

Place-Based Picture Books as an Adult Learning Tool

Supporting Agricultural Learning in Papua New Guinea

Kym Simoncini, PhD¹, Barbara Pamphilon, PhD¹, and Katja Mikhailovich, PhD¹

Abstract: This article describes the rationale, development, and outcomes of two place-based, dual-language picture books with agricultural messages for women farmers and their families in Papua New Guinea. The purpose of the books was to disseminate better agricultural and livelihood practices to women farmers with low literacy. The books were designed and illustrated in collaboration with women farmers from two provinces. Evaluation data were collected through focus groups with local peer educators (village community educators [VCEs]). The VCEs reported changes in family practices related to marketing, budgeting, and saving that reflected messages in the books. The books helped the VCEs who had received livelihood and agricultural training to recall and implement the training in addition to sharing their knowledge. Farmers with low literacy were able to access the messages through the illustrations. Such place-based picture books are a powerful medium for low literacy women farmers and their families to learn about and reinforce positive livelihood and agricultural practices.

Keywords: agricultural learning, farmer learning, picture books, place-based learning, low literacy women farmers

For hundreds of years, women farmers in Papua New Guinea (PNG) spent their days working to produce food to feed their families. With colonization and the introduction of commodity crops such as coffee, cocoa, coconut, and oil palm, men engaged in the commercial opportunities and women labored to feed the family. However, today, it is essential that women subsistence farmers are supported to engage in the cash economy, especially as the majority of income generated by women is used for the benefit of the family (Garap, 2004; The World Bank, 2001). It is only in the last decade that agricultural learning in PNG has focused on training and development that

addresses the particular needs of women farmers.

This was the launching point for a 4-year project that, through a range of participatory learning processes, developed the business acumen of women

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DOI:10.1177/1045159516668815. From ¹University of Canberra. Address correspondence to: Kym Simoncini, Australian Institute of Sustainable Communities, University of Canberra, Bruce ACT 2617, Australia; email: Kym.simoncini@canberra.edu.au.

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subsistence farmers in PNG. This article describes the development of place-based, culturally relevant picture books that featured a number of the key business and agricultural messages from the project. Two findings from the baseline study informed this innovation: (a) Many women aspired to be able to read and write and (b) an even larger number wanted to support their children's education. We hoped that simple place-based books would help mothers interact with their children and with the books as well as recall and learn good practices in marketing, budgeting, and saving.

PNG is the largest of the Pacific island nations and has an estimated population of seven million. It is one of the most rugged and bio diverse countries in the world with vast natural resources. The population is dispersed widely across the country with approximately 87% of the population living in villages or rural communities (Department of National Planning and Monitoring, 2010). The majority of these people are subsistence farmers without access to basic services of health, education, clean drinking water, and adequate sanitation. There are more than 860 local languages, accounting for 14% of the world's languages (Papua New Guinea National Commission for UNESCO, 2008). Tok Pisin, Motu, and English are the official languages; however, less than 2% of the population is fully literate in English (Rena, 2011).

PNG has recently moved to free primary education, but girls are expected to work on farm plots and/or help with housework rather than attend school. The latest available figures show literacy rates at 56%, with female literacy rates significantly lower than males (Department of Education, 2011). However, in studies that do not rely on self-reports as the census does, literacy rates of women are reported as much lower, as low as 12.9% in Chimbu province and 2.5% in Gulf province (Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education Project, 2012).

The Rationale for Picture Books for Farming Families

Four theoretical perspectives informed the rationale for the development of picture books to support the learning of farming families.

Arts-Based Ways of Learning

In PNG, oral and arts-based traditions are embedded in daily life. Thus, the Tok Pisin language has a specific

word "Tok Bokis" for a story told for its deeper meaning, or as a parable (Bartell, 2016). Storying is an essential form of narrative thinking, which Bruner (1985/2006) has argued contrasts to the other basic mode of thinking such as the paradigmatic logical-scientific. The narrative mode draws on the human process of meaning making through storying. This makes visible the dialectic interplay between a culturally and place-based story, the teller, and the reader.

Images communicate knowledge, meaning, experiences, and ideas in ways that cannot be done by using written or spoken words alone (Pink, 2007). Callow (2012) argues that pictures can have an immediate emotional effect on the viewer and can evoke a whole range of responses and information. Furthermore, memory systems favor visual storage (Dowse, 2004).

Carney and Levin's (2002) review of the literature on the role of pictures in text concluded that well-constructed pictures reliably improve the reading-to-learn process. However, for learners with low literacy or no literacy, pictures may actually be more important than the text. In the agricultural extension context, the use of visual aids to enhance training is widely recognized (Food and Agricultural Organisation, 1985). Images have been found to foster engagement, facilitate communication and the expression of tacit knowledge, facilitate collaboration, and effect change in individuals or communities (Mikhailovich, Pamphilon, & Chambers, 2015).

Pictures within books aid comprehension and are referred to as "twice-told tales" because both the pictures and the text tell the story (Agosto, 1999). Pictures are also crucial in developing literary elements such as plot, setting, and character, which aid comprehension (Prior, Willson, & Martinez, 2012). Pictures can bridge language barriers. According to Reid (2002), "(g)ood pictures are as close to universal language as the world is likely to get . . . picture books are an invaluable aid to communication across linguistic lines" (p. 35).

Children's Literature for Literacy Development

Children's literature is a powerful tool for connecting children and adults, communities, and schools in language and literacy development

(Hadaway & Young, 2014). Children's picture books have long been used in first language acquisition and more recently been used effectively in teaching English as a second or other language to both adults and children (Chen, 2014). Appropriate children's literature gives these readers exposure to new illustrated vocabulary, provides repetition of key words and phrases, and allows for a sense of mastery in completing a whole book (Brown, 2004).

Culturally Relevant Literature

According to schema theory, text in itself does not hold meaning, rather the text gives directions for readers to retrieve or construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge or background knowledge (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Text comprehension is an interactive process between the text and the reader's background knowledge. Therefore, culturally relevant books improve reading comprehension (Ebe, 2010; Freeman, Freeman, & Freeman, 2003). Culturally relevant books validate the readers' identities, cultures, and languages (Rodriguez, 2014). Texts that are both culturally and personally relevant are even more powerful. According to Larrotta and Gainer (2008), "powerful texts" or "texts that matter" are ones that genuinely resonate with the participants. During their family reading project, these researchers noted greater participation when the text was considered "relevant and essential to their wellbeing" (Larrotta & Gainer, 2008, p. 47).

Dual-Language Learning

Given that PNG has two major languages, English and Tok Pisin, dual-language books were key to this project. Dual-language books are written in two languages and are intended to be read simultaneously in both languages. They help readers become literate in second or third language (Kenner, Gregory, Ruby, & Al-Azami, 2008) by allowing readers to use higher order vocabulary skills from their first language (Naqvi, McKeough, Thorne, & Pfitscher, 2013). Readers can extend their first language literacy and link it to second language literacy (Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, & Cummins, 2008) and transfer conceptual knowledge and skills across languages (Kenner et al., 2008). Translation, paraphrasing, and code mixing, which are using units from two languages intersententially and

intrasententially, facilitate English language learning (Shah-Wundenberg, Wyse, & Chaplain, 2012).

Importantly, dual-language books can form a bridge between home and school where both the home language and official language are valued (Sneddon, 2008).

Development of the "Maria Books"

Building from these principles, we designed picture books with agricultural messages to be used by both adults and children. The first step was to consider the central characters of the books. The concept of a "family team" in which farm and family work and decisions were shared between men and women was a core feature of our project. Therefore, the "family team" in the series is a mother, father, grandmother, two primary school-aged children, and a baby. Maria, the young girl, was chosen as the central character to present an active role for women and girls. We decided to develop narrow reading books based on the same family. Narrow reading is reading in only one genre, one subject matter, or the work of one author, and can help second language learners (Hansen & Collins, 2015). Narrow reading assists beginning readers by providing a familiar context, that is, they do not need to learn new characters and settings, hence making reading more comprehensible (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005). Narrow reading also allows for repeated exposure to the same vocabulary, easing the lexical burden on readers (Hwang & Nation, 1989). Our books would allow readers to become familiar with the family characters in addition to repeated exposure to the concepts and vocabulary related to earning money, saving money, and budgeting.

The key messages of the books were data driven. The project had found that major barriers for women included gender inequality in the distribution of farm and family labor, lack of postharvest and market skills, low financial literacy (planning, budgeting, saving, banking), and lack of control and decision making over assets. Hence, the two Maria books were *Maria's Family Goes to Market* (messages: sharing farm roles, planned harvesting, planned marketing, preparation of produce, cleanliness of seller and produce, pricing, generating savings from profit) and *Maria's Family Saves Their Kina* (messages: all family members contribute to income generation, family plans a budget

together ensuring money for daily living, church, school and medical costs, agriculture costs, extended family needs, and saving for a family goal). The books followed the guidelines and best practices for developing print material for low literacy farmers (Cheng, 2013).

Community Design Workshops

Two regions were chosen for the pilot: the Baiyer Valley of the Western Highlands (WH) and the Gazelle Peninsula of East New Britain (ENB). These diverse “places,” one in the highlands and one coastal, represent two of the major geographical farming regions of PNG. Two communities in each region were part of the study. Farmers with low literacy were invited to workshops. In ENB, 20 mothers participated in the workshop and in the WH 10 mothers, nine grandmothers, six fathers, and four grandfathers attended the workshop. The two workshops lasted approximately 5 hr each. The workshop was the same in both regions.

A participatory learning and development approach was used to ensure that the families benefited from the activity while making contextual assessments. The Big Book version of “Handa’s Hen” by Eileen Browne was read to the group to enable participants to see a contextually based book on Kenyan village life. This was then linked to the need for PNG books, on PNG village life and the parents’ important role as “cultural critical friends” in the development of the Maria books. Both Maria books were read to the group who then worked in smaller gender-specific subgroups to critique the content and the illustrations. These subgroups reported back to the large group so that the large group could assess conflicting advice.

The changes recommended by the workshop participants were significant. It was clear that there needed to be two place-based versions of the marketing book as local practices were different. For example, in ENB, women go to market in the local bus, whereas in the Highlands, they walk to the nearby roadside market. Bilums (woven bags) are used in the Highlands to carry goods whereas rice bags and pandanus baskets are used in ENB. The original format of Maria’s family saving their money in “budget bottles” was roundly dismissed as bottles are hard to obtain and too valuable for such a use. The recommendation

was to use empty tin cans. The participants also suggested other improvements for the books, such as, common things families would purchase for daily activity costs and farming/livestock costs. Participants in both regions agreed that saving for a water tank was an appropriate goal. We decided to produce two versions of *Maria’s Family Goes to Market* with drawings specific to each of the two regions. In contrast, one version of *Maria’s Family Saves Their Kina* would suffice as with slight alterations to the illustrations.

Training Workshops

To maximize the impact of the Maria books, workshops with community members and teachers were held prior to their dissemination of the books into four pilot communities. The community members were the project’s village community educators (VCEs) who were beginning their role as peer educators with other farming families. This workshop involved modeling how to read the books with children (predicting what the story would be about; asking literal, inferential, and beyond the text questions; summarizing and clarifying text). The workshop particularly focused on how illiterate mothers could use the books with their children (talking about the pictures, asking questions, naming objects, and relating the story to their own lives). Print conventions were also made explicit.

Once this training had been completed, the project distributed the books to five primary schools (Grades 3-8) and one elementary school (K-2) in total across the four pilot communities. These schools were asked to use the Maria books in the classroom for approximately 4 weeks and then send one book home to every family in the school. In this way, children would know the books’ words, drawings, and messages, and be well prepared to interact with their parents in the “reading” of the books. The project team returned to the four communities 6 months after the community members’ and teachers’ training workshops.

Results and Discussion

Evaluation of the Maria books was conducted with VCEs across the four communities. Focus groups were held with the VCEs from all four areas. In ENB, 14 VCEs participated (eight females), and in the WH, 18 participated (10 females). The VCEs reported they had

used the books extensively over the 6-month period. They had used the books within their family and community (immediate family, extended family, neighbors, church groups, fellowships, and youth groups). In ENB, they read the books in both English and Tok Pisin. In the WH, they also translated the books into Tok Ples (a local language). Both groups reported that older schoolchildren read the books to parents when parents were unable to read.

The visual modes of learning resonated strongly with the VCEs. They repeatedly reported how the books were effective visual learning aids.

The Maria books are very good because some people never went to school and they can't read but they can see the pictures. Those who can read still like the books because of the pictures. In the past we used pictures, illustrations, do dramas, body language to teach ideas to the community. That's the way of pidgin. (Tok Pisen; Male, WH)

All the VCEs thought the books had enhanced the training they had received through the use of images.

The books have added to the training. It took some of those things we have been taught and put them into a picture. (Male, ENB)

The book reminds us of the training. It speaks louder . . . It brings more vision for the future because you can see it. At times we forget about what we learnt from the training but the book is with us and reminds us. (Female, WH)

The Maria books were clearly a valuable learning tool and an important addition to the wider agricultural learning project.

The book is very good. All the other training is just training and we forget. The book is more powerful. We can read and understand. It helps us recall. Future training should have the book so we can remember. Trainers have come from Canberra and spent a lot of money to come and give us training. But it would have been a waste of money if we didn't have the books because we would have forgotten everything. (Male, WH)

According to Houts, Doak, Doak, and Loscalzo (2006), people with low literacy skills rely more on spoken explanations, and therefore need help in remembering what they hear. VCEs repeatedly commented that the books helped them to remember the training they had received. Our findings support Houts and colleagues' conclusion that the addition of pictures can increase attention, comprehension, recall, and adherence of written and spoken instructions and that people with low literacy benefit the most from pictures.

The implementation of the project contributed to families making changes in their lives and behaviors planning for a better family economy and learning as a family endeavor. The VCEs reported changes in family practices that reflected those in the books. They spoke about how the books had changed their thinking. "It helps us revolutionize or change our thinking pattern. Previously we spend carelessly or do not use our time wisely" (Female, ENB). More importantly the VCEs thought the books had brought about changes in their behavior. "Our families have used the Maria books by planning how to sell our garden produce and how to manage their income. We had discussions with our families on the importance of money use" (Female, ENB).

The VCEs reported that families were growing and marketing more, trying new ventures such as raising chickens and pigs, and sewing to increase their incomes and saving some of their earnings. Similarly, they recounted new family practices that were suggested in the books, for example, pricing their produce and saving for a family goal. These findings align with other research where adults implement what they learn when they see direct connections to their lives and when they believe their families' lives will be improved (Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011).

The books also assisted the VCEs in disseminating the training they had received. The VCEs consistently reported how they used the books to share their knowledge with family, neighbors, church members, and other members of the community. "A useful book to pass on skills and knowledge. We can pass on through fellowship and churches . . . The books substitute the training for those who were too busy to attend" (Female, WH).

The VCEs particularly valued the cultural relevance of the books supporting our belief that the most effective books for our PNG readers would be those that drew on their context and culture, that is, books that readers “can connect with” (Freeman et al., 2003, p. 7) and “draw on their background knowledge and experiences to make meaning” (Ebe, 2010, p. 194). The VCEs frequently spoke of how the books matched village and subsistence life. The VCEs appreciated the local backdrop of the stories and could relate to both the characters and story line. Our findings align with other studies that have shown reading culturally relevant books results in greater engagement in reading and in learning (Feger, 2006; Rodriguez, 2014). Furthermore, the VCEs were proud that the books were based on their local village and of their contributions to the books designs. As one VCE said, “When we get old or die the books will remain. Our children and grandchildren will know this was our book. The Maria books are our ideas from the Baiyer Valley” (Female, WH).

The VCEs were proud of the Maria books and expressed the wish for more books. In particular, they wanted books that related to the other training they had received. “We have had training about weeding; insects but we didn’t get a book. We need to see a book” (Male, WH). They recommended that the books form the basis for further agricultural education topics (Maria, the pest detective; Maria’s family grows crops; Maria’s family raises chickens; Maria’s family raises pigs). The gender message was also apparent with the suggestion that Maria goes on to high school and even university.

Implications for Practice

A participatory learning and development design process is essential in the development of culturally relevant learning tools. This process ensures relevance and resonance of the text for the targeted audience. The place-based impact deepened as the local participants critiqued the stories and pictures. While pictures typically aid recall, place-based picture books have the potential to further empower the learner with low literacy as they can immediately interact and interrogate the pictures of “their place and their lives.” This becomes an important nonthreatening first step into literacy development and agricultural learning.

This study suggests that culturally relevant, place-based children’s picture books containing narratives with agricultural and business messages can bring about positive changes to smallholder livelihoods. The Maria books clearly had an impact on family practices especially marketing, budgeting, and saving. Culturally relevant and place-based literature enhances comprehension, whereas illustrations serve as visual aids. Stories or narratives are more easily remembered than abstract facts and information. More research is needed to ascertain whether these types of books can be a substitute for traditional training delivery and/or to what extent they add another important layer to the training. In either case, this study suggests that place-based books are a valuable and exciting adult learning tool.

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Author Biographies

Kym Simoncini is an assistant professor of early childhood and primary education. Prior to her

academic career, she was a primary school teacher. Her research focuses on family learning, children's learning, and play.

Barbara Pamphilon has taught adult education and community development for more than 20 years. As a community educator, she has worked with rural communities, environmental education, women's issues, youth and the aged, as well as in HIV/AIDS, disability, and sexuality education.

Katja Mikhailovich is an associate professor in community education, community development, and health promotion. Her research has been focused upon marginalized and disadvantaged populations with a particular interest in evaluation research.