

Pulling Together

PCVs helped reform Tonga literacy education

BY PAUL JURMO



► Kelli Fierro used music and drawings on cards to work with a small group of students on Vava'u island.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, small, remote Peace Corps posts in the Pacific like Tonga were threatened with closure. Peace Corps sent no trainees to Tonga in 2011, only 15 in 2012. But based on an evaluation at Peace Corps headquarters and a request of by Tonga's Ministry of Education, Peace Corps decided to continue the Tonga post for at least five more years. To enhance efficiency, the post established a single project with an ambitious goal: help modernize how Tongan primary and middle school children build their English literacy.

Volunteers would help Tonga's teachers use modern, student-centered practices and

strengthen family and community support for basic education. Primary school students needed English for success in secondary and post-secondary education and in civic and family roles where English was required, and as workers in Tonga and countries to which they might migrate.

Our project came to be guided by the spirit of the traditional Tongan saying *Takanga 'etau fohe*, Our Oars, Together. This collective mindset reflects how the early seafarers who founded the nation depended on one another for safe passage across long stretches of open Pacific waters and then for survival in near-isolation for thousands of years.

In September 2012, 15 trainees began a

two-year tour. New training groups arrived each of the next four years to build on their predecessors' contributions. With schools, communities, and governmental and non-governmental organizations, Peace Corps staff provided an integrated support system of site preparation, training, and safety, medical, and administrative resources to help the Volunteers perform their jobs as English literacy facilitators.

For five years, Volunteers worked with

each other and with partners to develop literacy teaching and assessment materials and activities designed to ensure success for all students, including those with special needs. With local partners, Volunteer groups also created a multi-village after-school basketball program, a girls' hiking club, a school water tank upgrade project, and leadership camps for teen girls and boys. Volunteers adapted collaborative strategies in their villages to establish women's walking groups and a community waste-management system. To support each other in this work, Volunteers worked collectively to establish an advisory council and a committee to help Volunteers

respond to challenges of gender and racial diversity on the archipelago.

The results of the Volunteers' literacy work were embraced by their Tongan counterparts. PCV Carrie Lee Pugh says, "The teachers preferred using our tools because they were simple and used topics the teachers understood and could talk about."

Given these positive results, Peace Corps decided to continue the Tonga literacy project. It is now in its seventh year with 55 Volunteers, all serving as English literacy facilitators.

CLASSROOM PIONEERS

The innovative and professional work of

the Volunteers was a key ingredient in the project's success. They relied heavily on the technical strengths in basic education and the cultural navigation strategies they brought with them. The Volunteers showed respect for others and for themselves, responsibility, resourcefulness and resilience, and reflective and realistic reasoning. They also had a supply of humility and humor, and a good deal of creativity, communication, collaboration, and courage

In the first two years, 30 Volunteers used these strengths to explore what for them and the post was uncharted territory. In addition to learning how to stay safe and healthy on a cluster of islands, the Volunteers had to figure out the particular English skills they and their counterparts should be teaching and what student-centered methods would work in Tongan schools.

Only a few of the trainees had teaching experience. Most were generalists before they arrived. They had to learn how to respond to the Tongan realities of low student English skills, schoolteachers unfamiliar with student-centered methods, unrealistic or unclear expectations of principals and their ministry's curriculum, and communities where oral and written English was uncommon.

Through trial and error in their schools and communication with fellow Volunteers and Tongan counterparts, they began creating practical resources they and co-workers could use. Peace Corps staff asked the more-experienced Volunteers (whom we affectionately called "super-stars") to share their insights in training sessions, and officials of the Tonga Ministry of Education invited them to run workshops for teachers and principals.

SHIFTING TO PROJECT TEAMS

By the second year, we realized Tongan schools



► **Top:** Red uniformed students wait to enter the Vaini school library, a former storage room turned into a model library by Emily Merchant and Jason Connors. **Above:** Corinne Schillerstrom, right, greeted three new Volunteers arriving on the Eua Sea Transportation ferry to create the Eua Girls Outdoor Club. From the left, Samantha Bailo, Bailey Bollinger, and Samantha Lucci.

had few reading materials suitable to students' language and cultural backgrounds. School libraries were under-equipped, not well used, or non-existent. Peace Corps Volunteers and Tongan teachers lacked relevant, easy-to-use student-centered teaching activities. With support from Peace Corps staff, Volunteers took a major step in a new direction. They created a Library Committee with subcommittees to develop the needed resources.

Trained teachers Emily Merchant and Kelsey Smith, with Jason Connors who had

a background in theatre and working with individuals with special needs, met with staff to identify themes for more-relevant reading materials. They formed a Sight Word Book (SWB) Subcommittee which decided to produce a series of easy-to-read books that could be used for instruction and could be easily reproduced. The books would contain simple words, phrases, and sentences organized around illustrated themes such as "at the beach," "healthy foods," "animals," "school" that were familiar — and inviting — to Tongan children.

Kelsey Smith and another trained teacher, Megan Smith, developed a model of guided-reading lesson plans for the books. Other Volunteers contributed sample plans and Volunteers trained each other in how to use them and train Tongan counterparts in their use.

Volunteers with an art background illustrated the books. Renee Fern and others contributed line drawings of village life. Samantha Bailo and Abraham Castillo-Ruiz provided photographs. They recruited Tongan writers and artists to join the team.

Gurkeert Bagri figured out how to format the books for printing. Kelsey Smith, Kayla Callicutt, and Atkins Trout wrote funding proposals to cover printing costs and stipends for local artists.

Trout, who was trained to teach English as a Foreign Language and extended for a third year with other members of this pioneering group, says, "By the time I left Tonga (in November 2018), more than 60 separate SWBs had been produced. They covered themes as simple as 'big vs. small' to complicated titles related to environmental protection."

A Library Development Subcommittee researched existing local libraries, developed a system of ranking books by levels of difficulty and guidelines for effective school

library operation, and trained Volunteers and Tongan counterparts to adapt those guidelines in their schools. Subcommittee member Carrie Lee Pugh drew on her experience working in the library at Salem College in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

BEYOND GOOGLE

Trained teacher Abby Kloberdanz and generalist Ryan Kloberdanz, who were approaching the close of their service in their small, remote school in Tu'anuku on the island of Vava'u, developed a way to store and share teaching plans and materials they and other Volunteers had found useful. They collected, organized, and posted the resources to a Google online file-sharing system.

Their efforts led to the creation of the Information and Technology Subcommittee that developed a system of flash-drives Volunteers shared with counterparts. Volunteers also contributed materials to Arizona State University's SolarSPELL digital library that provided teaching resources to Volunteers

and counterparts working in Internet-limited schools.

Abrham Castillo-Ruiz and his Book Distribution Subcommittee gathered books donated by foreign organizations through the Rotary Club of Nuku'alofa, the capital city, sorted and distributed them to PCVs and other schools, and created book-selection guidelines for donors.

The Volunteers were assured that their pioneering work would be sustained long after they left Tonga because our staff and Volunteers built partnerships with the University of the South Pacific, Tupou Tertiary Institute, Tailulu College, and the Education Ministry's curriculum, teacher training, and inclusive education units. The Library Committee's work was gradually taken under the wing of the respected Tupou Tertiary Institute, whose leadership in school/community library work had inspired the Volunteers.

WHEN THE PIONEERS LEFT

The groundwork by these English literacy

facilitators resulted in increased use of books and libraries at their schools and higher reading skills among their students. In one example, Volunteer Gurkeert Bagri had helped to develop an attractive library equipped with an outstanding book collection and literacy-software-equipped laptops. These resources were well used by teachers and students. Bagri reports: "The Class 6 students achieved the highest test scores across the country at the end of my service. I know that the library and computer resources played a large factor in getting those results."

Thoughtful, creative Volunteers collaborated with their forward-thinking Tongan educational partners to build a successful literacy reform initiative. It has benefited our host country Tonga and our own nation as these Volunteers come home with valuable skills in education and inter-cultural navigation. ●

Dr. Paul Jurmo was program and training director for Peace Corps/Tonga from 2012 to 2017. His career in basic education for development began as a Volunteer in a national farmer literacy project in The Gambia from 1976 to 1979.



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