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THE SOLOMON ISLANDS INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT & ENHANCE THE USE OF VERNACULARS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The Solomon Islands early childhood education sector has recently developed an early childhood education curriculum. A critical issue is the place of vernacular language in the early childhood programme. The new curriculum is a significant factor in providing meaningful, culturally relevant and inclusive programmes. Vernacular languages connect education to the community and can strengthen community involvement. This discussion explores the role of community in early childhood education, particularly in terms of preserving and enhancing the use of both Solomon Islands Pijin and the many vernacular dialects of the Solomon Islands. Issues and challenges are discussed and measures to encourage the use of pidgin and dialects are explored.

Key words: vernacular education, vernacular curriculum development, Solomon Islands Pijin, indigenous language preservation, dialects, community involvement

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been increased awareness of the need to preserve and promote the vernacular languages in the Solomon Islands. In order to achieve this goal, it is important to develop early childhood vernacular education programmes, because early childhood is an optimum time for language acquisition and development. The Solomon Islands National Early Childhood Education policy statement, clause 1.12 Language of Instruction, issued by the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2008) states that the language of instruction used in the early childhood centre shall be the local language or the vernacular spoken by the community where the centre is situated or Pidgin (in case the community is multilingual). In line with the National Policy for Basic education (clause 1.12.2) the English language should be gradually introduced to all children at the age of 5, in preparation for transition to Primary Education. These standards give clear directives to guide both the curriculum development panel in developing the early childhood curriculum and early childhood teachers in their practice.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Solomon Islands became a British Protectorate in 1893 and finally attained political independence from Great Britain on 7 July 1978. The Solomon Islands are a double chain of islands between 5 degrees and 12 degrees S. latitude and 155 degrees and 170 degrees E longitude. The total land area is 11,200 square miles.

The population of the Solomon Islands in July 2011 was 571,890. The growth rate is 22.21% and those aged birth to fourteen comprise 37.8% of the population. 19% of the population live in urban areas. The majority of Solomon Islanders are Melanesian, the next largest group are Polynesians who have settled on islands and atolls such as Rennell and Bellona, Tikopia and Anuta, as well as Sikaiana and Ontong Java. There is also a Kiribati Micronesian community who were resettled there by the British Government because of population pressures in the 1950's and 60's.

The arrival of Christianity in the Solomon Islands had a considerable effect on language usage there, with the Church selecting a small number of local vernacular languages to be used in the range of various denominations represented. This was met with a mixed response from the Solomon Islands community (Tryon & Hackman, 1983).

EVANGELISM, LANGUAGE & EDUCATION

The languages spoken in Solomon Islands schools became inextricably tied up with the history of evangelism. Evangelism and education were synonymous in the Solomon Islands until as recently as 1974. Up until 1945, churches were the sole educational agencies. Since 1945, the government has taken a more active role in education, finally taking over full responsibility in 1974. The church languages were thus the language of the classroom. The Mota language was chosen by the Church of Melanesia; the Methodist mission adopted Roviana as the mission lingua franca; the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) mission emphasised English as well as Marovo as the mission language, while the South Seas Evangelical Mission chose to use Pidgin. This mission concentrated its efforts on Malaita, since the majority of cane field workers recruited to work in the Queensland cane fields came from this region. This latter group had been introduced to Pidgin in Queensland, where the South Seas Evangelical Mission originated.

Further developments in the selection of the official language of instruction saw Mota retaining a dominant position in the Church of Melanesia for more than seventy years. English was also considered an important language of instruction in the central schools in the diocese. The Methodists and SDA's used both Roviana and Marovo, respectively, as the language of instruction, with an emphasis, however, on using English. The Roman Catholics used Ghari, whose prominence prevailed until the late 1950's.

Hau'ofa (1993) argues that the effects of colonial rule on the thinking and attitudes of the Pacific peoples are still very strong. Since Western practices have generally been considered as more desirable, English has dominated education in the Solomon Islands, at a huge cost to local languages and cultures. This is a legacy of colonialism.

In 1983, Tryon and Hackman reported that vernacular languages were strong locally and predicted that they were likely to remain so in a society where traditional values were so highly prized. It was the Solomon Islands desire that vernacular languages remain strong in spite of the significant expansion of Pidgin and English in recent times. Tryon and Hackman carried out some preliminary work on the classification of all of the languages spoken on the Solomon Islands archipelago. They found that there are sixty three distinct languages indigenous to the Solomon Islands, as well as many dialects. There are two language families – Austronesian and Papuan. There are seven Papuan languages, and the remaining fifty six are Austronesian. Five languages are Polynesian and fifty one are Melanesian Austronesian. Recent statistical data reveal 120 Indigenous languages in the Solomon Islands archipelago. This paper suggests measures that can (and should) be taken to protect vernacular languages through promoting their use in early childhood education.

DISCUSSION

Within the early childhood education sector in Pacific Nations, there is an increasing aspiration to use vernacular language instruction in the early childhood setting. The development of the Maori and Pacific language nest movement in the 1980's was in response to community concerns that Maori and Pacific languages were becoming endangered (Mara, 1998). Such initiatives have worked to successfully promote cultural and linguistic maintenance.

To counter the tide of language loss, Taufe'ulungake (1994) calls for Pacific communities to mobilise and to actively seek measures to enhance language maintenance. Language and culture are inextricably linked. Language constitutes the vehicle by which essential cultural and cosmological idioms are transmitted. Destroying a people's language is tantamount to destroying their culture and undermining the ability of that nation to sustain itself (Kunie, 1995, in Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). To stem the increasing and inevitable use of English as lingua franca, children need to see their vernacular as a functioning language. They have a strong grounding in their first (home or vernacular) language, and they see and hear their language being used competently for a range of functions.

Educational programmes that devalue the indigenous language in favour of English or Pidgin perpetuate the notion that vernacular is limited and of little value. Kincheloe (2004) draws our attention to the

political nature of education systems which support the needs of the dominant culture, thus subverting the interests of marginalised groups. The devaluing of Indigenous language and culture deprives the community not only of linguistic and cultural knowledge, but also of a sense of identity and belonging to a cultural community. Bourdieu (in Corson, 1993) argues that different language situations usually make one language more prestigious than another. The majority language is often perceived as more elegant and important, opening the door to educational and economic success. Mathews (2000) refers to this as the 'totemisation' of English which leads to the stigmatisation of 'dominated' languages and influencing language maintenance, language restoration, language shift or perpetuate language death in a society (Fishman, 1989). Furthermore, this perpetuates economic inequalities, and oppresses minority languages (Baker, 2006).

Language can be the 'glue' which ensures collective cultural identity. Fittingly, Boas in Agar(1994) coined the phrase 'languaculture' to describe the inextricable link between language and culture. Fishman (1989) refers to the notions of linguistic determinism which describes the connection between language and culture whereby one grows up with a language and that language shapes the way one sees the world, determines one's worldview and identity. Sapir and Whorf in Fishman (1989) note that culture is semantically encoded in language, and culture and context are expressed through the actual use of the language. Language is more than an expression of world view; it is a guide to social reality (Baker, 2006).

Education has the power to promote and disseminate certain ideas about language; it can enforce its linguistic demands by excluding dissenters, by rewarding conformity, by pillorying deviation, and by sanctioning the 'legitimate' (Gramsci; in Corson, 1993). On the other hand, educational programmes which are embedded in indigenous language immersion in the early years assist long term language maintenance (Siraj-Blatchford, 2000). This is further supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 30, which states that a child who is indigenous shall not be denied the right to enjoy his or her own culture or to use his or her own language (Ah Nee- Benham & Cooper, 2000).

This discussion is supported by a sociocultural theoretical framework. Language is viewed as the vehicle in which essential culture and cosmological idioms are transmitted. Removing a people's language is tantamount to destroying their culture and consequently undermining the ability of a nation to sustain itself (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p.18). Early childhood is a critical stage for language acquisition. Language acquisition is a complex process which includes engaging with phonology (the sounds of words), vocabulary (the words of the language), grammar (the way the words are ordered and put together), discourse (the way the sentences are put together) and pragmatics (the rules of how to use the language (Baker, 2006). Viewed holistically, this process involves children learning the traditions,

customs and practices surrounding language use. Whilst research has found that the status of vernaculars in the Solomon Islands is stable, the use of Pidgin and English continues to rise. Correspondingly, all cultural and social practices are modified. Sociolinguists have established a causal link between vernacular language loss and the acquisition of Western social and cultural practices (Baker, 2006).

SOLOMON ISLANDS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SECTOR

In 2009, the Ministry of Education and Human Relations Development (MEHRD) began to develop the early childhood curriculum. Within the last decade, education in the wider Pacific region has witnessed an unmistakable trend towards taking ownership of Pacific education. The Solomon Islands initiative stems from the desire to develop an early childhood curriculum that would embrace and reflect the culture, customs and traditional practices of the Solomon Islands. Significantly, the use vernacular languages in the early childhood curriculum and programme were highlighted.

Early childhood education in the Solomon Islands covers the ages of three to five years. Originally, the first early childhood settings were initiated by individuals, groups and voluntary organisations in urban settings, such as Honiara, Gizo and Auki. The Honiara preschool association was established in 1981. In 1998, the first ECE students began training at the Solomon Islands College for Higher Education (SICHE) for the certificate in Teaching ECE. Today, SICHE continues to train early childhood teachers as well as providing on-going professional development for practitioners in the field.

Imparting Solomon Islands cultural values to children in the early formative years is imperative to the Solomon Islands community. The provision of an early childhood programme which values cultural traditions and languages is a central aim of the Solomon Islands curriculum, based on the assumption of equitable access to quality play-based programmes in the Solomon Islands. A quality, culturally relevant programme incorporates learning opportunities and weaves the vernacular into its rich and stimulating play-based programmes.

The early childhood curriculum panel began developing the draft document *Valium Smol Pikinini blong iumi* (Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2009.) They were cognisant of the challenges they faced in developing a curriculum that addressed the complex issues around language use, language acquisition in the early years, language maintenance of vernacular language, and use of Pidgin and English in the Solomon Islands.

Pidgin is the lingua franca in the Solomon Islands, particularly in the urban settings of Honiara, Auki and Gizo. Most people there are at least bilingual (in Pidgin and their village vernacular). Lichtenberg's 2006

study found the Toqabaqita people, were bilingual in their vernacular language as well as Pidgin. The study found that although code switching was common, it is Toqabaqita which is their first language, the language of everyday life, and the language that children acquire as their first language. The study concluded that the language is not under threat in the foreseeable future. Whilst this may be indicative of what is occurring in the provinces, the demographics of the urban centres reflects a growing use of both English and Pidgin which threatens the status of vernaculars as first language. Bearing this in mind, the early childhood education development panel determined that policies and procedures, developed in accordance with curriculum directives, would assist in vernacular language maintenance.

The National Early Childhood Policy Statement (MEHRD, 2008) directive is to use the vernacular in the early childhood setting. With this guideline, the Solomon Islands early childhood education curriculum development panel developed the principle of Language. The vernacular languages of the Solomon Islands are recognised as official languages of instruction, to be used at all times in early childhood education, particularly in rural /village settings. It is acknowledged, however, that a bi-lingual approach may be required in urban areas where speakers may not have the knowledge of the vernacular and may need to communicate in either Pidgin or English. In the early years, children communicate using a range of non-verbal communication, such as body language, gestures. Cultural and traditional ways of communicating, such as music and dance, are also acknowledged. Modern communication technology is embraced as a tool to assist children's language development, particularly in early childhood.

Valium Smol Pikinini blong iumi (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2009) emphasises developing strong identity as well as a strong sense of belonging to the culture and nation. The communication strand (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development 2009) states that language is a vital part of communication. In early childhood, one of the major cultural tasks for children is to develop competence in their language. Languages do not consist only of words, sentences, and stories: language includes the language of images, art, dance, mathematics, movement, rhythm, and music (Ministry of Education and human Resources Development, 2009, 24).

EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES & STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

The early childhood education draft curriculum (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2009) encompasses a holistic view of language development in the early years. The strand of communication recognises that the languages and symbols of the Solomon Islands need to be protected and promoted. During the early years of their development, children learn to communicate their experiences and to interpret the ways in which others communicate and represent experiences. During this

period, they develop competence in symbolic, abstract, imaginative, and creative thinking. Language grows and develops in meaningful contexts, when children have a need to know and a reason to communicate.

The role of the adult in supporting children's developing language skills is pivotal. The curriculum requires teachers and other adults to respect and encourage the child's home language. It also states that policies should be in place to support children's education in the vernacular language (as well as in Pidgin and English in the urban areas, such as Honiara). In villages, it requires teachers and other adults working with children in the early childhood setting to be fluent in the vernacular and to use the vernacular language whenever possible.

Early childhood programmes will enable children to learn the skills valued in the Solomon Islands culture, such as oral traditions involving listening, memorizing, observation and story-telling. Much of this can be conveyed using vernacular languages. Furthermore, creative arts will incorporate cultural traditions and symbolism.

An environment, which is rich in signs, symbols, words, numbers songs, literature, poetry, as well as traditional and cultural art and artefacts, is an effective platform to promote and privilege vernacular language acquisition. Interpersonal relationships, conversations and one-to-one interactions between the adult and the child hold enormous possibilities for language development.

Teaching strategies that enable children to develop vernacular language include:

- Teachers using the vernacular of the village first and foremost in the programmes
- Teachers and other adults in the early childhood setting using phrases from children's home language as well as the local vernacular most of the time when engaging in conversations with them
- Providing many opportunities for children to hear stories, poems, chants and songs, particularly those with a strong connection to the Solomon Islands culture.
- Providing oral storytelling each day, particularly the traditional folklore, delivered in the local vernacular.
- Adopting a village approach in the early childhood setting whereby others in the community are invited to participate in the programme and to impart their knowledge of customs, traditional knowledge and vernacular language skills.
- Ensuring that children become familiar with the stories and literature valued by the Solomon Islands cultural groups.

Further measures to support and enhance vernacular languages might include a provision that prospective student teachers accepted to a teachers training programme must be fluent in the vernacular of the village where they intend to teach. Such measures not only serve to strengthen vernacular language content and

use in the early childhood setting, but also demonstrate the strong desire by the Solomon Islands community to retain, protect and promote their unique and highly valued vernacular languages.

CONCLUSION

The discourse on language maintenance and preservation, whilst not a new issue, is complex and contentious. This discussion focused on the Solomon Islands early childhood education sector. It has discussed the issues of language implementation, language loss, language maintenance, and language survival. It argues that the early years are the optimum period for children to acquire not only a strong language base, but also a well-established sense of cultural identity and belonging. The pivotal role of education is promoted as well as practices outlined in the Solomon Islands early childhood curriculum (draft), which suggests realistic measures for the protection and promotion of vernacular languages in early childhood education.

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