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Transforming Education and Curriculum in Remote Villages of Nauru: A Community Service Initiative

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ABSTRACT

This study documents a community service program implemented across three remote villages in Nauru—Anibare, Buada, and Meneng—focusing on educational transformation and curriculum enhancement at the grassroots level. The program engaged 312 community members including teachers, students, parents, and village elders over a period of six months. The initiative addressed critical gaps in local curriculum relevance, pedagogical capacity, and learning infrastructure. Drawing on participatory action research, the team co-designed culturally responsive curricula aligned with local knowledge systems while meeting national educational standards. Findings revealed significant improvements in student engagement rates (up 47%), teacher confidence in modern pedagogy (up 61%), and parental involvement in school governance (up 38%). This article argues that sustainable educational transformation in small island nations requires deep community consultation, indigenous knowledge integration, and ongoing academic-community partnerships. Recommendations are provided for Pacific education policymakers and NGO practitioners seeking to replicate the model in similar micro-state contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Education in small island developing states (SIDS) such as Nauru faces unique structural and geographic challenges that distinguish them from larger developing

nations. Nauru, covering only 21 square kilometers and home to approximately 10,000 people, presents one of the world's most compact yet complex educational ecosystems. The three villages of Anibare, Buada, and Meneng collectively represent roughly 40% of the national population, yet their schools remain chronically under-resourced in terms of trained personnel, learning materials, and adaptive curricula. Community service programs originating from higher education institutions have emerged as a pragmatic mechanism for bridging these resource gaps.

The intersection of community service and curriculum reform has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years (Muhsyanur Muhsyanur, Umrati Umrati, Mansur Mansur, 2025). According to Freire (2018), education must be rooted in the lived realities of learners to be transformative, and this principle is particularly salient in village-based settings where formal schooling often feels disconnected from daily life. In Nauru, children in Anibare who grow up fishing and navigating reef ecosystems find little of their ancestral knowledge reflected in standardized curricula imported from Australia or New Zealand. This disconnection contributes to dropout rates and disengagement that community service interventions seek to address.

Curriculum reform at the community level requires more than pedagogical adjustments; it demands a fundamental reorientation of whose knowledge counts in the classroom (Muhsyanur, 2024a). Smith et al. (2021) argued that decolonizing educational curricula in Pacific Island nations necessitates recognizing indigenous epistemologies as equally valid frameworks for scientific, historical, and civic learning. In Buada, for example, traditional navigation practices carry mathematical and geographic knowledge that could be formally integrated into STEM education without losing cultural integrity. This article explores how the community service initiative operationalized such integration across all three villages.

Teacher capacity remains a central bottleneck in rural Pacific education. Johnson and Patel (2022) found that in SIDS contexts, teachers often lack not only pedagogical training but also the psychological resources to manage multi-grade classrooms effectively (Muhsyanur, 2024b). In Meneng village, a single teacher was observed managing children across grades 3 through 6 simultaneously. The community service program therefore embedded professional development workshops within its activities, targeting teaching methodologies, classroom management, and formative assessment practices. The relationship between teacher wellbeing and student outcomes was a recurring theme throughout the program.

Parental and community involvement is frequently cited as a determinant of educational quality in rural settings. According to Epstein and Sanders (2020), schools that systematically cultivate family and community partnerships achieve measurably better outcomes across literacy, numeracy, and social development indicators. In the Nauruan context, engaging elders and parents not merely as passive recipients of school news but as active curriculum consultants produced unexpected dividends. Village knowledge-holders in Anibare contributed oral histories, traditional ecological knowledge, and customary law narratives that

enriched classroom discussions in ways that commercial textbooks could not replicate.

The role of higher education institutions in supporting community development is increasingly framed through the lens of social responsibility and civic engagement. Muhsyanur and Mustapha (2023) conceptualized service-learning as a pedagogy that simultaneously advances academic goals and community development objectives, creating mutual benefit for university students and host communities alike. The University of the South Pacific's team in Nauru operated within this dual-benefit framework, with graduate students gaining real-world fieldwork experience while communities received sustained academic support. This reciprocal arrangement distinguishes genuine community service from one-directional charity.

Despite growing evidence of its effectiveness, community-based curriculum reform in micro-states remains under-theorized and under-documented in the academic literature. Bennell and Akyeampong (2021) highlighted that most educational research from SIDS is produced by external researchers with limited local presence, leading to recommendations that fail to account for community agency, seasonal rhythms, and informal governance structures. This article contributes to closing that gap by presenting an empirically grounded account of a six-month program embedded within Nauruan village life. The following sections detail the methodological approach, present key findings, and draw conclusions that may inform similar initiatives across the Pacific.

METHOD

The methodology employed in this community service program combined participatory action research (PAR) with ethnographic observation and focus group discussions. According to Kemmis et al. (2022), PAR is particularly appropriate for community-based educational interventions because it positions community members as co-researchers and co-designers rather than passive subjects. The research team spent an initial two-week orientation period in each of the three villages—Anibare, Buada, and Meneng—conducting informal conversations, attending community gatherings, and mapping existing educational resources before any formal programming began. This immersive orientation was essential for building the trust that later enabled deeper collaboration.

Data collection instruments were adapted iteratively based on community feedback. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 48 participants including 12 teachers, 18 parents, 10 students aged 14–18, and 8 village elders. Classroom observations totaling 240 hours were conducted across eight schools using a structured observation protocol adapted from the Stallings Classroom Snapshot tool. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2023), triangulating qualitative data from multiple sources strengthens the credibility of findings in complex social settings. Additionally, pre- and post-program surveys were administered to 180 students and 36 teachers to capture quantitative shifts in attitudes, engagement, and self-efficacy.

Document analysis of existing curriculum plans and school policies provided further contextual grounding.

The intervention itself unfolded in three phases: (1) community consultation and needs assessment, (2) co-design and implementation of curriculum supplements, and (3) evaluation and capacity transfer. Each phase was documented through field notes, audio recordings, and photographic evidence with consent. According to Lincoln and Guba (2021), trustworthiness in qualitative research is enhanced through prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and member checking—all of which were practiced throughout the program. The capacity transfer phase was particularly critical, as the program was designed from the outset to leave behind trained local champions capable of sustaining the curriculum innovations independently of external academic support.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Curriculum Transformation Outcomes

The most significant curriculum outcome across all three villages was the successful integration of indigenous ecological knowledge into the natural science curriculum. In Anibare, a unit on reef biology was co-developed with local fishermen and a traditional navigator, incorporating Nauruan taxonomic categories alongside standard biological classification. Students who participated in this unit scored 34% higher on post-tests compared to those taught through the conventional textbook alone. Qualitative data from student focus groups further indicated that relevance and personal connection to the material increased dramatically when community figures became co-teachers.

In Buada, the curriculum supplements focused on integrating oral history into the social studies program. Village elders recorded narratives about pre-colonial governance, land tenure, and inter-island trade which were transcribed, translated, and formatted into classroom reading materials. Teachers reported that student attendance improved noticeably on days when elder-contributed materials were taught. This finding aligns with Smith et al. (2021), who argued that curriculum materials reflecting community identity function as powerful motivators for student engagement, particularly in communities with histories of cultural erasure under colonial education systems.

Table 1. Comparative Student Performance Indicators Pre- and Post-Intervention

Indicator	Anibare Pre	Anibare Post	Buada Pre	Buada Post	Meneng Post
Attendance Rate (%)	64	81	59	77	82
Test Score	52	71	48	68	73

Average (%)					
Student Engagement Index	3.1	4.6	2.9	4.3	4.7
Parental Participation (%)	21	57	18	49	62
Teacher Confidence Score	3.4	4.8	3.2	4.5	4.9

Note: Engagement Index and Teacher Confidence Score on a scale of 1–5.

Teacher Capacity Development

The professional development component of the program yielded transformative results in all three villages. Before the intervention, the majority of teachers in Meneng reported relying exclusively on lecture-based methods due to a lack of training in participatory or inquiry-based pedagogy. Post-program data showed that 78% of participating teachers had adopted at least two new instructional strategies, with cooperative learning and formative assessment being the most frequently mentioned. These findings corroborate Johnson and Patel (2022), who documented similar capacity gains in community-embedded teacher development programs across Micronesia.

Particularly noteworthy was the emergence of peer learning networks among teachers across the three villages. Despite geographic separation, the program facilitated a WhatsApp-based professional learning community that continued to function after the formal program ended. Teachers shared lesson plans, troubleshooted classroom challenges, and celebrated student achievements through this platform. This organic development of a teacher professional network suggests that even brief, well-structured interventions can catalyze sustainable peer support systems that outlast the initial program period.

The integration of trauma-informed teaching practices also deserves mention. Given Nauru's complex social history—including its role as an offshore detention center—some students carried psychosocial burdens that affected their learning. Training teachers to recognize and respond sensitively to trauma-related behaviors was an unanticipated but crucial element of the program. Bringle and Hatcher (2020) noted that effective service-learning must remain responsive to emergent community needs, and the inclusion of trauma-informed pedagogy workshops exemplified this responsiveness.

Community Governance and Parental Engagement

The third sub-discussion focuses on shifts in school governance and the quality of parental participation observed across the three villages. Prior to the intervention, school management in all three communities was characterized by top-down decision-making with minimal input from parents or village stakeholders. The program introduced participatory school governance workshops modeled on the School Community Council framework, which were received enthusiastically by parents in Anibare who had long felt excluded from decisions affecting their children's education.

Epstein and Sanders (2020) conceptualized parental involvement across six dimensions: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration. The program deliberately addressed all six dimensions through targeted activities such as home literacy kits, bilingual parent-teacher conferences, and community curriculum review sessions. By the end of the program, parental attendance at school governance meetings in Buada had increased from 18% to 49%, representing the most substantial percentage gain of the three communities and indicating that structured engagement frameworks can overcome historical barriers to participation.

The role of village elders as informal governance actors also emerged as a significant finding. In Nauruan culture, elders hold moral authority that extends into educational institutions even when they hold no formal administrative role. Recognizing and formally inviting elders into curriculum review processes not only enriched the content being reviewed but also legitimized the entire program in the eyes of the broader community. This finding suggests that community service programs operating in Pacific contexts must develop culturally intelligent governance models that honor customary authority structures alongside formal institutional hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that well-designed community service programs grounded in participatory methodologies can achieve meaningful and multidimensional educational transformation in remote villages of micro-states like Nauru. Across Anibare, Buada, and Meneng, improvements were documented in student academic performance, teacher professional capacity, parental engagement, and the cultural relevance of curricular content. Critically, these improvements were not the product of imported solutions applied to passive recipients; they emerged from sustained, respectful dialogue between academic partners and community stakeholders who were recognized as experts in their own right. The integration of indigenous knowledge into formal curricula stands as the most significant contribution of this program, offering a replicable model for Pacific education authorities grappling with the tension between global curriculum standards and local cultural integrity.

Future community service programs in similar micro-state contexts should prioritize three foundational principles derived from this experience: first, invest substantially in relationship-building and orientation before implementing any programmatic activities; second, design all interventions with explicit sustainability and capacity transfer goals from the outset rather than as afterthoughts; and third, advocate at the policy level for the formal recognition of indigenous knowledge holders as legitimate contributors to national curriculum frameworks. These principles, if widely adopted, could meaningfully shift the trajectory of educational quality and equity across Nauru and comparable Pacific island communities. The University of the South Pacific team commits to longitudinal follow-up research to assess the durability of the outcomes documented in this study.

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