

Research with children in Oceania: Getting the methodology right

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Abstract

This paper offers an approach by researchers based in Aotearoa New Zealand, who are engaging as Pālangi and New Zealand Pacific educationalists with the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative by Pacific Peoples for Pacific Peoples (RPEIPP). Children and their school communities are essential stakeholders in teaching and teacher education research in Oceania, and we discuss a study carried out with 55 primary schools from three countries: Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Kiribati. This project aimed to find a range of views on schooling from key stakeholders in order to inform future policy, planning, and practice in education. We describe the approach we took in the design of appropriate methodology used to collect high quality quantitative and qualitative data from a range of participants: Year 1-3 and Year 4-6 children in the schools, out-of-school children, parents and community members, and other key local and national stakeholders. From this experience we offer a number of areas of decision-making to be considered when designing tools and processes to be used by multi-country teams researching with children in Oceania schools, so that the results can best inform the theory and practice of transformative teacher education. Each of these points is illustrated with small vignettes from our research implementation.

Introduction

This study was a commissioned research project which aimed to measure six “pillars” of quality schooling, which had been developed through extensive consultation before the current project began:

1. Inclusiveness
2. Effective teaching and learning
3. Health, safety, and protection
4. Gender responsiveness
5. School-community partnerships
6. Effective leadership

These provided the theoretical framework for the study, around which the methodology would be developed. This is a different situation from research contexts in which the theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches are both developed by researchers, such as in postgraduate research projects. Other requirements in the contract for this project included the locations of the study, and the necessity for a focus on children's perspectives. Some of these aspects were addressed in the tendering process for the project, while others were developed once the contract had been assigned.

In the context of the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative by Pacific Peoples for Pacific Peoples (RPEIPP), it was necessary to address our role as a small Pālangi-owned research organisation based in Aotearoa New Zealand. The challenges around cross-cultural research with indigenous people globally have been considered by Hall (2014, p. 377), in the context of her research in Australia:

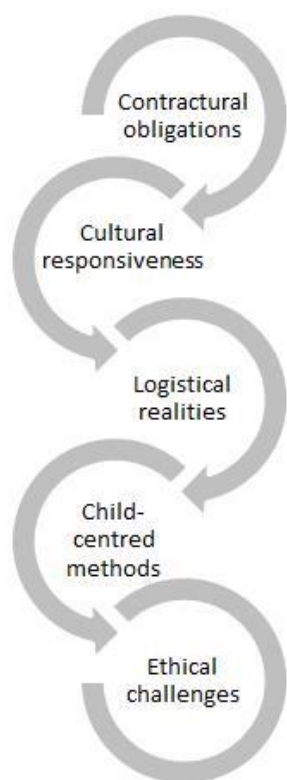
Fortunately we are now living in an era where many Indigenous researchers and academics are speak-

ing back to the Academy and not only naming the impact and damage of past research practices, but also claiming their right to rethink the underpinnings of the research process through an Indigenous lens. This is leading to emerging research paradigms that have at their heart Indigenous ways of knowing, worldviews, values, ethics and methodologies. These paradigms offer researchers and research participants working in a cross-cultural space valuable opportunities to explore how they could do research differently especially around questions of ethics, research design, methodology and dissemination.

Although Hall is referring to the international research context rather than the RPEIPP, her statements reflect the current situation for research in Pacific education as articulated by Pacific leaders such as Taufe'ulungaki (2003) and Helu Thaman (2014).

Figure 1 shows the main areas of decision-making in the methodological design of the project: contractual obligations, cultural responsiveness, logistical realities, child-centred methods, and ethical challenges. Although they are presented in discrete parts here, in practice they interacted with one another in different ways at the various stages of the project. Each of these areas will now be discussed in turn, interwoven with vignettes which illustrate some of the operational challenges we faced in meeting them.

Figure 1. *Areas of decision-making*



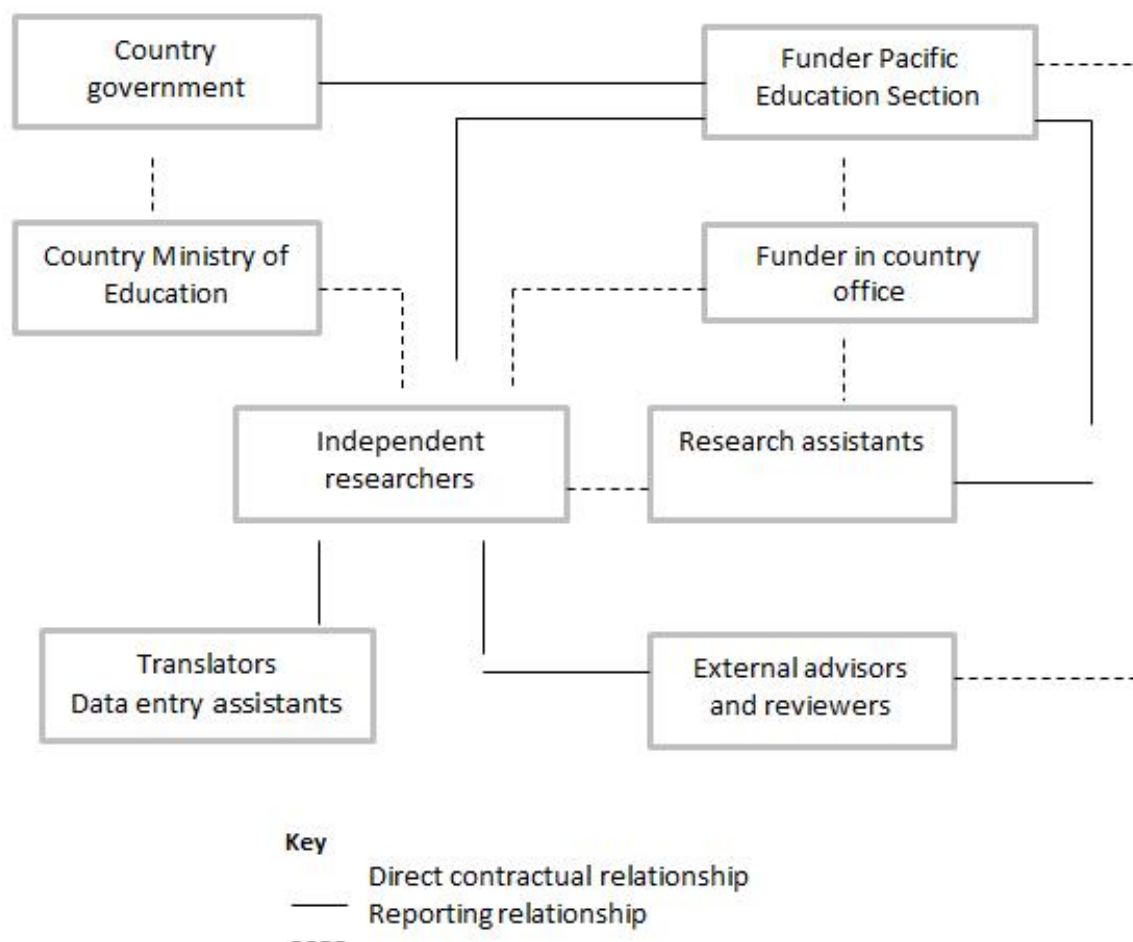
Contractual obligations

The research team of six people has travelled to the main town in an outer province of Vanuatu, and is visiting the provincial education office to authorise and set up the research, as has been required and organised by the funding organisation under the terms of its relationship with the local education ministry. Unfortunately the designated person is ill, and we wait for several days until the meeting can proceed.

Since the research was carried out through a contract with a funding organisation who is also a large donor in the Pacific region, we were representatives of that organisation and needed to operate within its systems and requirements, as well as its relationship with local stakeholders. This was in addition to our own relationships

with them as researchers. Figure 2 shows the formal structure of the relationships, with both the contractual and reporting relationships.

Figure 2. Formal research structure



During the official welcome by the chiefs in a remote area of Solomon Islands, the research team is informed that the village is preparing an evening programme and the team should make presentations to the assembled villagers. The provincial government representative who is accompanying the group leads with an official talk about education, and is followed by members of the research team responding with personal responses about their childhood and approaches to the education of children.

As visits by outsiders to remote areas appeared to be rare, the boundaries between research and official visits tended to become blurred. However, this seemed to be generally regarded by the school communities we visited as a positive aspect, and the participants often regarded the research visits as an opportunity for dialogue on issues of education for their children.

Cultural responsiveness

When we arrive at an atoll in Kiribati we need to drive to the end of the island to pay tribute to the island spirit goddess, at her shrine. We are told that the usual tribute consists of cigarettes, but as representatives of an organisation which also has a health mandate we feel this is inappropriate. We negotiate an alternative offering of chocolate drink and tea, which is placed in the shrine by the lead male researcher in the team.

The composition of our research teams was important in ensuring that the methodology was appropriate for the multiple Pacific environments we would be working in. The two main aspects we considered were gender balance and ethnicity; there was a gender balance in all country teams. The need for Pacific people to be involved at all levels of research for the Pacific is an aim of RPPEIP and has been clearly articulated by Pacific educational leaders such as Taufe'ulungaki (2003, p. 35). The lead researchers are Pālangi, one of whom has lived in Tonga and Papua New Guinea, and both of whom have worked extensively in Oceania. Our associate researcher is a Sāmoan New Zealander who has also lived and worked in Solomon Islands; he has a chiefly title and brought considerable manna to the project. We have been engaging with the ideas of the RPEIPP for some time (see Smith and Pakau, 2005).

A teacher's accommodation in Vanuatu has been affected by volcanic ash and is not waterproof. We can see that the rain is ruining the few belongings she has. When we leave she presents us with woven mats which we suspect she can ill afford. Although in some contexts accepting gifts as researchers is unethical, we feel we need to acknowledge her generosity and accept her gift.

In each country local research assistants were recruited by the funding organisation in consultation with us. This brought the local knowledge which we relied on to advise us on protocols such as offerings and gifts, although we were all mindful of the myriad different local customs. For each school we visited, the project budget included costs for a shared meal, and we took gifts of laminated maps in recognition of the importance of reciprocity with research participants (albeit largely symbolic and asymmetrical).

In a village in Vanuatu one of the women in our research team is told by the men that the village meeting ground is a sacred area. It is beside the road and she is warned that no women must look at the men as we drive past when leaving the school, otherwise we will be attacked. We follow the instructions and leave safely.

We approached each school community through the local education administration office, but at times it was appropriate to contact the village chief before any other community or school leaders. We invited church, and other community leaders to our meetings and to take part as appropriate. Our local researchers were in pairs of one male and one female, which allowed us to ensure that men and women were interviewed separately by respective men and women researchers wherever possible, reflecting the importance of gender roles in many of the communities we visited.

Logistical realities

One of the Kiribati schools is only accessible by boat across a shallow lagoon. Our local research counterparts order a boat to be sent over at high tide, and we will meet it early in the morning. We walk out for 30 minutes until the water is deep enough for the boat to float with us on board. The crossing takes a couple of hours until the water is again too shallow, and we wade another 20 minutes to shore. After interviewing the children, their teachers, parents and community leaders, we repeat the process to get back to the main part of the atoll in the evening.

For this project we carried out visits to 55 primary schools in six different locations. In Vanuatu, we visited a sample of schools in Tanna (10), Sanma (10), and Penama (10); in the Solomon Islands, we visited a sample of Isabel schools (10); and in Kiribati, we visited all schools in Abemama (4) and South Tarawa (11). In total, we sampled 3,600 children in schools, as well as principals and teachers, community members, out-of-school children, and other stakeholders. The decision to use a sample survey was so that we could explore the situations in as wide a variety of different schools as possible. This would add considerable extra cost and time to the project, but we were aware that previous research projects have tended to focus only on schools within a one-day travel radius from airports, and this meant that the results might not accurately reflect the situations for the many schools in isolated regions of Oceania. By using a random sample survey of schools (or inclusion of all schools in smaller locations), we could ensure that our results would be generalisable to all children in the regions studied.

In the Solomon Islands the access to the schools in our sample is by motor boat in a two-week trip around the perimeter of the island. When some researchers return to the capital town of Honiara, we see on the television news that there has been an earthquake in New Zealand with considerable loss of life. We do not know if the other New Zealander in the research team has friends or family in the quake-affected city, and have no way of contacting him until he reaches an area of cellphone coverage again in a week's time.

The logistics of our research locations meant that the researchers had to commit to travel away from contact. We were hosted in villages and carried our own mosquito nets and solar chargers for the cameras which were used to collect observational data. In the event all villages hosted us generously with one or two hours of electricity, and comfortable accommodation with mosquito nets (although one of the team became seriously ill with malaria on return to New Zealand).

Child-centred methods

Many children in Solomon Islands draw pictures of “paddling”, both as something they like and something they dislike about their school. This reflects the situation for many children in the coastal regions of Solomon Islands who travel to school in canoes, which might be motorised or hand-paddled. They travel either in pairs or groups of children, or with adults, along the open sea, through mangrove swamps, or along rivers.

As it was important to ensure that our research included the perspectives of children, we were keen to ensure that our methods were child-centred, and would be meaningful for children whether they were living in isolated coastal areas of the Solomon Islands, volcanic plains of Vanuatu, or crowded urban atolls in Kiribati. A major complication was that we were working in one of the most linguistically complex areas of the world, and so we needed to minimise any reliance on the interpretation of verbal reports. The initial meetings of the research team with funding representatives focused on the development of tools which would be appropriate for the developmental stages of children. The issues in choice of the best tools in child-centred research have been discussed by a number of researchers (e.g. Adams, 2000; Barker and Weller, 2003; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). We used a “draw and write” method of graphic elicitation for the Year 1-3 children (Merriman and Guerin, 2006), and a two-page questionnaire for the Year 4-6 group (Bell, 2007). These tools and the findings have been outlined elsewhere (Smith, Haslett, and Lulu-Karae, 2012).

We notice that quite a few of the children in one province of Vanuatu are drawing beautiful butterflies as something they do not like at school. They can not explain this adequately to us, and we are mystified until one of the researchers notices a display of the life cycle of a caterpillar. It becomes clear that the children, who help the adults in their home and school plantation gardens, regard butterflies as a pest. This is seemingly too obvious to the children for them to explain.

We were particularly impressed with the thoughtfulness shown by children of all ages, as we had not known whether they would find the tasks meaningful, and were mindful of previous research findings that children in the Pacific are not usually involved in decision-making (McMurray, 2006, p. 11).

Ethical challenges

It becomes clear in one school that a few children in Year 4-6 are struggling to understand the questionnaire as it is read aloud in Bislama, the lingua franca of Vanuatu. We do not have any teachers in the room while the children are answering the questionnaire (and it is possible that they might not speak the language of all of the children), so we make the decision to ask one of the other children to translate the 43 questions one by one for their classmates, so that all children can participate.

Ethical issues were considered throughout the development of the methodology of the project. Formal ethics

protocols were developed and signed by the research assistants and data entry assistants. Since it is difficult for children in a primary school situation to refrain from taking part in a classroom activity, issues of informed consent were addressed through the design of the tools, by allowing children complete freedom to choose what they drew (Year 1-3), and including a middle choice as well as non-response or “opt-out” choice in the questionnaire (Year 4-6). Although children were randomly assigned to the research group, any children who decided not to join in were not put under any pressure to take part. Asking students to translate for each other might have been considered to be putting undue pressure on those children, but we took that decision in the interests of enabling participation.

Although it is not legally sanctioned, a teacher explains to us that the children in this province of Vanuatu are “hard-headed” and need to be beaten in order to learn. The children’s drawings include several instances of teachers beating the children with sticks, with children crying as a result. We decide to address this finding through the research reporting process, as it appears to be a wide-spread issue reflecting a need for better student management through teacher development.

The need for re-thinking ethics in Pacific research to allow for the complexities of local ethical systems has been identified by leaders such as Sanga (2014). In our project we were able to develop formal ethical guidelines and protocols with the input from Pacific experts at the start of the project, but then had to be sensitive to issues as they arose in the field through discussion among the research team. This further highlighted the need for diversity among the research team, and although our responses were not always comfortable, we were able to arrive at mutually agreed outcomes.

Conclusions

Given the resources needed to carry out large-scale research projects in Oceania, it is essential to ensure that the projects provide value for money through the collection of high quality data. Such research is fundamental for the development of new theory, which in turn forms the basis of new and innovative approaches to teaching, learning, and teacher education.

We do not claim that through our approach we were successful in achieving the best methodology for a Pacific educational research project, but we hope that this sharing some of the decision-making processes we carried out as a cross-cultural Pālangi and Pacific team of researchers will be useful for the development of future methodologies for the complex research environment in Oceania.

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