

BOOK REVIEW:

Relational learning in Oceania: Contextualizing education for development

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BOOK REVIEW: S. Johansson-Fua, R. Jesson, R. Spratt, and E. Coxon. (Eds.). (2020). *Relationality and learning in Oceania: Contextualizing education for development*. Leiden: Brill Sense. ISBN 978-90-04-42529-3 (paperback). 172pp.

Relationality and learning in Oceania, edited by Seu'ula Johansson-Fua, Rebecca Jesson, Rebecca Spratt, and Eve Coxon is a welcome addition to the fund of knowledge about how relationships and learning exist in a central but complex dialogue. A central theme is the value of thinking through relationality, the state of being related, as a focus on people-centric thought and action. The book describes aspects of two interventions in the Oceania region in the context of development aid. Geographically, Oceania is roughly bounded by the shores of the Pacific Ocean. However, the region can also be thought of as a complex web of relationships between various people, their travels and their environments. This more dynamic definition of Oceania is honoured in this volume.

Divided into three sections, the book offers important insights into what education in context means, and the value of thinking about development education through relationality. The offerings, which focus on literacy interventions in Tonga and Solomon Islands, come from a wide range of well-qualified practitioner-contributors. The core value of the volume is as a timely counter-narrative to managerial views of education, development, and education for development.

After Eve Coxon's appropriately concise introductory chapter, the first section kicks off with scene setting by Eve Coxon, Jack Maebuta, and Seu'ula Johansson-Fua in Temotu, Solomon Islands, and Tonga. Their sketch encompasses demographics, history, and a profile of the two interventions: Temotu Literacy Support programme, and the Literacy and Leadership Initiative executed in Tonga. Attention to context provides readers with a sense of place helpful for unpacking later detailed accounts.

The relational foundation of the book is then framed in Seu'ula Johansson-Fua's chapter, an unpacking of *motutapu*, whereby an island is understood as a sacred, safe space for dialogue. In this context, the *motutapu* is a relational space for interactions between researchers and practitioners from small Pacific Island states and New Zealand, a far cry from contractual and bidding arrangements that generally configure donor aid relationships. The key messages are the importance of contextual means to promote solutions, and the significance of learning that acknowledges the strengths of community as experts in their own worlds. Design-based research (DBR), as described by Rebecca Jesson and Stuart McNaughton, is the concluding focus of the first section,

an account of value to those interested in sustainability in development education. DBR involves relationship-focused research-practice partnerships through which persistent problems are addressed in ways that produce learning for all.

Section Two opens with Rebecca Jesson's DBR-guided additive approach to literacy. This includes attention to cultural functions and uses of literacy. She describes how warm relationships allow researchers to weave ideas about literacy into existing understandings, "nudging" all those involved to re-examine their ideas. Robert Early's case study of literacy in Temotu province puts more flesh on theory. He shows how vernacular literacy can be incorporated into previously English-focused classrooms. The payoffs are that children learn to speak, read, *and* write in their own language, and new kinds of collaboration between school and village communities developed. The contribution of 'Ana Heti Veikune, Jacinta Oldehaver, Seu'ula Johansson-Fua, and Rebecca Jesson illustrates how Tongan practices such as *lālanga* or weaving can inform education and provide a frame for local understandings including *ako* (reciprocal teaching/learning) to come together in the service of education. All in all, this section provides synergies of theory and practice, and deeply rooted examples of contextualization. By way of conclusion, Rebecca Spratt and Ritesh Shah remind us of the commonly encountered tension between assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning, and the way assessment acts to exercise power from afar at the expense local ideas of education in Oceania.

The third and final section begins with Irene Paulsen and Rebecca Spratt's proposition that if the approach to intervention through DBR is adaptive, pre-set rigid evaluative frameworks make little sense. They show how locally framed negotiated approaches such as *tok stori* (a Melanesian oracy), when leveraged as both intervention and evaluation, are more likely to produce deep descriptions and positive change. This is a consideration useful to those who navigate the straits between communities and donor agencies on an ongoing basis. Rebecca Spratt's closing chapter brings us back to the intersections between relationality and aid as a question for the future, focused on effectiveness and what that might entail.

What this book does well is to keep the common theme of relationality close to the surface of the varied chapters. Thinking about who we are to each other as people, and the ways flows of power can be shaped through deliberately re-configured relationships is a worthy focus; it has ontological relevance for many peoples of Oceania and matters in a world where the "glocal" discourse is growing. Unevenness between the chapters is the product of the approaches taken by various authors, who are associated with the University of Auckland, The Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific, and Solomon Islands National University. A spin-off of this diversity is the potential to interest a wide range of readers, policy makers, development professionals, and researchers. If space had allowed, I suspect the editors would have included more local stories of relational encounters in the field. After all, *he aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata. He tangata. He tangata* [What is the most important thing in the world? It is people. It is people. It is people].

Book-ended by blessings from Kabini Sanga and Konai Helu-Thaman, *Relationality and learning in Oceania* offers much pause for thought regarding established agendas and thought pathways about how relationships and learning are understood in the specific context of literacy intervention and development aid. However, its lessons

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extend beyond that into re-imagining how we might live well together as caring people as we seek the common good through education in Oceania and beyond.



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