on Eua and Vavu'u.

Fund Raising

In the Association's 1983 Annual Report the President stated — 'The Government of Tonga recognises the importance of Pre-school Education and gives the Association moral support. Urban Pre-schools charge fees but rural Pre-schools usually pay their way through fund-raising'.

While I was visiting I was able to be present at a couple of fund raising days, one at the Hofoa Kindy to raise funds for their Christmas break-up party and another at Neiafu where all the Vavu'u Kindys came together for their annual 'Kindy Day'.

The mothers and teachers went to a lot of trouble creating beautiful leis, skirts, head-dresses, bracelets and anklets out of leaves, flowers and feathers. At Vavu'u the Free Wesleyan Church College Brass Band led the parade around the main town block and into the college grounds where coconut palm booths had been constructed for the onlookers. Each Kindy first sang songs and said rhymes in Tongan and English and one even put on a Christmas play. Then the band played and the children danced to be joined by their mothers and other adults who tucked money into their costumes. It was a most colourful and entertaining way of raising funds and allowed everyone who wanted to, to participate.

Special Events

Two of the many highlights during my stay were the World Food Day celebration and the Police Kindy's Christmas concert.

The Nuku'alofa Pre-schools joined with the schools and colleges to emphasise the benefits of home-grown food. Special songs were learned and presented before Queen Halaeva Mata'aho and invited guests. I was present at one of the rehearsals at the Mata'aho Kindy and I suspected that the parents enjoyed learning the song and hand actions for the sitting dance as much as did the children. On the day, the children brought along fresh fruit and vegetables to add a visual illustration to their song.

The Police Kindy were very fortunate to be able to have the Police Band at their Christmas Concert. It is justifiably famous and led both the procession around the police compound and the singing and dancing during the concert with great gusto. It was a very ambitious programme with group singing and rhymes plus a Nativity Pageant and Santa Claus with gifts but everything went very smoothly. The Police Department is very much behind the Pre-school work and provided generously for the prizes and party fare. The two teachers and the children and their parents were to be congratulated on the results of all their efforts.

Special Programmes

1. Children with hearing problems are now able to receive special help in the Deaf Unit set up by Red Crss in Nuku'alofa. At the official opening of the Unit the older Primary children were most in evidence but there are several Pre-school children enrolled and a delightful playground has been created for them.
2. One of the town teachers runs a regular session at the hospital for which she receives a small remuneration from Association funds.
3. The Association also has a fifteen minute radio programme once a month which is proving very helpful in spreading information to the general public as well as to Pre-school teachers in the scattered communities. It costs \$200 a year but everyone considers it tremendously worthwhile. Susi Taumalolo organises the material and spends five minutes each time specifically on some aspect of teacher training.

Funding is received from UNICEF and similar organisations for special projects such as provision of toilets. The executive officers were organising their holiday jobs as I left at the beginning of December. These were to instal one water tank and ten toilets at pre-schools in the villages of Tongatapu. They hope eventually to have a toilet and water tank at each of the Pre-schools and are well on the way to fulfilling this aim.

Tongans cultivate an attitude of thankfulness for all their blessings and any kindness is received with overwhelming gratitude. Living in a village and being invited to the regular Sunday feasts gave me an insight that few short-term visitors would normally experience. While scrounging for cast-off materials I encountered a wide range of responses and realised some of the problems that the Tongans have to overcome in their contacts with officials. So much that we take for granted is unknown to many of the villagers and yet in many ways their way of life has great advantages which visitors envy.

I am very grateful that the opportunity to visit and share with Tongan Pre-school Teachers was given to me.

It rounded off my year of travel and allowed me to get to know many beautiful people and see a country that is a little off the beaten track. I certainly would like to return some day.

The Association executive indicated that others with knowledge to share would be greatly appreciated, perhaps to take workshops at the Annual Conference. Help of many kinds is sought from and given by countries all round the world. Perhaps there are others from Australian Pre-schools who can share something and gain as much as I did. If you are interested, the address to write to is Tonga Pre-school Association, P.O. Box 941, Nuku'alofa, TONGA.

