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## **Vernacular Education in Papua New Guinea**

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Papua New Guinea leads the world in linguistic diversity with over 830 languages (Grimes 2000), including English and two lingua francas, Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu. It also leads the world with the number of languages used for initial education with over 435<sup>1</sup> - something historically unique in education development. What started twenty five years ago in 1980 using two vernacular languages in Bougainville (North Solomons) expanded to become national policy with a new level of formal education called elementary.

### **History of Vernacular Education Policy**

A survey by university students in Bougainville Province in the late 1970s showed that parents wanted their language and culture included in education because they felt English-only education was partially responsible for the alienation and social problems among youth in the province (Delpit and Kemelfield 1985). In 1980 the province introduced a *Viles Tok Ples Skul* VTPS (village vernacular school) system that provided two years of vernacular education for children before they entered Grade 1 in English. It was outside the national formal education system and was financed by the provincial government. Two languages were introduced in the first year with a plan to eventually include all languages in the province. The Summer of Linguistics (SIL) assisted in the area of literacy training and materials.

In 1983 the East New Britain introduced a similar two-year program called *Tok Ples Pri Skul* TPPS (vernacular pre-school). This province required extensive community

assistance before the it would assist with a subsidy for teachers' pay. SIL personnel were seconded for 10 years to assist provincial personnel in the areas of materials and training.

Individual language communities also introduced TPPSs beginning in 1981 primarily with the assistance of SIL personnel. Milne Bay, Enga, and New Ireland provinces also added vernacular programs. Almost all the early provincial and community programs were assisted by SIL. The Papua New Guinea Trust and other NGOs became involved later.

In 1986 a ministerial report under the Chairmanship of Sir Paulius Matane proposed a Philosophy of Education based on PNG cultures and values. All its recommendations were approved by Parliament except the one that the vernacular be used for initial education. However, the vernacular grassroots movement grew until in 1989 the Department of Education (DOE) introduced a Language and Literacy section in the Curriculum Development Division to assist with the growing interest. A DOE national language and literacy policy was introduced that *encouraged* the use of the vernacular for prep school, out-of-school youth and adult literacy programs. In 1990 a Grade 1 English bridging teachers' guide was introduced for those primary schools where entering students had attended TPPSs. Its purpose was to continue vernacular literacy and assist in the transfer of literacy skills learned in the vernacular to English.

In 1991 an Education Sectoral Review resulted in an education reform proposal that Parliament approved in 1993. Pilot elementary classes were introduced in Milne Bay and New Ireland provinces in 1994 and Parliament approved the Education Reform Agenda in 1995. It included a new introductory level of formal education called elementary in

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Guy (2003). It is assumed that more languages have been added in 2004. He also fails to include classes in Hiri Motu that is used for an estimated 5000 students.

which the language of the community is the language of instruction. This is generally the vernacular in rural areas but a lingua franca in urban areas. Elementary includes three years (Prep, Grade 1 and Grade 2) with oral English introduced in the second half of Grade 2. Elementary schools are village based and feed into primary schools that retain Grades 3-6 of the old community school system with some schools adding Grades 7 and 8. Primary is divided into lower (Grades 3-5) and upper (Grades 6-8). Lower primary schools are bilingual moving from predominately vernacular to predominately English. In upper primary English is the medium of instruction with vernacular maintenance activities.

Elementary	Prep-G2 (E2)	Vernacular	Bridging to English in G2 (E2)
Lower Primary	G3-5	Bilingual	Bilingual
Upper Primary	G6-8	English	Vernacular Maintenance

### **Education Reform Structure**

Figure 1.

TPPSs continue to operate in many areas where elementary education has not yet been introduced. Further developing vernacular or lingua franca skills in secondary schools is encouraged.

### **Introduction of the vernacular policy**

The new policy was introduced with the new elementary level of education. Although this involved a new structure, training system and personnel, there was some infrastructure and experienced personnel for vernacular education at the national level and in some provinces. The DOE is responsible for policy, curriculum guidelines, finance and the training of trainers. The provincial governments are responsible for implementation including planning, training and administration for the specific language

programs. Some provinces with TPPS programs were able to adapt readily to the new system (Waters et al, 1995). Others had little or no experience with vernacular education, which in some cases resulted in a disconnect between national policy and provincial implementation.

### **Political challenges**

There was no major political challenge to introducing the policy at the national level for several reasons: 1) Vernacular non-formal education had proved to be successful and was growing in popularity throughout most of the nation at the provincial and language community level. 2) All four political regions (Island, Highlands, Papua and Mamose) had numerous vernacular programs. 3) There were no political divisions based on language minority-majority status at the national level and in most provinces due to the large number of languages present. However, there is competition between the lingua francas, especially Tok Pisin, and vernaculars in many rural areas

The main political challenge was to take a decentralized network of non-formal vernacular education with shared national, provincial, community and NGO responsibilities into a centralized, national, hierarchical system where ultimate administrative, educational and financial responsibility rested with the DOE. The implementation of national policy varies from province to province as capable personnel are not available throughout the hierarchy to implement all aspects of the policy.

There are political challenges at the village level. Elementary schools are to be managed by a board of management that can empower parents and communities in education in a way that was not possible with English education. Communities select those to be trained as teachers and chose the language to be used for instruction. Boards

of management vary in the degree in which they provide direction to the elementary schools and implement education policy.

### **Educational challenges**

The greatest educational challenge was to provide sufficient personnel competent to operate a vernacular education system when past experience in the formal system was limited to English education. This was a challenge at all levels of the education hierarchy. In the non-formal system NGOs with vernacular education experience, especially SIL, provided extensive assistance from the national to the village level.<sup>2</sup> The focus was on language and culture. After Australian Aid for International Development (AusAID) began to assist the program, most assistance at the national level came from Australian education professionals with limited experience of the type immediately relevant to vernacular education in the PNG village setting. The focus changed to education issues.

Another challenge was the training of elementary teachers. To provide trainers of elementary teachers, teachers with experience in the English system were selected and given short training courses on vernacular education and received a Certificate of Elementary Teacher Training. In the majority of situations they had no experience in vernacular education. The TPPS training courses were practical and emphasized materials production and teaching in the vernacular. However, the training course that has been implemented for elementary teachers is more lecture oriented and emphasizes education issues but is weak in vernacular materials development and teaching. The

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<sup>2</sup>Members of SIL provided 22 work-years of assistance to the DOE through secondment between 1989 and 2002. 20 work-years of assistance were provided to the East New Britain Province between 1983 and 1992. Many more decades of service were provided for other provinces and specific language communities.

elementary training system utilizes Self Paced Modules in English so those with Grade10 education are preferred over experienced teachers in the TPPS system that generally have lower levels of formal education but have teaching experience and generally know the language and culture better.

A more basic challenge for educational development is the lack of alphabets for many smaller languages. One government requirement for vernacular education development is an approved alphabet. The large majority of the population is in languages that have alphabets but many of the smaller languages still lack them. An AusAID contract with SIL resulted in the development of alphabets for 135 languages through alphabet design workshops (Wroge and Hoel, 2003). In many cases a lingua franca is utilized in place of the vernacular where there is no alphabet. Most provinces still lack trained personnel who can assist in alphabet development.

Another educational challenge is vernacular materials. Early TPPS programs developed specific materials for each language. In the 1980s the DOE developed a few sets of printed pictures that could be made into simple books by adding text. SIL developed a similar computerized system of pictures called Shell Books that are used to supplement materials created locally. A few years before the introduction of the elementary system the DOE began to provide kits of educational materials for TPPS programs. These kits contained blank big books that could be written in to provide vernacular materials and a silkscreen printer, stencils, ink and paper for producing booklets. Later AusAID provided funding for similar kits for the elementary program. In some isolated areas these kits were not available to teachers because funds were not available to transport them from the provincial centers. The method of teaching literacy

in elementary is interactive whole language in which phonics and whole language approaches are integrated. This saves some on materials costs in that separate primers do not have to be developed for each language. The down side of this is that using this method requires a good understanding of the process of reading. Teachers lacking this understanding may teach children to memorize books rather help them develop comprehension and decoding-encoding skills.

Another challenge is monitoring and assessment. With the English system and its emphasis on standardized testing, assessment was not complicated. But developing equivalent means of monitoring for national standards is difficult with so many languages involved. In elementary schools teachers are responsible for their own assessment. For the primary system, a pilot project is in progress to monitor the progress of students in Grades 3, 5 and 8 in four languages: Kuanua, Jabem, Enga, and Motu. Evaluation will be skills based.

### **Financial challenges**

During the TPPS period each province or language community was responsible for financing the program, often with assistance from provincial and national NFE funds or NGOs. Each province with a program had its own policy for financial assistance. The National Language and Literacy policy introduced in 1989 specified the financial responsibilities of the national and provincial governments and the language communities. The national government provided subsidies for the programs through the National Literacy and Awareness Secretariate to assist with training and materials. The provinces and/or communities were responsible for salaries, which varied according to the economy of the area. In some situations multiple teachers volunteered their services.

With the introduction of the elementary program into the formal education system, the financial burden on the national government increased dramatically as it was responsible for most costs.<sup>3</sup> Teacher salaries were standardized under the Teaching Service Commission and were higher, significantly higher in many cases, than those of the TPPS system. Still the cost per student was much less than the previous English only primary system in that elementary schools operate for only half a day and the fully trained elementary teachers' salary is 60% of that of a beginning primary school teacher<sup>4</sup>. AusAID provided grants to cover the costs of training and materials from 1997 to 2002 after which time the provinces and communities were responsible. Consequently fewer new teachers have been trained and the expansion and introduction of new schools was reduced.

### **Curriculum**

Two instruments introduced by the DOE in the era of TPPS are still used in the elementary system to assist with curriculum development and lesson planning. The first is the cultural calendar. Seasonal changes and their associated cultural events are listed according to the months of the year. This calendar provided guidance for the selection of topics for the curriculum and for the appropriate time frame for their introduction.

The second instrument is the theme web. Elementary schools use integrated teaching according to themes. The theme web provides a place in the center for writing the theme and around this are spaces for listing the topics for each specific type of lesson for the week. From this daily lesson plans are developed for each week.

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<sup>3</sup> Litteral (1999) discusses the advantages of TPPS in comparison with English, including costs.

<sup>4</sup>The TPPS system operated for half a day. When the elementary system was being first being discussed, half-day classes were planned. Because of the improved communication using the vernacular, it was

The Elementary section of the Curriculum Development Division in 2003 published 3 curriculum guides based on the scope and sequence of instruction in language, maths and culture (DOE 2003). An elementary teachers' guide is in process. An in-service training module is being developed for introducing these guides.

### **Training**

In contrast with primary school teachers who are trained in two-year national teachers' colleges, elementary teachers are trained within their province in three six-week training courses, one each year for Prep through Grade 2. This is a fraction of the cost of training primary school teachers. The training includes Self Paced Modules that the teachers are to complete while they are teaching. Teachers have provisional status until they have completed all their training and taught successfully. The training is primarily by lecture with limited time for hands on activities. This follows a Western method of training rather than the Melanesian cultural style of activity based training. The teachers are expected to develop their curriculum and teaching materials once they return to their home areas. Some schools use materials in a lingua franca rather than developing language specific curriculum and materials. There is a review of elementary training in progress by the Australian Council of Educational Research.

Primary teachers receive training for bilingual education in the pre-service teachers' colleges. Presently AusAID is assisting with finance and personnel in the Primary and Secondary Teachers Education Program. Curriculum guides are presently being developed for Grade 3-5 bilingual education in arts, community living, health, environmental studies, language, maths and physical education.

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assumed that as much could be taught in half a day using the vernacular as could be taught in a whole day using English.

### **Managing teachers**

There is a supervisor for each district who administers the elementary teachers and provides in-service training for them. Elementary schools are organized into cluster groups in which teachers can meet to share ideas, receive training and work on materials together. District inspectors oversee primary teachers.

### **Introduction of English**

The policy is to introduce oral English in the second half of Grade 2. With the transition to primary school in Grade 3, oral English is increased and bridging literacy from vernacular to English is introduced. English continues to increase as the vernacular decreases in Grades 4 and 5 with English becoming the language of instruction in Grade 6.

Language Ratio	Vernacular	English
Grade 3	60%	40%
Grade 4	50%	50%
Grade 5	30%	70%

### **English/Vernacular ratio in Grades 3-5**

Figure 2

A survey of 136 teachers in 2002 (Guy 2003) indicated that Tok Pisin was used more than the vernacular in Grades 3 to 5. Most primary teachers do not have experience in vernacular literacy or in teaching in the vernacular. Also provincial authorities may not consider language when assigning teachers to primary schools.

There are several problems related to introducing bilingual education into the primary system. One is trained teachers. Only recently has bilingual education been introduced in the primary teachers' colleges so the majority of teachers have not had bilingual training. Another problem is that many areas with little education may not have people with sufficient education to be trained as primary teachers. Another problem is that in areas with small languages, several languages may be spoken in one primary school. In such cases a lingua franca may be used.

### **Lessons learned for sustaining multilingual education**

Multilingual education in the PNG in primary education is still in its infancy and it is too soon to draw conclusions regarding its success. However, there is twenty-five years experience in initial education in the vernacular from which lessons can be learned.

- 1) Vernacular education must be successful from the perspective of both the community and the education establishment for it to be sustained. Many communities and teachers that were skeptical of initial vernacular education were convinced when they saw the success of the students.
- 2) The number of languages is no major obstacle to vernacular education if the language communities and government support it practically and politically and if technical assistance for linguistic issues is available.
- 3) The NGOs can make significant contributions, both for their technical expertise and their close relationships with communities.
- 4) A long-term perspective is essential and can be maintained if programs prove to be successful through student achievement and the development of the community as the people assume responsibility for their children's education. Professional development

for bilingual education personnel is essential in the area of language as well as in the area of education.

- 5) Aid organizations can provide invaluable help in the developmental stages in terms of finance and expertise. Wise planning is needed so that long-term dependence does not develop and the program can be internally sustainable.
- 6) The greatest resource for basic vernacular education is within the community. The local language and culture is the best for basic education in terms of communication and intellectual development but needs to be developed as bilingual education progresses.
- 7) Growth needs to be gradual. Rapid, unplanned growth in programs will be detrimental to the quality of vernacular education.

### **Quality of schooling and learning achievement**

I am not aware of any formal statistical studies on the national level that demonstrate the efficacy of vernacular education in PNG. However, the Measurement Services Unit and the Curriculum Development Division are developing instruments for testing Grade 3, 5 and 8 students who have had vernacular education.

There is ample anecdotal evidence of the success. The greatest indicators of success are the growing number of language communities that are requesting vernacular education programs and the positive response of teachers in primary schools who have seen the products of quality vernacular schools.

There are many informal evaluations of vernacular programs. Litteral (1999a) provides information on the success of the Angor and Amanab language TPPS students

in terms of retention in community school and success in gaining positions in high school.

### **Conclusions**

The PNG experience with bilingual education demonstrates that there need be no competition between vernaculars and national languages. Rather they are complementary and each has a role in developing competent individuals and communities to function in both the local culture and the wider world. The development of quality programs depends on cooperation between communities, NGOs, governments and aid agencies. Developmental problems remain but with patience and persistence they can be overcome.

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