

Papua New Guinea's Vernacular Language Preschool Programme

Cultural and linguistic diversity occurs for a variety of reasons. In developed countries these often include influxes of immigrants, refugees and international students, while a large number of developing nations have long contained several language groups within their borders. Among the challenges of educating young children in such settings are promoting a national identity, encouraging participation in national life, dealing with globalisation, language and culture issues, delivering services to both rural and urban areas, and distributing fiscal resources.

Some countries are seeking to address these challenges through a bilingual education policy. Such a strategy extends basic education to everyone. This goal cannot be accomplished unless minority or vernacular languages are included in the formal education system.

Papua New Guinea (PNG), an island nation in the South Pacific north of Australia and east of Indonesia, is one developing country with a bilingual education policy. A reform of the country's English-only educational system was launched in 1995 after a non-formal community-based vernacular language preschool movement spread throughout PNG. Government policy henceforth required the national formal education system to include vernacular language education in the initial years of a child's education, and to implement a gradual transition to the use of English as one of the languages of instruction.

Papua New Guinea is unique in a number of ways compared with other developing countries. It is the world's most linguistically diverse nation, with 823 living languages spoken by a population of 5.2 million (2000 PNG Census). Only 50,000 people speak English as their first language. The population of each language group is small compared with other indigenous languages around the world, and 80 percent of the PNG population resides in the rural areas. Since the largest language group has only 165,000 speakers, none is numerically or politically dominant. Multilingualism is common, with many people speaking their first language, one or both of the lingua francas, Melanesian Pidgin and Hiri Motu, and/or the official language, English. It is important to note that in PNG, English is learned in a foreign language context, mostly through the education system, and not in a second language context. Most people have little exposure to English unless they live close to towns.

From 1870 until the 1950s, the majority of schools in PNG were established by missions and the vernacular languages were used as the language of instruction. An English-only

policy was adopted in the 1950s. At PNG's independence in 1975, the policy was reviewed but maintained under the 1976 Education Plan. Instruction in the vernacular languages was reinstated in 1995.¹

In 1979, parents on Bougainville Island, in North Solomons Province, expressed concern that the English-only school system was alienating their children from their own language and culture. Children who did not pass secondary school entrance examinations had to return to their villages, but they were unable to reintegrate into village life. The Bougainville Islanders proposed giving their children two years of preschool education in their own language before the first grade of primary schooling, in which the language of instruction was English. The *Viles Tok Ples Skul* (VTPS) ("village language school") scheme thus emerged as a non-formal community-based vernacular language preschool education option. Later, it became known as *Tok Ples Pri Skul* (TPPS) ("vernacular language preschools").

The government of North Solomons Province committed ample personnel and budgetary resources to this programme, with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) helping to prepare the necessary literacy materials in the vernacular languages. During the 1980s, three other provincial governments and four other language communities followed the North Solomons initiative. Vernacular language preschools quickly spread throughout the country, with NGOs playing a vital role in most of these programmes. Community members and NGOs promoted vernacular preschooling even in provinces whose governments were initially not supportive of the idea. The involvement of communities, provincial governments and NGOs in the vernacular language preschool movement later became part of the government's Education Reform policy. These groups invested time, money and personnel in the planning and implementing of the programmes in their respective areas.

From 1979 to 1995, the vernacular language preschool programmes remained in the realm of non-formal education. They did not have standard curriculum requirements, teacher selection criteria or common teacher preparation courses. Students could complete a preschool

¹ Litteral, R. (2000). *Basic Education in Papua New Guinea: Past, Present and Future*. Paper presented at the First Faculty of Humanities Conference Bridging Borders/Moving Boundaries: Defining/Redefining the Humanities into the New Millennium, 30 October-3 November 2000, University of Goroka, Goroka, Papua New Guinea.

programme in one or two years. The teachers were less highly trained than certified primary school teachers. Many were volunteers, especially in the communities or provinces that did not offer financial support.

A review of the VTPS programme found not only that children who had attended a village vernacular preschool before entering the first grade experienced distinct educational advantages, but also that their communities enjoyed social and cultural benefits (Delpit and Kemelfield, 1985).² Primary school teachers noticed that the transition to the English-only classroom was much easier for children who had attended the vernacular language preschools compared with those with no previous educational experience. Community members and elders, even those who could not read and write themselves, were invited into the classrooms to pass on important cultural knowledge and information to the children.

In July 1991, following the proliferation of vernacular preschools in PNG, officials from national and provincial departments of education unanimously agreed that the formal education system needed restructuring. This eventually led to the 1995 Education (Amendment) Act. The Education Reform, designed to improve educational access, equity and quality, encourages vernacular language instruction in the first three grades of a child's education (Elementary-Prep, Elementary-1, Elementary-2). Oral English is introduced as part of the Elementary-2 curriculum. The lower primary grades (3-5) are taught in the vernacular language and English. This is followed by a gradual transition to English with each successive grade spending more time using English as the medium of instruction (third grade 60% vernacular, 40% English; fourth grade 40% vernacular, 60% English, and fifth grade 30% vernacular, 70% English). By 1997, each of the 20 provinces had begun implementing a nationally approved Provincial Education Plan.

The Education Reform policy recognises the important roles played by the community, NGOs, and the government in the development, dissemination and implementation of the vernacular language preschool programmes. It encourages these stakeholders to continue their involvement. The National Department of Education sets curriculum guidelines and the criteria for the selection of teachers and teacher trainers. For its part, the Provincial Department of Education has the task of implementing the Education Reform according to its own plan. The provincial and district teacher trainers plan and organise the training courses. Once new elementary schools are approved and registered, and the teachers are trained, they can begin to hold elementary classes in the vernacular languages. Community members are encouraged to build the elementary classrooms, nominate the teachers and help them develop culturally relevant curricula.

² Delpit, L., and Kemelfield, G. (1985). *An Evaluation of the Viles TokPles Skul Scheme in the North Solomons Province*. ERU Report No. 51, University of Papua New Guinea.

Conflicts occurred when some community members and NGOs objected that the government intervened to take over a programme they had developed themselves. One example was in East New Britain Province, the last to start implementing the Education Reform. The provincial government and local communities had experienced the success of developing preschools through their own efforts, and they were reluctant to let the national government control their schools. Since Education Reform policy permits but does not require the inclusion of vernacular language preschools in the elementary school system, some provinces incorporated them and their teachers, while others did not.

The key elements of PNG's Education Reform are the encouragement of early education in the vernacular languages and a gradual bridging to English as a language of wider communication. It also includes the development of a culturally relevant curriculum and materials, and the availability of nine years of basic education instead of six, closer to the child's village home. At the end of 2000, the Education Reform involved 380 language groups. In PNG's experience, a village-level non-formal vernacular language preschool movement, with minimally trained teachers, eventually guided the entire nation to launch an ambitious drive to provide education in the language children know first and best, their own. They are then better prepared cognitively, developmentally and academically to transfer the learning of skills in their own language to learning in English.

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