

Re-thinking English literacy development in Tonga: A case study, 2012–2017

Paul Jurmo¹

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Abstract This article presents a case study of a five-year English-literacy project carried out in primary and middle schools in the Pacific island nation of Tonga from 2012 to 2017. It summarizes why and how the project was begun; the activities carried out by Peace Corps Volunteers and Tongan partners; its objectives; and the products, procedures, and lessons that this international collaboration generated. The project aimed at building Tongan educators’ capacities to create, use, and sustain “child-centered” (or “student-centered”) instructional and assessment practices; use books, libraries, and technologies to support literacy development; strengthen family and community support for children’s learning and literacy development; and increase access by young children and in-school and out-of-school youth and adults to literacy development opportunities. The article concludes with recommendations for actions that policymakers, practitioners, and parents might take to build a more effective literacy development system in their nations.

Keywords Literacy · English · Tonga

How English literacy is used and developed in Tonga

Tonga is a small, multi-island South Pacific nation of 100,000 inhabitants, founded by Polynesian seafarers about 2800 years ago. (NB: I base this section on my five years of living and doing field research in Tonga [2012–2017], and on my previous research and development of workplace and community learning systems in the United States.) For the

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✉ Paul Jurmo
pjurmo@comcast.net

¹ Consultant on Basic Education for Development, 3835 Keswick Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21211, USA

past 200 years, English-speaking missionaries, merchants, and media have shaped Tonga culturally and economically.

Like all other nations, Tonga has a number of formal and less-formal mechanisms in place to help its residents develop fluency in its languages. These include the Tongan language that is used daily by almost all inhabitants, and—to a lesser degree—English, considered an important second language. These supports include a formal education system of government and private schools at primary and secondary levels and less-formal processes and structures that residents use to develop oral and written language skills.

The less-formal mechanisms include regular, authentic communications in face-to-face spoken language in family, church, community, commercial, and workplace settings. Increasingly, especially with the advent of high-speed Internet service, Tongans communicate through the use of electronic media (e.g., text messages, phone, email, and Facebook and other social media); listening to the radio; and viewing television, DVDs, and online videos. These often-unconscious uses of oral and written language allow for meaningful practice in the use of Tongan and, to a lesser but growing degree, English. Such regular applications of literacy and language skills are important even if they are often limited in terms of what kinds of literacy and language skills they reinforce (i.e., primarily informal social communications and consuming of digital entertainment). There is also variation in how intentional and systematic users are when using these *de facto* opportunities for oral and written language development.

Some Tongans also engage in “self-study” outside the formal education system. They use tutoring or the study of paper or electronic resources to improve particular literacy-related skills, or they learn English less directly by studying other subjects that are presented in English-language formats. Many Tongans travel to other English-speaking countries for family, academic, work, or other purposes (e.g., vacation or to access healthcare). In the process, they have motivation and opportunities to develop fluency in English and bring those language skills back to Tonga with them.

The net effect of this “literacy development system” is that Tongans are generally fluent in oral and written forms of the Tongan language, especially the written language used for religious purposes. (Tongan is evolving to incorporate many English words, and younger generations tend to be less fluent in traditional, more formal uses of Tongan). Many also have a working fluency in oral English and—though less so—in written forms of English.

However, policymakers and much of the public commonly state that the English literacy of its people is not as strong as it should be. Much of this concern focuses on the many young people who emerge from school with limited English literacy and, seemingly, with few other skills needed for life in the modern Tongan culture. These are the Tongan version of the “disconnected youth” found in many other countries, disconnected from meaningful employment, education, and social supports. These young people cannot fill the small number of modern-sector jobs available in Tonga. They also have only limited prospects if they travel overseas and have to compete with the large numbers of foreign workers doing manual labor in agriculture, construction, and other industries where such jobs can still be found. Remittances sent home by Tongan workers engaged in such employment are a significant component of the incomes of many Tongan families and of the Tongan economy as a whole. There is also concern that, for better-educated Tongan youth, their English is not adequate for them to do well in tertiary-level education in Tonga or in other countries.

Some worry that an overemphasis on learning English will impact Tongan children’s fluency in the historical language of Tonga and their connection to its culture and traditions. Others argue that, while society must—and can—preserve the Tongan language and culture, this can be done while outside influences (like the English language, technology,

work procedures, environmental practices, and healthy lifestyles) are learned alongside, and integrated with, the best aspects of Tongan life ('Maui Taufe'ulungaki 1979).

Recent reforms of English-literacy supports in Tonga's formal educational system

It is in the formal education system where most attention is given to "literacy development" both in Tongan and in English. In 2011, the Tongan Ministry of Education, Women's Affairs, and Culture (now the Ministry of Education and Training, or MET) embarked on an effort to reform how English is taught in Tongan schools. This was seen as necessary due to the poor student performance on English exams, lack of readiness of students to deal with the English-literacy demands of secondary and tertiary education, and (as described above) Tongans' frequent lack of the English literacy skills needed to participate effectively in the adult roles—in Tonga and in other countries to which they travel—that require English fluency.

With the help of foreign consultants and funding, MET created a new English syllabus (MET 2011a, b), which called for a shift of English literacy education to a "child-centered" direction. This new approach:

- emphasizes English literacy as a vital tool for students' academic success and their ability to fulfill adult responsibilities;
- adopts instructional practices that help students to actively engage in the learning process and truly master English rather than simply memorize and repeat meaningless pieces of the language;
- recognizes that people learn in different ways and at different rates, and uses differentiated instruction that customizes activities to each student's strengths and needs;
- uses ongoing assessment to gauge students' needs and monitor and guide student progress;
- gives learners multiple opportunities to practice individually, in small groups, and in whole group, and to share ideas, model for each other, give feedback to peers, and provide opportunities to use English to communicate;
- links language learning to other academic subjects and to family, civic, and economic roles that Tongans perform;
- encourages student creativity, thinking, risk-taking, and openness to new ideas; and
- uses role plays, songs, games, flashcards, and real objects related to relevant themes.

This child-centered approach is consistent with literacy reform initiatives undertaken in other countries and advocated by international funders and education experts and organizations. In the Pacific region (Puamau and Hau'ofa 2010), in particular, educators are encouraged to build literacy-education systems that have:

- relevant content (i.e., relevant to culture, academic requirements, economic conditions, and particular learner populations, including focusing on technology, the Pacific environment, and other topics for children, people with disabilities, and youth);
- engaging instructional practices inside and outside classroom environments;
- involvement of parents and other community stakeholders;
- ongoing use of monitoring and evaluation to inform practice and policy;

- special emphasis on supporting teachers to use effective practices via teacher training and other forms of professional development;
- strong, objective, and visionary leadership and governance, with effective strategic planning focusing on appropriate goals and objectives and;
- adequate support from funders and host institutions targeted to educational improvements.

Tonga's new English syllabus advocates for an abandonment of teacher-centered instruction (in which teachers and other authority figures largely control the content and activities). The new English curriculum, as an alternative, presents what is hoped to be more-relevant content and examples of instructional practices that teachers can use to help students master that content (MET 2011a, b).

In the years since the launch of this new curriculum, Tonga has trained new and current teachers, distributed teacher guides to schools, and undertaken special assessment and program improvement projects. Teachers, to varying degrees, have begun using the new content and methodology.

Origins, objectives, and activities of the Peace Corps/Tonga English Literacy Project (2012–2017)

As this new curriculum reform effort was getting underway in 2011–2012, MET reached out to the United States Peace Corps for help. Though plans were moving forward to send new teacher guides and pupil books to schools and to train teachers and implement special assessment and program-improvement projects, MET officials also realized that the reform effort faced a number of major challenges. These included a populace who did not speak English as its first language and a teaching workforce often not strong in English themselves and not familiar with the child-centered philosophy and practices now being promoted for Tongan schools.

In late 2012, in response to the Ministry's request, the Peace Corps arrived on the literacy-reform scene in Tonga. The Peace Corps, an independent agency of the U.S. federal government, had been sending Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) to Tonga for nearly 50 years at that point, providing technical assistance to a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental projects and agencies.

In late 2012, Peace Corps/Tonga began what came to be known as its "English Literacy Project", whose overall purpose was to help the MET implement its new child-centered English curriculum. PCVs had successfully worked in Tongan schools for years and were known for their commitment (of a minimum of two years of service), fluency in English, willingness to live and work in remote communities, and willingness to learn the Tongan language and customs. MET felt that these U.S. Volunteers could be helpful to this challenging curriculum-reform effort.

The project's planners also assumed that PCVs had, as students, been exposed to some forms of child-centered teaching methods and would be comfortable and able to help principals and teachers adopt such methods. They would do so through living and working with their Tongan teacher counterparts, many of whom might have had some prior exposure (through training or experience as students or teachers) with new child-centered methods.

Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., had its own version of what it called a "student-centered" approach to English literacy and language education which PCVs

were using to implement English projects around the world. Under this approach (Office of Overseas Programming and Training Support 2015), PCVs would work with their host country counterparts to:

- focus instruction systematically on helping students master components (building blocks) of literacy;
- expose students to activities in which they become familiar and comfortable with how English is used naturally, as a tool for meaningful communication;
- take a biliteracy approach (blending teaching of English with mother tongue literacy);
- build support for literacy in schools but also in homes and communities and;
- adapt the student-centered activities described in the Peace Corps’ *Building Blocks of Literacy* manual to PCVs’ particular students and school contexts.

In the early years of the project, Peace Corps staff worked with MET officials to design and revise a framework for the new English Literacy Project that identified goals, objectives, activities, partners, and indicators of success. The project’s overall purpose was to build the capacities of Tongan principals, teachers, and communities to provide effective English-literacy development opportunities to primary-school children. The learner targets for this effort gradually expanded so that they came to include secondary-level students, as well as other youth, adults, and younger children who may or may not be connected to formal English-literacy education. (The project’s seven objectives are presented below, along with related activities, outcomes, and lessons learned).

Results vis-à-vis the project’s objectives

As the five-year mark was being reached toward the end of 2017, the results of this collective international effort were positive. Many useful procedures and products had been generated by PCVs in collaboration with Tongan students, teachers, principals, and other stakeholders (e.g., parents and major educational institutions). The project had exposed Tongan children to native English-speaking teachers and new instructional activities over a period of four or more years, and it had resulted in the formation of new partnerships to support English-literacy development. In turn, a number of stakeholders at local and national levels were reviewing, adapting, using, and sustaining the resulting resources.

This section summarizes results—products, procedures, and key findings—related to the project’s seven objectives.

Objective 1.1: Increase grade 3–8 teacher use of student-centered methods; and Objective 1.2: Increase grade 3–8 teacher use of student-centered materials

To accomplish these two inter-related objectives, PCVs had to do two things at once: develop working relationships with Tongan partners at their schools while also working with those new partners to develop and disseminate student-centered instructional and assessment practices relevant to Tongan students and schools and usable by Tongan teachers. The two interwoven—and fairly successful—strategies they used are described below:

Strategy #1: Develop student-centered practices and materials

Through training workshops, trial-and-error in the field, discussions with national experts, assessments of student literacy abilities, and sharing of resulting practices through face-to-face and electronic communications, PCVs (with Tongan counterparts) identified the priority literacy skills—especially decoding, reading comprehension, and grammar—with which Tongan primary and secondary students needed extra help. PCVs simultaneously developed useful instructional practices and materials that Tongan teachers could use to teach those skills. These instructional tools and methods fell into several categories, including culturally and linguistically relevant reading materials (among them, a series of Sight Word Books); the use of engaging games (e.g., card games, games requiring physical movement), performing arts (e.g., songs, role plays), and visual arts (e.g., drawing, collages) as teaching tools; and activities that integrate the teaching of English with other subjects (e.g., health and environmental knowledge). The Volunteers tied these practices to existing MET curriculum units and published them in hard copy and electronic formats.

Similarly, PCVs created several forms of assessments to measure the above-described priority skills. They field-tested these assessments and shared the results with their Tongan partners. The PCV Monitoring and Evaluation Committee made the case that it is important to demonstrate the actual skill levels of their students, as a way to educate stakeholders about both the type and the extent of the literacy needs to focus on, and to measure progress and document success.

Strategy #2: Develop, implement, and sustain collaborative capacity-building relationships to help partners to design and use student-centered practices

Peace Corps/Tonga staff developed the term “collaborative capacity building” to refer to the working relationships between PCVs and the principals, teachers, and other stakeholders they interacted with in their two years. Such two-way relationships were vital if the project was to really help local partners strengthen their abilities to adopt a student-centered approach, make it their own, and use and sustain this approach over time. The other important advantage of a collaborative approach was that it helped PCVs to develop their own understanding of the teachers, schools, and curricula they were working with. The collaborative strategies used by PCVs with multiple partners and key results are described below:

The project defined key components of collaborative capacity building, including the various partners with whom PCVs can work; ways that collaboration can be carried out; various purposes for those relationships; and supports required for successful collaboration. PCVs and staff developed, implemented, refined, and sustained productive relationships with multiple stakeholders—including education institutions, donors of financial and in-kind assistance, government agencies and nongovernmental organizations, religious organizations, and community groups—in the nation’s four main island groups and at four levels: local (school and community), district, national, and international.

At the level of the school and village, Peace Corps staff and Volunteers implemented multiple processes for developing productive relationships with school and community stakeholders (Peace Corps/Tonga 2015). Peace Corps staff carried out site identification (i.e., initial development of relationships with schools and communities where PCVs

might work); training of partners in newly-identified communities in how to work with PCVs and how to plan and implement development projects; and regular ongoing communications between Peace Corps staff and local partners (via site visits and phone calls).

At that same local level, PCVs inventoried local needs and resources when they first arrived at their sites. They visited students' homes (to introduce themselves to parents and other family members and to clarify children's needs and how families might work with the PCVs), and they participated in their schools' Planning Week at the launch of the school year. PCVs observed school activities during the first school term and modeled selected student-centered practices for counterpart teachers (i.e., showing, as opposed to explaining). Further, they devised various kinds of co-planning and co-teaching strategies with counterparts, sharing teaching resources in print and electronic formats.

At the district level (i.e., in the four main island groups where the PCVs worked), PCVs collaborated with the MET district offices by running staff-development workshops about student-centered practices for teachers and principals. They also engaged in informal exchanges with district officers and staff at the MET offices and when MET representatives visited PCV schools. These communications allowed the PCVs to develop positive relationships with teachers and principals, share ideas, and get practical supports for their work. Several staff members in the district offices became strong advocates for what the PCVs were doing and helped spread the word about the project to schools that were not assigned a PCV.

At the national level, Peace Corps/Tonga staff gradually realized that they could benefit from the knowledge and other resources of many national-level partners. The staff saw that the partners could open doors and increase support for this effort, and staff and Volunteers could disseminate project products and knowledge more widely, if they worked through national networks. While the staff simultaneously supported collaborative work by PCVs at the level of their schools and communities, they also built active partnerships with a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) composed of committed representatives of key national educational agencies (the MET, the University of the South Pacific, a major post-secondary technical institute, and a leading secondary school). PAC members guided the project's direction and helped PCVs develop and disseminate curriculum and assessment tools. In addition, several international donors (e.g., Embassies of the United States and Japan and the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions, as well as Rotary International) provided financial and in-kind support to PCV activities. Tongan governmental and nongovernmental organizations worked with PCVs on projects related to community waste-management, water safety instruction, school gardens, creation of reading materials, after-school basketball, and inclusive education for children with special learning needs.

In Year 2, Peace Corps staff and Volunteers began to create a number of PCV committees and groups. These allowed teams of PCVs who had an interest in a topic to work together across sites to compile useful resources, create new ones, fine-tune them, organize them into print and electronic collections, and share them. These committees and groups also had the collective strength to work with the kinds of national-level institutions described above, thereby ensuring that Tongan partners were involved in creating, using, and sustaining resources that the PCVs were initiating.

At the international level, a by-product of the project was the positive relationships that staff and PCVs developed with institutions outside of Tonga. These included: working with the Institute of Education at the Tonga campus of the University of the South Pacific (USP) to develop reading materials for Tongan children that could potentially also be adapted by USP campuses in other Pacific nations; learning from USP faculty visiting from other

countries; working with SolarSPELL, a project of Arizona State University (ASU) that was field-testing a solar-powered, climate-resistant minicomputer for use in schools in several Pacific nations; sharing information about the English Literacy Project with interested people around the world via a website (www.peacecorps.gov/tonga) and through PCLive (a file-sharing system for Peace Corps personnel worldwide); and tapping into financial supports for specific project activities from the U.S. Embassy in Fiji, the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions, the Japanese Embassy, and Rotary Clubs in other nations.

Objective 1.3 (part A): Increase grade 3–8 teacher use of library resources

Our PCV Library Committee carried out four important tasks. One of those was conducting a study of existing libraries in secondary- and tertiary-level schools to clarify how those libraries worked and how they might inform the design of primary-school libraries (Connors and Pugh 2015). Committee members also prepared guidelines for leveling and sorting books, and they created a coding system for primary-school libraries that was consistent with the systems used in secondary- and tertiary-level libraries. Finally, they trained five groups of PCVs in the use of these library-related resources.

Many PCVs made library development a major component of their work. New Volunteers did an initial assessment of their school libraries to identify existing book-related resources, how they are used, and what improvements might be made. Volunteers also often cleaned up and reorganized existing libraries at their schools, created new libraries, trained teachers and students in the use of their libraries, repurposed less-useful materials (by, for example, cutting out illustrations from old books to use as teaching aids), solicited and organized reading materials for the libraries, used school or public libraries for special reading programs (e.g., on Saturday mornings or after-school), and created community-based libraries.

Objective 1.3 (part B): Increase grade 3–8 teacher use of library ICT (information and communications technology) resources

In late 2012, the project began looking at appropriate ways to use technology in schools. The use of computers for instructional purposes was limited in Tonga due to schools' general lack of working computers and personnel trained in their educational uses. The lack of a national school technology plan and resources also limited efforts in this area. Despite these challenges, PCVs worked with counterparts to develop numerous promising ways to use technologies, broken down into seven models, described below (Peace Corps/Tonga 2017b).

Technology model #1: Sharing educational resources

Working individually and through a PCV Technology Group, PCVs developed three versions of electronic file-sharing systems that they used to share digital resources among themselves and with Tongan counterparts. Initially, this took the form of an online Dropbox collection that PCVs used to share lesson plans and teaching materials with each other. When that proved to be difficult for many Volunteers to access (due to limited Internet service), the PCVs switched to using flash drives to store and share electronic resources among themselves and with Tongan teachers. In a third version of file-sharing, PCVs and Peace Corps staff worked with SolarSPELL to upload useful teaching resources onto the

SolarSPELL solar-powered, climate-resistant hard drive that ASU staff were field-testing in Tonga and four other Peace Corps posts around the Pacific.

Technology model #2: Organizing and upgrading computer equipment

New PCVs often found used computer equipment in their schools' offices, libraries, or classrooms, or possibly stored in closets. These computers could either be functioning well or—more often—in various stages of disrepair. Tonga is not very friendly to the average desktop computer due to physical conditions (e.g., heat, humidity, dust, insects, and even geckos that can damage computers' inner parts), power surges, computer viruses, and lack of basic maintenance. Despite these challenges, some PCVs scrounged together used and/or donated computers to create working computer labs in their schools. In some cases, they integrated these computers into more traditional school libraries. Those PCVs working in secondary schools found significantly better computer resources than those in primary schools.

Technology model #3: Helping students develop English literacy and computer skills

Although most of their schools lacked the hardware, software, and expertise to use a Western model of instructional technology, several PCVs adapted technologies in ways that worked for their students and schools. PCVs used computers to teach English skills and computer skills to students, or used DVDs as a tool for teaching English and for classroom management (i.e., as a reward for good behavior). Some employed CDs, MP3 players, and inexpensive speakers to use recorded songs (including some made by PCVs) to teach English and channel student energy. A few PCVs used Skype to communicate with U.S. schools—sending photos, videos, messages, or songs back and forth—or to do joint assignments (e.g., using maps). The Tongan students could thereby see and hear fluent English-speaking children from another culture in a natural setting.

PCVs also used video technology to enable students to make presentations to their parents. Some Volunteers learned how to use simple audio recorders (found on many phones) to record students' oral English skills. They played the recordings back to the students to let them hear what they sounded like. These recordings, saved for each student, served as an ongoing record of how the students' skills were developing over time.

In 2016, a small number of PCVs experimented with using a special software to develop prototypes of electronic books. Students, teachers, and parents could use these books to read through a story while hearing an English-speaking narrator voicing the words in the background.

Technology model #4: Helping teachers develop expertise and credentials

Some PCVs used their personal laptops or the school's computers to teach basic computer skills to their counterparts. Teachers then used these skills to create their own lesson plans and teaching materials. A few PCVs tutored counterparts who were taking online professional-development courses through the University of the South Pacific.

Technology model #5: Helping principals and counterparts prepare documents

PCVs used spreadsheets to record the results of literacy assessments they conducted with their students, which they then shared in an electronic grade book with supervisors and teachers, who could use these records when preparing reports for MET. Some PCVs also helped their principals use computers to prepare other types of reports, funding proposals, and documents required by their agencies, funders, the media, or other audiences.

Technology model #6: Using video technology to train PCVs

In 2016 and 2017, staff began using video technology to record PCVs doing practice teaching during Peace Corps training events. They used edited versions of these videos to train those same Volunteers and new Volunteers.

Technology model #7: Communicating about our project with other stakeholders

In 2016 and 2017, staff and PCVs began to use websites, online file-sharing systems, and video technology to communicate about the project to interested audiences within and outside Tonga. They posted project documents on the post's website (www.peacecorps.gov/tonga) and on PCLive (an online resource-sharing system set up by Peace Corps headquarters). Staff and Volunteers also began exploring how to use short English- and Tongan-language videos to explain the project to local communities, policymakers, teachers, and others.

Objective 2.1: Improve grade 3–8 English literacy through classroom learning; and Objective 2.2: Improve grade 3–8 English literacy through extra-curricular learning

PCVs—on their own and with counterparts—provided literacy instruction and assessment services to children in 40 schools over five years. Based on anecdotal information, these joint PCV/counterpart efforts improved children's performance (e.g., improved scores on Class 6 exams required for admission to secondary school).

PCVs and their counterparts provided these supports during regular schools hours and in extracurricular activities outside regular school time. Extracurricular activities included Class 6 exam preparation classes; tutoring and homework help sessions; and reading and other literacy-support activities (e.g., after school and on Saturday mornings) at the school in community settings (e.g., community libraries) and in PCVs' and students' homes.

Volunteers and partners also developed innovative health (e.g., after-school basketball) and environmental activities (e.g., community clean-up, girls' outdoor activities club) that were at least indirectly tied to English-literacy development in that English was often used during the activities or related vocabulary was covered in English classes.

Objective 3.1: Increase community support for literacy development for children, youth, and adults

This objective received less attention in the first five years of the English Literacy Project. This is probably because literacy development is normally seen as the responsibility of

the school rather than of parents and the community. Nonetheless, PCVs did work with counterparts and Peace Corps staff in various ways over five years to help parents provide literacy-related supports to their children and to their schools. They also collaborated with PTAs, churches, town officials, sports groups, and local governmental and nongovernmental agencies to bring various supports to schools.

PCVs used five strategies to promote family and community involvement: (1) integrate family and community themes into literacy instruction; (2) use family and community members as learning resources at schools; (3) involve communities in improving the school's physical infrastructure; (4) provide learning opportunities in the home and community; and (5) involve parents and community members as advocates for quality learning opportunities for all children. Peace Corps staff and more-experienced Volunteers trained Volunteers and school and community partners in the use of these strategies (Peace Corps/Tonga 2017a).

Objective 3.2: Strengthen community members' English literacy

This objective also received less attention in the first five years of the project. Nonetheless, a modest number of PCVs and their counterparts worked in various ways to provide literacy-development opportunities to learners other than those primary- and middle-school students with whom PCVs normally worked. These learner populations were younger children (including preschool and Class 1 and 2 children who are not normally given formal training in English), youth who may or may not be enrolled in secondary school, and adults. The PCVs' efforts to serve this population were in direct response to requests from their communities.

PCVs provided English tutoring for students in occupational programs; helped students at the University of the South Pacific and Tupou Tertiary Institute strengthen the writing and other English skills they required for postsecondary education; tutored secondary students and adults in English and other subjects; and taught high school-level courses in subjects other than English (e.g., computer classes and business classes), while using English extensively in those courses and thereby reinforcing students' practical uses of English. They also provided computer-skills training for youth and adults (including co-workers), thus helping students develop both computer and English skills as most computer applications use English. In addition, PCVs helped in *kindi* (preschool) and Class 1 and 2 classrooms, providing songs and other activities that lay the groundwork for learning English and developing literacy skills; they helped parents understand how they can help their children learn English and develop basic literacy and learning skills at home (and, in the process, helped parents feel more comfortable using English themselves); and Volunteers helped teachers improve their English and complete course work for teacher-training programs.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered to key stakeholders who have important roles to play in their nations' efforts to create more effective literacy-development systems at national and local levels. (This is particularly relevant for situations in which the language being taught is an international or national language not spoken by most schoolchildren). These important players include education and development policymakers and funders,

educators, other potential partner agencies and organizations, and parents and other community stakeholders. I base these recommendations on the five-year collaborative effort in Tonga described in this article, and on experience and research in other literacy initiatives in other countries. These recommendations are also consistent with the guidelines for literacy education (described at the beginning of this article) promoted by Tonga's Ministry of Education and Training, Pacific education experts, and Peace Corps headquarters.

Recommendation 1: Invest in effective practices in meaningful ways

This project demonstrated that it is, indeed, possible to develop the kinds of practices called for in the objectives of the Tonga English Literacy Project and in international guidelines and research related to literacy education. PCVs in Tonga—often working with host country partners—were able to design, field-test, and document many kinds of promising instructional and assessment activities and materials; uses of books, libraries, and various kinds of technologies; strategies for using these practices during normal school hours and in extracurricular settings; and models of providing literacy-development opportunities to various populations of young children, youth, and adults. The Volunteers and counterparts also developed ways to build teacher capacities to create and use these kinds of tools, as well as strategies for families and other community stakeholders to support literacy development at the village level.

As the project unfolded, it became clear how necessary it was for multiple categories of stakeholders to actively support the development, introduction, and further refinement of such innovations. Without emotional, policy, and practical supports (e.g., funding, in-kind resources, teacher training, parent education) for these new forms of literacy development, such innovations are not likely to be widely understood, used, and sustained. The project was able to work with principals, teachers, parents, and representatives of local-, district-, and national-level organizations who were open to new ideas to create these innovations. However, too often such supports were slow in coming—or never came at all—and, as a result, good ideas and motivation withered on the vine.

A key recommendation is thus that, for this kind of project to have a meaningful, lasting impact, strong commitment and involvement of partners (i.e., host schools, parent groups, other collaborating organizations, and funders) are necessary from the start of the project. While kind words are appreciated, innovative educational practices cannot take root in a country unless partners invest staff, time, expertise, and other resources. These resources might include existing teacher-training and curriculum development staff and health and environmental agencies that can support integration of literacy activities with promotion of community health and environmental sustainability.

Partners need to team actively with those who are doing innovative work to further develop useful tools, train teachers in their use, make needed adjustments, and disseminate resulting resources electronically and in easy-to-use print forms. These new resources might be further piloted in carefully selected schools and communities (with more-experienced users mentoring newcomers) to further develop interest and build capacity to use innovative products and procedures.

This kind of commitment and collaboration requires leaders who have technical expertise, organizing skills, authority, and a forward-thinking, willing-to-learn, committed-to-quality attitude. It also requires financial and in-kind supports targeted to support and sustain quality rather than hit-and-miss, short-term, uncoordinated efforts.

Recommendation 2: Learn from and build on prior experience

To take the promising practices developed in the Tonga English Literacy Project to the next level of quantity and quality (i.e., to reach more students, teachers, and communities with continuously improving services), strong leadership is needed. Well-qualified professionals from key educational and other institutions committed to improving literacy should be organized into a taskforce or work group to guide and manage system reform efforts. This leadership team would take the time to really understand the strengths and limitations of literacy supports developed to date in the country and then guide further development and use of selected practices and tools.

This steering committee should evaluate what system improvement efforts reveal about the needs of students, teachers, parents, and other key players; potentially effective ways to respond to those needs; and what can be done to expand the use of effective practices in ways relevant to and sustainable within national realities.

Recommendation 3: Organize multiple stakeholders into a more comprehensive, better-integrated effort

A well-run literacy system reform effort should consider how it might efficiently respond to diverse learner populations and other stakeholders, purposes for literacy, and learning strategies. Planners should decide, for example, what learner populations the reform effort will prioritize: younger children, older children, and youth (both those enrolled in school and those not in school), and possibly adults (e.g., parents, workers). Within the selected populations, what challenges do the target learners face (e.g., disabilities, difficult life circumstances, remote locations)? What are the goals of the reform effort (e.g., literacy as a tool for academic advancement, health, environmental sustainability, workforce development, social cohesion, and/or democracy)?

A comprehensive effort might facilitate learning in a broader range of venues (i.e., at school during and after regular school hours, in the community, in homes), activities (e.g., games, project-based learning, integration of basic skills with other subjects through “clubs”), and tools (e.g., engaging reading materials and appropriate forms of technologies). And it could involve a broader range of stakeholders (especially parents and perhaps community volunteers who support literacy development in schools, homes, and other venues in the multiple ways described above under Tonga’s Objective 3.a). Leadership of the reform effort should be encouraged and given opportunities to develop expertise and share ideas and strategies via open, positive, and ongoing communication and problem-solving.

Recommendation 4: Be guided by—and advocate for—a vision of how education can improve the lives of individuals and the future of the nation

All willing to be involved in literacy system improvement—teachers and other educators, parents, community leaders, and others—should be encouraged and helped to become “educated consumers” about why and how they can contribute. In addition to having specific “worker bee” roles to play, they should become active advocates, inside and outside their communities, for learners and literacy development.

Recommendation 5: Celebrate successes

Building more effective learning and literacy-development systems is a lot of work. We need to acknowledge and support positive efforts and meaningful results—even if they are small ones. Those doing this work need to be encouraged and supported to continually build on their strengths and successes. “*Keep your eyes on the prize*” and *stay strong as you move forward*.

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Paul Jurmo (United States), Ed.D., is a specialist in basic skills education for adults, youth, and children, having served multiple roles (e.g., planner, evaluator, researcher, administrator, professor, curriculum developer, trainer, and advocate), in multiple institutions (e.g., non-governmental and governmental agencies, universities and a community college, labor unions, prisoner re-entry), and in both the United States and other countries (e.g., The Gambia, Tonga, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Canada). He promotes participatory and collaborative approaches to developing basic skills to help learners participate actively and successfully in work, family, and civic roles. He recently served for five years as Director of Programming and Training and Country Representative for Peace Corps/Tonga. He is currently working as an independent consultant, with a focus on developing work-related basic skills systems inside and outside the U.S. For more information, visit www.pauljurmo.info.