Peer-Reviewed Paper

The Response of Solomon Islanders to an Early Childhood Education Partnership Project with New Zealand

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ABSTRACT: *A field-based training programme designed for Solomon Islands' kindergarten teachers was a partnership development initiative between New Zealand and Solomon Islands. A research study investigated the impact of the training programme, on the roles, relationships and activities of educators working in the Solomon Islands' kindergartens. It identified and analysed possible changes to their professional behaviour and teaching practice as a result of the training. This paper has focused on some aspects of what teachers, administrators and the community, including parents, thought about the programme and it had affected educators' work with children and families. The research suggested that the field-based training programme has succeeded in respecting and adhering to local cultural beliefs and practices. It has modified them based on more contemporary values such as gender equity, and at the same time as improving the practice of Solomon Islands' teachers in early childhood centres.*

INTRODUCTION

Research on the developing countries has demonstrated that support of early development yields rich benefits not only in immediate ways for the child and its parents, but also over time in terms of the child's ability to contribute to the community (Evans, 1999, 2000; Evans & Myers, 1994; Myers, 1992, 1997; Torkington & Landers, 1999; Woodhead, 1996, 1999). It is suggested that applying intervention programmes in the early years of childhood offers an opportunity to help avoid or moderate learning problems, and to bring lasting benefits to the individual, families and society (Evans, 1999, 2000; Myers, 1997; Torkington & Landers, 1999). Support for young children includes established early childhood centres, devising intervention programmes and providing support for their primary care-giving contexts. Hence, for people of the countries that mainly rely on donor agencies for funding assistance, it is important that the essential elements that encourage, support and enhance

quality learning environments for young children are implemented with care and thoughtfulness.

Culture determines the nature of many elements of young children's development environments (Smale, 1998). It has been suggested, for example, that early childhood development involves a partnership between the cultural world of the family, and that of other representatives of society engaged in caring for children (Adamson, 1998; Bram, 1998; Smale, 1998). In the wider context, cultures have some unique values, beliefs, customs, traditions and lifestyles. In the developing nations (Bram, 1998; Smale, 1998) such characteristics influence the roles of new development initiatives in each culture and how designers of new projects, and local governments manage the implementation process. However, despite sociocultural variations and/or differences in cultures and social groups (Lamb, 1998; Rogoff, 1995; Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu & Mosier, 1993; Rosenthal, 1999, 2000; Woodhead, 1999), such understandings could help designers and educators assess current views about children. They should be as authentic and respectful as possible if they are to best serve the interests of children from multicultural backgrounds of the community and family contexts.

The concentration on training by the partnership initiative is significant, as training was thought to be the best way to develop and promote quality early childhood education throughout Solomon Islands. The over-riding principle of the field-based training programme was that training would enable kindergarten teachers to provide high quality programmes for young children that met the overall aims of education of Solomon Islands.

The Context to Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands has a population of about 430,000 people. The three main groups are Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian, with about 90 percent of the population living in the rural regions (US World Journal, 1994). The country has about 962 islands and atolls, with only about 350 islands being inhabited by people. The climate is tropical, though temperatures are rarely extreme due to cooling prevailing winds blowing off the surrounding seas.

Solomon Islanders by tradition, live in subsistence agriculture-based communities in small-scattered inland or coastal villages. The Solomon Islanders' way of life has evolved over many generations, creating social and cultural strengths that have held communities and society together. The social structure is diverse and complex, varying from island to island and even between villages and clans on the same islands with different customs, codes of behaviour, land tenure, leadership, traditional and contemporary religions, marriage customs and other cultural practices. There is great linguistic diversity,

with at least 87 different languages being spoken on the islands, all with different dialects. There is no vernacular language common to the people of Solomon Islands. English, the official language, is a medium of instruction in schools but Pidgin with a typical Melanesian syntax forms the most effective way to communicate with people of other islands. The cultural aspects remain a major part of everyday life for people in the rural communities, even though these are being minimised by the drift of young people to urban centres and other contemporary influences.

Education has been acknowledged by the Solomon Islands' Government to be a cornerstone of economic and social development for its people. However, in spite of the government's high priority on education, formal education is yet to be accessible to all Solomon Islanders, as it is neither universal nor compulsory in the national education system. This is due to a set of complex and interrelating economic, political, social, cultural, demographic and geographic factors affecting Solomon Islands. Many children are denied the opportunity to learn in the formal system. Statistics (Oxfam New Zealand Report, 2001) have shown that only 41 percent of children in Solomon Islands enrolled in primary education in 1999, and the national average literacy rate is 30 percent (Oxfam New Zealand Report, 2001). In most situations, girls are the most affected as parents are sometimes forced to make decisions about who is and who is not to attend school. Cultural norms make educational opportunities for girls a low priority. Some families, for example, seem to place a lower value on educating their daughters than on educating their sons for other reasons related to the family's social and marriage expectations.

The idea of developing a field-based training programme for teachers, resulting in the establishment of the partnership project, grew from the Solomon Islands' Government's aim to maximise good quality kindergarten programmes for young children within Solomon Islands. The New Zealand and Solomon Islands' early childhood training programme partnership was developed when the Solomon Islands' Government invited the New Zealand Government to commission a project design study to examine the training needs of early childhood teachers and to make recommendations on how these needs were to be met. As a result, two New Zealand consultants were appointed to undertake the project. They travelled to Solomon Islands to speak with representatives of the government, education, administrators, teachers, families and the communities; filed a report and then presented it to the Solomon Islands' Government. Noting that the majority of the kindergarten teachers had no professional qualifications, the report (Taylor & Foote, 1995) recommended the development of an early childhood field-based training programme to provide immediate support to - for example practising teachers in Solomon Islands. Then

followed an evaluation of the field-based training programme (Daiwo, 2001), and this paper reports on a section of the data.

METHOD

A qualitative formative evaluative methodology that included in-depth interviews was employed in the research study. Triangulation, the procedure for establishing validity in qualitative research, involves the use of data from several sources so that the research uses a constellation of evidence to substantiate conclusions (Maxwell, 1996; Holloway, 1997; Schwandt, 1997; Creswell, 1998). It is a means of checking the integrity of the inferences the researcher draws. In this study, kindergarten teachers, administrators and community people's perspectives and perceptions on the training programme provided triangulation of the data.

Participants in the study included 16 kindergarten teachers, 13 administrators and 35 members of the community. Data collection involved interviewing the sixteen educators, thirteen administrators and the thirty-five persons from the community.

FINDINGS

Teacher Perspectives on Training

Teachers were untrained or preparatory educators at the time of their kindergarten appointment and the majority of them were women. A minimal number of the teachers were trained as primary school teachers before they became kindergarten teachers.

Teachers placed a great emphasis on the importance of training for kindergarten educators. The training had encouraged practitioners to continue learning, to gain professional skills to help with their planning and facilitating of curriculum programmes and their administrative and management roles, and to think critically about their work with children. Kelly highlighted the importance of training for practising kindergarten teachers:

> The early childhood experience is crucial for children's development, so it is critical that teachers are trained. Also, early childhood education is new in Solomon Islands and it's important that teachers learn new knowledge to help them deal with children and how to manage their centre. Parents and the community now have a clearer understanding of why field-based training is important for teachers as we continue to help children under our care.

Rosa emphasised the importance of understanding child development theories:

> Kindergarten teachers should be trained because it is important for us to learn the different theories relating to children's learning. I think teachers should increase their knowledge of child development theories, and how children learn. My understanding of the theories has helped me with my work with children. Also we, teachers should learn the right skills that will help us to run our centres well and how to deal with families and the community. To have quality kindergarten education in my view involves having trained and resourced teachers teaching kindergarten children.

Jane discussed the significance of having administrative and management skills in the early childhood education setting:

> Teachers should also understand how to administer and manage their centres. For example, keeping and recording of books: log book, visitor's book and other documents. We should learn how to write children's running records, how to keep them, and how to record teachers, committees and parents' books.

The teachers' field-based training had impacted on them in significant ways and had enabled them to gain useful knowledge and professional skills that they were able to put into use in their kindergarten setting. Practitioners facilitated stimulating teaching and learning activities, and interacted successfully with children.

Professional Skills and Determination

The determination of teachers encouraged them to perform their professional work with ease, planning children's activities, and asking families and the community to assist with collecting teaching materials and resources. Sandie discussed why she took her kindergarten job seriously:

> As a kindergarten teacher, you should have a proper training before teaching young children. There is no "house girl business" in kindergarten because many parents think that teachers at kindergarten level are just baby sitters and that's not true at all. Teachers do a lot for children under their care in relation to children's learning. As an early childhood teacher, I should keep interacting with children and bring myself down to their level to really help them. I think that's real teaching for teachers at the early childhood education level.

Training provided teachers with an opportunity to advance their professional development and teaching experience. Jane, for example, explained how they were encouraged to recognise children's different learning abilities:

> In our field-based training, we were asked to think about how to interact with younger children, with individual children, and how to deal with the different levels children are at, in their learning and in their language development. Teachers should also learn relevant skills to help them plan an environment suitable for young children's learning.

The field-based training programme encouraged teachers to critically think about their work with children, and had equipped them with the necessary skills they needed to operate the activities of their centres.

> Doing field-based training was a useful thing for me. It has helped me learn the necessary skills I need to organise my classroom space to increase children's learning. I am able to plan activities for children carefully. We were training, learning and teaching at the same time. The trainers would come out to observe us at our centres and write reports on their observations. We would get helpful feedback where they would suggest certain things, question us and we would discuss with them areas to improve. That type of process has helped me to understand well what things I should be changing and what new things I should include in my planning of curriculum programmes. *(Laura)*

The teachers' training was critical to their job and faced it with determination.

Gaining in Confidence and Competence

The kindergarten teachers' training boosted their confidence to a professional level where they were able to carry out their job with competence, planning and facilitating children's activities. Sandie explained the responsibility that came with being a conscientious educator:

> As a kindergarten teacher I have a big responsibility to ensure I am giving children a lot of learning situations that will encourage them to think for themselves and will prepare them to think about their lifelong learning. Since finishing my field-based training, I have grown in confidence to run the centre. I am also in charge of the administrative work that the community expects me to do in addition to my teaching role. I have organised awareness workshops for families and the community.

The training had also helped change teachers' attitude. Ted, for example, explained the significance of being a role model in his job as a kindergarten teacher:

> As a kindergarten teacher, I have become a role model for children, for the centre and to parents. I should also be a role model in the way I deal with children, how I carry out practical work and in my behaviour and attitude. For example, I should be punctual to prepare the classroom before children arrive at kindergarten. Parents and the community expect teachers to be examples to children. I don't mind really, even though it's a big responsibility.

Teachers had moved from utilising teacher-centred methods to child-centred approaches in the early childhood setting. The child-centred approaches helped educators to focus on enhancing children's learning holistically.

> In my teaching, I always try to remind myself that children's learning should be based on their interests and abilities, and it is something that I try to put into practise in my daily planning of children's activities. I am clear too that learning activities for children besides other things should encourage children's development abilities, creativity, imagination, questioning, language or communication skills. *(Laura)*

Lilly raised the importance of interacting with children and integrating their learning areas and activities:

> The training programme has encouraged me to grow as a teacher. Children are freely interacting with teachers and their peers. They come in and share their community stories with our kindergarten community. I am more aware that interaction with young children is very important for their development. Also integration of all learning areas is just as important for teaching young children, because while they learn in one area, they are also learning something from another area.

The teachers' new experience had empowered them to perform their teaching, professional and management roles with confidence and competence.

Enhancing the Solomon Islands' Culture

The field-based training programme employed a culturally sensitive approach. Culture, for example, was included in the goals of the teachers' training programme.

> Another thing that makes this training programme very useful is that it stresses culture. It covers our culture in different places, different communities, tribes, and families inside our country. It is a programme that is culturally sensitive to the needs of Solomon Islands as a society. It's important that we do not lose our culture and should hold on to good things about it. So, the training programme has done a good thing for our children and people. *(Michelle)*

The delivery of teaching in centres was sensitive to the fact that there was a diverse group of children attending kindergarten. Faith explained the role practitioners were expected to play in enhancing children's cultural values:

> In Solomon Islands, we don't have the same cultural values. The training programme has catered for all children and teachers are encouraged to adapt aspects of other cultural values into our kindergarten programmes because of the mixed roll of children. We do our part by providing cultural learning experiences for children. In this way, children can learn about their culture in an organised way as well. Parents are also encouraged to expose their child to examples of our artifacts such as canoes, spears, bows and arrows, and even learn others' languages and songs.

Culture and cultural values were common elements in teachers' relationships with children, families and the community. Rosa believed that learning of other people's cultures was important:

> Those of us teachers who have completed our training have benefited from it by our increased confidence in doing what we are supposed to do for and with children to help them learn. We are discussing and sharing our cultural differences and the many cultural values with children. We try to include many activities to emphasise our language differences in Solomon Islands. As we have children from almost every part our country, it's important to learn about others' cultural values as well.

Molly was concerned with preserving the Solomon Islands' unique culture for future generations:

> To learn aspects of our culture is really good. It has helped us, teachers to enhance our own knowledge of our culture. It has also helped us to try to learn individual children's cultural values. It's important to do it to help the village elders who are doing their part in encouraging children to learn and pass on our culture and cultural values. It gives us pride and strength to remind ourselves that culture is our heritage as citizens of Solomon Islands. I believe people

> coming into our country from other countries do recognise how unique our culture is and so it should be maintained for future generations.

The field-based training programme was in tune with the Solomon Islands' culture.

Encouraging Gender-Inclusive Relationships and Equitable Opportunities

Gender is a major issue for teachers in Solomon Islands. There are vast cultural variations in the expectations of what boys and girls can do either individually or in mixed groups. Teachers encouraged gender-inclusive relationships among the children, and practised equal treatment of both genders by consistently performing the process.

> One of the strengths of the field-based training programme is that it encourages gender-inclusive activities. I try my best to encourage boys and girls to work side by side while doing class activities. It means boys and girls are free to be involved in any activity without being restricted in what they could do together. For example, boys and girls threading beads together using seeds and shells. The reverse process is also true for girls; they are doing activities such as making headbands that traditionally are done by boys only. Headbands are used as decorations in community ceremonies. *(Molly)*

Encouraging equitable opportunities for children in their centres became an ongoing pursuit for kindergarten educators. Tracy explained the importance of encouraging gender equity and inclusive education:

> Our centre activities encourage gender equity and inclusive education for all. We accept all children whether they are handicapped or not. We try to accommodate them within our existing early childhood setting. We talk about including all kinds of children, regardless of gender, ability, belief, ethnicity or physical appearances, and the trainers are aware and supportive of what we are doing. Once children are in, we try our best to build on and expand their strengths.

Gender was important in Solomon Islands because traditional beliefs and practices concerning girls and boys was still an issue, as Ted explained:

> Gender is a very important word in Solomon Islands because the country is among the societies in the world where traditional beliefs regarding the status of boys and girls is still an issue. This type of attitude tends to slow down progress for girls in many areas. In the area of education, for example, girls don't get as many opportunities as boys do. But women can offer a lot to society, and they should be

> encouraged to be partners with men in development. It's slowly happening in Solomon Islands, but we are really behind in promoting our girls. At kindergarten, teachers should encourage girls to be part of every activity happening to create a balance and a new way of thinking about gender.

Children were provided with learning activities that challenged gender stereotypes imposed by the local cultures within Solomon Islands.

Developing Family and Community Relationships and Support

A linkage between teachers, families and the wider community, and its contribution to the encouragement of good quality within the early childhood setting was seen as crucial. Lilly explained why she believed fostering a mutual relationship with families and the communities was important:

> We have built and are continuing to build a good relationship with families and members of the community, organising awareness talks for them. These sessions are important, as we try to gain the people's confidence. We are interacting with families more; our mutual relationship has improved, and the people are supportive and helpful. Our centre is progressing well, as teachers, parents and the community work together for the good of children. Everyone is happy and communication among us is open and respected.

Teaching sessions were organised for families and the communities to increase the people's understanding of the field-based training programme and its goals.

> Families have different expectations for their children and they are not happy if they think teachers are not doing enough for them. Parents would, for example, question why children are having free plat at kindergarten. Some parents are understanding and when you explain to them how young children should learn at kindergarten level, they would say, "oh yes, that's true." "You teachers should be the ones to lead us, parents for you know what you are doing." The training programme is like a movement in our country, and those of us who have trained understand it and its goals well. We are doing our part in educating the community about the usefulness of the programme. *(Ted)*

The partnership between teachers, and families and the people had grown steadily, with teachers ensuring that families and members of the community understood clearly what was happening in the centres.

> When I was placed to teach at our local kindergarten, the first thing I did was to run an awareness workshop for parents and people of the

> community. I regard it to be important because apart from teachers, families, the community and the kindergarten committee are the backbone of our kindergarten. Many parents have different views about kindergarten, but at the end of the first workshop, many families expressed that they were able to learn more about kindergarten education and the kind of activities that children were supposed to learn there. *(Sandie)*

Linkage between teachers and the community included the ease in which the training programme had encouraged families to provide support to teachers or the centres, as Laura explained:

> Our centre has worked really hard to establish a good working relationship with parents and the community. Parents, especially mothers would offer their time to help make teaching materials and other resources. People have also offered their help in other ways. Mothers would ask for guidance from teachers on how they could enhance their children's learning while they are at home. Families realise that it's their responsibility to encourage their children's learning at home, but sometimes they don't know where to start.

The relationship between teachers and families was built on mutual respect. Teachers relied on families and the communities for help and support when it came to carrying out maintenance work around the kindergarten setting.

Administrator Perspectives: Developing a Philosophy Sensitive to the Local Context

The thirteen administrators consisted of the national and provincial early childhood education coordinators; the primary education director, also responsible for early childhood education; the coordinator of the School of Education (a teacher training institution) early childhood education programme; and the New Zealand-based initiators and designers of the field-based training programme.

The field-based training programme promoted the development of an early childhood philosophy, sensitive to teachers' working goals, those of their centres, and children's learning interests. The philosophy supporting teachers' training was a reservoir equipping practitioners with necessary knowledge, professionalism and experience that educators could use as an overall guiding tool in their job.

> The philosophy has come up with something that meets the needs of Solomon Islanders. Those of us involved with the project right from the beginning would ask questions when we come across things that

> are different from our culture. We would ask, what of this, is it appropriate to us? So as Solomon Islanders, we wanted something for Solomon Islands and something that would work for our children and people. *(Arlene)*

One of the underlying aspects of the philosophy was its sensitivity to the Solomon Islands' culture.

> A loving relationship that's related to local culture, which was what we also wanted to recognise right from the start. As you are aware [nodding to the researcher] wherever you go to different parts of Solomon Islands, the culture differs, the music differs, the dances differ, the art differs. The interactions, the social structures differ, and the philosophy wanted to recognise that. It's to do with wanting to recognise the languages of the people, as Solomon Islands has a lot of languages. Education in the past had always had this philosophy that it must be done in English. This is done in English, it's done in Pidgin, and in the vernacular language, the Mother Tongue of the community that the kindergarten is in and all of these are accepted by the people. *(Simon)*

The goals of the training package served as a way to ensure that teachers doing their training were assured of being exposed to the agreed aspects of a Solomon Islands' influenced philosophy. Arlene explained what it meant to have a philosophy influenced by the social context:

> We have a vision, something that we believe in. Solomon Islands is a diverse society, so it is important to think about that aspect in our philosophy. We want to help our young children to think about their culture. We have to look at what we value; these values and beliefs become bases for what we want our training programme to help develop and encourage. For example, we would like to help our children to think like Solomon Islanders, to have self-confidence, have a solid identity, and to respect all people despite our differences. We would like them to be independent and deep thinkers, to be creative, imaginative, to resocialise and accept every person. Respect others, our culture and language and to help others.

Susan described other vital characteristics of the philosophy:

> Promoting and encouraging the use of local materials and resources, to cater for all children' learning, regardless of whether they are disabled or able children, or children of different cultures, religions or nationalities. Also, to promote partnership with parents and the community and provide children with the type of education that will

> help them discover their world and the environment in which they live.

Encouraging children to question and converse openly infront of adults was paramount in the early childhood philosophy. This was critical as Solomon Islands' young children are socialised to listen more and say less in the presence of their elders or adults who are highly regarded in society, including teachers. Arlene noted that teachers were succeeding and recalled what she saw when accompanying a visiting international early childhood education group to a kindergarten centre:

> Adults are talking to children all right, but seeing and hearing children talking back is something that's almost nil. But this one time, we went into a kindergarten classroom and the teacher was sitting on the floor with the children, talking about their kindy [kindergarten] rules or guidelines. The children were participating in the discussion and I said, "this is just so exciting, my dream has come true." Children are discussing things with their teacher. So I think it's also good for us, and the group to see that children are able to participate and are actually participating in classroom discussion.

The philosophy reflected the people's cultural values and sustained relevant guidelines that kindergarten practitioners could utilise in their early childhood setting.

The Partnership between Solomon Islands and New Zealand

One of the crucial aspects of the field-based training project was the initial decision to invite New Zealand to be a partner in it, an effective way to deal with such a cross-national project. New Zealand's involvement inspired Solomon Islanders, and was commended for its role and financial support. Bob, for example, explained the advantage of this partnership relationship over the commonly utilised counterpart approach:

> I am very happy with New Zealand for establishing a partnership approach as a basis to work with Solomon Islands and its people. I favour this partnership approach because it is different from the common way of establishing a counterpart working relationship. I feel there is little respect really in an arrangement like that. In this type of arrangement people are encouraged to participate and have a 'say' in the whole process right from the beginning and in my view this way is culturally sensitive.

The appointment of the two New Zealand officers was a positive step. The officers brought in specialist knowledge and skills needed to assist the national

and provincial coordinators with their responsibilities. Arlene commended the deep understanding and respect for the culture demonstrated by the officers:

> I am really pleased that the New Zealand Government appointed [names of the NZ officers] them as consultants because they are the right people for the job. What I mean is that they have a different style of working with us, not like other consultants. For example, at the beginning they were determined to establish a mutual and respectable working relationship with us. They do not come in and ask us to do it their way. They work with us and we work with them. They ask us what we think and how we feel about important issues to enable the process to progress. They ask lots of vital questions to make us think. They are mindful of our cultural values, our cultural heritage and differences. They are very understanding, friendly and caring. We work together and other times they act as our advisors. We work in harmony. Importantly, they are our friends.

Helen acknowledged the contribution of the New Zealand officers in the implementation of the field-based training programme within Solomon Islands:

> Through their [names of New Zealand consultants] hard work, help and belief in the project, the training programme has come a long way and it is succeeding. The officers' contribution has been excellent and outstanding. As hard working people, I believe that the officers' love and care for us, Solomon Islanders have somehow contributed to how fast and well the training programme has turned out and spread in the islands. Personally, I am very grateful for all the work they have done and for their support.

Solomon Islanders acknowledged the professionalism, humility and expertise showed by the New Zealand officers. Arlene further explained that the New Zealand consultants' style of working was critical as they believed in team work:

> I very much thank these experts and New Zealand for the work they have been doing for our country. I have worked with other consultants in the past, but I find these two officers quite unique in the way they have gone about how to work with us. They don't spoon feed us, they ask us questions and we answer them in our own way. They would sum up things their way, but would help us to think about how we would sum them up our way. At the training workshops, for example, they would give us guidelines and ask questions to help us think. They don't impose their views on teachers or on us, trainers, but they give us the space to think and then decide

> on what to do. As advisors, they would tell us what they think before we make final decisions on what is suitable for our Solomon Islands' situation.

The New Zealand officers' style and nature of work had worked well with Solomon Islanders.

The Value of Autonomy and Ownership

The decision mutually reached on getting Solomon Islanders involved in the planning of the partnership project was a positive step taken by New Zealand and Solomon Islands. Cultural differences were ascertained, and crucial questions asked, setting the basis for issues that were considered in the designing of the field-based training programme.

> We feel an ownership of the field-based training programme because we were involved with it right from the start. Our opinions were sought and what we thought was good for our children were incorporated in the writing of the training package. *(Bob)*

Bob added that the training programme had encouraged other important values, including community spirit:

> The training programme has also encouraged cooperation, trust, partnership, sharing, and listening to each other among the people. It has to some extent reinforced and enhanced community spirit and oneness. The programme has become a point of reference for people at the village level, that is all members of the community regardless of age, status or position, know they have something in common.

Susan explained that the ownership was further enhanced by the choice of a Solomon Islander carrying out the evaluative research of the field-based training programme:

> It is great that you are doing the research (addressing the researcher), a Solomon Islander, one of us. I think it is good that someone from the Solomon Islands is doing the reviewing of the field-based training programme.

As part of the partnership project, the trainers who ultimately increased in number took a 'look and learn' trip to New Zealand. Its purpose was for the trainers to see the concept of early childhood education in other contexts. Diana explained what the early childhood trainers gained from the New Zealand visit:

> The trainers went back to Solomon Islands with the notion of what early childhood education is like elsewhere, [in this case in a certain part of New Zealand]. The experience gave the trainers the

> knowledge, inspiration, encouragement and motivation to press on with the task they had been assigned to do with the help [of the New Zealand team]. The first group of trainers was also instrumental in the concept, practical and final development process of the field-based training programme in Solomon Islands.

New Zealand's support was positive and highly commended by Solomon Islanders.

Family and Community Participation, Support and Involvement

The 35 representatives of the community comprised other early childhood and preparatory teachers, and representatives of families, chiefs, church elders and leaders, village women and men, kindergarten chair persons and government workers.

There was a strong sense of community responsibility towards the field-based training programme and its development within Solomon Islands. Families and members of the community willingly offered their assistance and support to teachers and trainers, after attending awareness workshops on the training programme.

> In a way, people will understand and should find it easier to be supportive and offer their help with the running of the training programme. Without the support of the community, it can be hard to proceed with the training programme, and then it will affect teachers. But I am confident that once members of the community understand what's going on, people will be helpful because everyone has the same goal for their children, that's to attend education. *(Community 4 female representative 1)*

A male member added that the people were united in working with teachers to support the activities of the centre.

> We, parents are working together with teachers. Parents' support and help are a must if we are to expect our kindergarten to continue to improve for the sake of our children. Kindergarten is still at its baby stage and it's only now that it's showing improvement and success. The people of this community believe in unity, and are united in making sure our centre is performing well. People's support is very good as we work together to improve our kindergarten setting. *(Community 2 male representative 1)*

Community support included helping teachers to keep the physical surroundings of centres and the outdoor space clean and tidy and making equipment for

children. People often carried out such tasks under trying circumstances and difficult financial situations.

> Our community has monetary problems, but we have tried our best to build a permanent building to house our kindergarten, and to support our children's early education. When the early childhood project was introduced here, we had just finished building a house for the primary school. So, much of the community money has gone to the primary project. By the time the kindergarten project came along, we didn't have enough money to build the centre straight away. But being the builder, I decided to build it free of charge. We will continue to help because our children will be the people to take over the development of our community in the future. *(Community 2 male representative 2)*

Mothers offered their help and support to the centres. Mothers with significantly younger children were prepared to bring their children in and remained until the end of the kindergarten hours. Community leaders commended the assistance and support provided by women.

> The women have been good in helping our in kindergarten centres. It's the same everywhere you go in our province. For example, in a certain village, the women are responsible for managing their kindergarten within minimal support from their men. It's the situation in two other villages in this region. It's encouraging to see women showing leadership roles in trying to help teachers and the centres. Women are the backbone of the early childhood education sector and the field-based training project in Solomon Islands. *(Community 2 male representative 2)*

Fathers' support was specifically sought in the planning and organisation of buildings in which centres were housed. The involvement of men in the negotiating stage of the field-based training project was critical to how the programme was initially viewed by Solomon Islands as a patriarchal society.

Kindergarten Teachers' Training

Families and the community considered teachers' training as a necessary tool in their role as kindergarten teachers.

> Teachers should be trained because untrained teachers could find it hard to run a centre successfully. Kindergarten education is a special one and teachers should learn how to plan for such a programme, and how to handle young children. I have seen differences between trained and untrained teachers. Trained teachers are close to children

> and seem to understand well how to interact with children at their level. These teachers are also confident in working with young children even though they are young themselves. *(Community 2 male representative 3)*

Lifelong education was critical for children, a belief widely shared by Solomon Islanders.

> I know that education is to do with dealing with the whole being of a child. One pioneer educationalist in our country gave the meaning of education when he asked, "Education for what?" He answered the question by saying, "Education for Life." Some children here think that education is only for academic achievement, but that idea is not true. I think that education for life should be encouraged and done properly, beginning at the kindergarten level. We should train our teachers to help children to learn, and to prepare them for their own life as children and adults. Children should be reminded that education covers more than just academic matters. The idea should be stressed strongly in the overall Solomon Islands' education system. *(Community 2 male representative 5)*

The issue of untrained teachers was a concern for parents. Although the training programme was meeting the professional needs of some teachers, the number of teachers who had qualified through the programme was not sufficient to supply every centre in the country with qualified kindergarten teachers.

> At present we only have an untrained teacher looking after our centre. Sometimes I think children are not happy to attend kindergarten because they are bored. The kindergarten committee and the community are getting behind the teacher, as we would like her to be trained. Teachers should gain more experience from their training to help them teach our young children. *(Community 1 female representative 4)*

Kindergarten teachers had benefited from being directly involved in the early childhood education sector. Families saw practitioners as having an important responsibility in facilitating children's learning.

CONCLUSION

The field-based training programme was a success, and had benefited kindergarten teachers within Solomon Islands. The training programme was responsible for providing educators with an opportunity to train, to obtain their teaching qualification, to enhance their professional development and to gain

their teaching practice skills. The programme assisted practitioners to gain the knowledge and attitude to help them in their job, and to manage their kindergarten setting. The teachers' training experience had increased their confidence, competence and sensitivity to cope with the demands and challenges of teaching diverse young children within Solomon Islands. The training and professional experiences of the Solomon Islands' early childhood educators are consistent with what research (Epstein, Schweinhart & McAdoo, 1996; Moss, 1998; Phillips & Howes, 1987; Rhodes & Hennessy, 2000) on teacher training and professionalism for early childhood education teachers has shown. It maintains that the knowledge, skills and expertise teachers gain from their training enhance their sensitivity and confidence to plan quality programmes and organise the best kind of learning opportunities for children under their care.

A significant characteristic of the project was the powerful partnership formed between Solomon Islands and New Zealand. The partnership and the financial support from the New Zealand Government contributed to the successful implementation of the field-based training programme. The New Zealand officers appointed to assist Solomon Islanders in the project did their work with ease and diligence. Families and the communities were also part of the success of the training programme in Solomon Islands. The reciprocal relationships among teachers, parents and the community enabled practitioners to work more closely with families, developing networks of support within local communities. Children benefited from this relationship, as there was closer connection between kindergarten and home and an increased support and practical assistance for the roles and activities of teachers and the centres.

The incorporation of aspects of the Solomon Islands' culture within the training programme was critical in its success, enabling its relevance to children, and encouraging sensitivity and appreciation of other Solomon Islands' cultural traditions. While the training programme was respectful of cultural values, it also challenged some practices such as gender stereotyping, which were not particularly appropriate to the changing context of the Solomon Islands' life. The effect of encouraging young boys and girls to develop their potential and competence in many areas regardless of gender, is likely to strengthen the capacity of the community to solve the social, economic and political problems currently faced by Solomon Islands.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

The success of the field-based training programme and the positive partnership approach created and utilised by Solomon Islands and New Zealand has implications for foreign governments and organisations as aid donors to

developing countries such as Solomon Islands. The feeling of inclusion experienced by Solomon Islanders at the initial phase of the project developed a sense of ownership of the programme in Solomon Islanders. In such development projects, it is crucial that potential aid donors consider incorporating the indigenous people's perspectives in the original planning and in the decisions regarding the goals and features of the potential overall aid package. The partnership approach had worked to benefit kindergarten teachers, children, families, the communities and the wider Solomon Islands' society. As in this Solomon Islands and New Zealand project, such an arrangement can make a definite difference to the people's initial reaction and acceptance, and the degree of assistance and support they are prepared to offer towards the project. Once the trust, interest and enthusiasm of the people have been gained, the internal processes are likely to proceed despite financial, transportation, geographic and/or political challenges. The field-based training programme with its organisational tenacity has significant implications of other development projects intending to provide financial support and human resources to the governments and people of the developing countries.

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