

## **Dialogics of Literacy Education in Papua New Guinea**

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In a negotiated classroom, all the dynamics of liberalized education take place. A negotiated classroom is a space in which both learners and teachers are engaged in a dialogic situation. A dialogic situation is where backgrounds of learners, their language conditions, the teachers' responsibility, the teachers' respect for students' language rights, and the expectation of the education department are all played out in the classroom. The success of learners in the education system can be traced back to the early learning environment of students. If students are taught in a proper way by teachers who understand their work as teachers—the students usually succeed. There are schools in Papua New Guinea (PNG) that continue to struggle in their efforts to provide high quality education to their students. There are differences in the education services, teacher quality, and learning backgrounds of students between schools in urban areas and those in the rural areas.

### **The National Curriculum Reform and the *National Education Plan 2005-2014*.**

The National Curriculum Reform in Papua New Guinea is about standardizing the disparities in education levels, education services, education outputs, and making education accessible to many Papua New Guinean children. There are areas in the curriculum reform process that need further development, especially in relation to the recently launched *National Education Plan 2005-2014*. The vision of the Education Plan is: “Our vision is integral human development achieved through an affordable education system that appreciates Christian and traditional values, and that prepares literate, skilled and healthy citizens by concentrating on the growth and development of each individual’s personal viability and character formation, while ensuring that all contribute to the peace and prosperity of the nation”. The Education Plan is the guide that all educators, planners and curriculum advisors must take heed of, especially in the implementation of the plan. Often people ignore the national government’s direction and plans, by allowing pedagogical practices that contradict, conflict with, and are contrary to the national direction.

### **Challenges in the Delivery of Education Services**

Is it ignorance, the lack of understanding of the dynamics of education based around the philosophy of education that the Matane Report highlighted, or the provision of materials and quality of teachers in schools of Papua New Guinea? Speaking from the perspective of someone involved in university education and as someone working with literacy workers, NGOs, churches, and women’s group, I am aware of the challenges that Papua New Guineans face in the delivery of education services. Recently I read a letter to the editor by a ‘futurist’ who declared that the elementary education is a failure. The futurist says:

It is my personal observation and knowledge that the elementary education system where children are taught in their local dialects is a total failure and waste of resources.

Mr. Baki has not done his homework nor has gone out to the schools doing inspections and physically seeing how it is progressing. He has got to get views from the primary and high school teachers and parents on how the children have been performing in their subjects and general knowledge like in speaking, writing or even reading and research.

They would tell you straight, most are hard to teach them and instruct them in English. You might realise that you will produce a lot of illiterate students who might not know how to even spell their names or spell the word pig in English.

I am saying this from living with primary and elementary school teachers who teach students in Grades 6 and 7 who started from elementary schools that they cannot write well. Even their style of writing is poor (Futurist 2005: 19).

The problem I have with the author of the letter referred to above is that the writer fails to recognize his or her own difficulties with writing and expression. There are errors of stylistics (punctuation, serial commas, subject verb agreement, unnecessary words) and composition in the letter of the futurist, who thinks that because education provision is in vernacular the elementary education is a failure. The letter is riddled with influences from Tok-Pisin and the writer's speech community.

### **Reactions**

The observations of the "Futurist" published in *The National* of Wednesday April 13, 2005 reveal a perspective that is too simplistic and ill informed. The writer is unaware of the success of literacy programs and elementary education in many Provinces. Elementary education itself is not a failure, but the quality of teachers leaves much to be desired. The attitude and quality of teachers, community and education planners in each province have much to do with the success or failure of elementary education. In a workshop on literacy policy and planning held in Kiunga last year, it was revealed that within the Southern and New Guinea Islands regions some provinces are way ahead of others in their implementation of the national language and literacy policy. Others have a poor attitude and infrastructure to support language and literacy activities. Administrative and demographic challenges alone are enough to stifle and choke efforts to promote language and literacy in Papua New Guinea. Provinces like Milne Bay, West New Britain, East New Britain, Manus, Western, and Central were way ahead (in terms of planning and administrative support) of their other counterparts, namely Gulf, Oro, NCD and Bougainville.

### **Literacy in PNG and 2000 Census Report**

In provinces where literacy programs are successful, it was noted that the positive and co-operative attitudes of administrators, education planners, and educationists, literacy workers, churches, NGOs, and communities towards language and literacy activities were the ingredient of success. Milne Bay Province is a good example, with a high literacy rate of 75 per cent. The history of literacy programs in that province is attributed to the input by churches in the province since the 1880s. In the 1980s the work on literacy was supported by government agencies, the Local Level Governments (LLG), National Literacy and Awareness Secretariat (NLAS) and the provincial Education Department. Milne Bay Province also reported that there is an increase in infrastructure development and literacy work, which is built into the provincial education plan.

The direction Milne Bay Province is taking is admirable and other provinces should follow. The 2000 Census national report indicates that 56 per cent of Papua New Guineans are literate in at least one language, an increase of 10 per cent since 1990. Out of the total population, 40 per cent are literate in English, 45 per cent are literate in Tok Pisin, only 5 per cent are literate in Hiri Motu, and 43 per cent are literate in tokples or local language. Males had a higher literacy rate of 61 per cent than females with 51 per cent. The difference between the urban sector and the rural sector literacy rate in English is 78.3 per cent for males and 70.2 per cent for females; Tok Pisin literacy rate in the urban sector for males is 80.5 per cent and 72 per cent for females, compared to 46.3 per cent of males and 43.2 per cent of females literate in Tok Pisin who live in rural areas. Of the 35.2 per cent of rural population literate in English, 40.1 per cent are males and 30 percent are females.

### **English Literacy Rates**

English literacy rate is high in the urban sector but low in the rural sector where literacy in Tokples is more common. By province, literacy was highest in NCD at 92 per cent for males and 89 per cent for females, and lowest in Enga at 40 per cent for males and 30 per cent for females. Except for the five Highlands provinces and West Sepik, the literacy rate in all provinces was 60% or more for males and more than 40 % for females.

The statistics given here reflect a general trend in the demographics of literacy development in Papua New Guinea. Before we can blame the education system and the efforts the national government is investing in improving literacy level in Papua New Guinea, we must recognize the different levels of achievement of literacy work in each province.

I consider the futurist as one of many Papua New Guineans who hold the view that students and teachers should be blamed for the failure of the education system in general. The issue at hand is not the failure of the education system, but the quality of teachers and teacher education in the country. A lot of teachers are poorly trained, unable to teach

subjects that they are not trained in, and communicate poorly with their students and parents.

### **Written Expression**

Recently my son brought home his elementary prep student record card for term one 2005. The first thing that caught my attention was not his excellent performance, but the writing difficulties of his teacher to communicate to the parents. The teacher spelled my son's name incorrectly to begin with. Let me try to present the teacher's problem as recorded on my son's record card:

<b>SUBJECTS</b>	<b>COMMENTS</b>
Language	Langstan's accedomeic work is performing well .
Mathematics	He do better in maths but next tern he need to improve more
Culture & Community	He can do better in the community activities.
Religious Education	He do better in Religious Instruction.
Personality	He is very good in his personality
Teacher's Comments	Langstan's accedomic work is performing better. He is very fast in learning.

### **Bridging Teacher's Knowledge**

I have presented the teacher's comments as recorded on my son's student record card. With problems such as these in written expressions of teachers, I fear the intention of the curriculum reform may never be fully realized. The training and bridging of knowledge of teachers should be a major part of the reform. Short refresher courses of remedial classes should be developed for teachers as part of the curriculum reform. One suggestion is to develop an extension or open college type of program for teachers to be visited by specialists, in subject areas of interest to teachers that the new curriculum expects them to teach. This type of program will allow teachers to learn quickly, the subjects they are expected to teach under the reform. This program will also help teachers to familiarize themselves with the curriculum packages written and posted from Port Moresby.

Some times teachers in remote schools in the provinces have great difficulty understanding and reconciling the expectations of the curriculum that does not make sense to them. The curriculum is invariably written by curriculum advisors and writers based in Port Moresby, who at best are generalist with no idea of the actual conditions on the ground in every school in the country. The failure on the part of the curriculum advisors and writers, is that they have not sought out the specialist advice of academics at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and other universities. The reliance on curriculum advice from specialists outside Papua New Guinea, leads to transferring knowledge that is too abstract and difficult to grasp by Papua New Guinean teachers.

### **We are Teachers Not Researchers**

In his newspaper column on “Remedy Flaws in education Reform” Michael Unage highlights some of the flaws in the curriculum reform of the education system:

The curriculum development has been slow because it takes time to trial a curriculum and then train teachers. The tardiness of scripting of the reform curriculum has so far been completed. I have talked with many teachers about the reform curriculum, and some claim that it had been shelved due to a lack of resource material to complement the reform curriculum.

“We are told to do our own research and provide the resource material for teaching,” commended one teacher. “We are teachers and not researchers. We need to be given clear direction [on] what we should teach.”

There is hardly any teaching of reform curriculum in the remote schools. Teachers continue to teach materials that they are comfortable with. School inspectors who are supposed to report on the reform implementation have failed to visit the remote areas (Unage 2005: 17).

### **Primary School Teachers as UPNG Students**

Recently I was in Madang to speak to primary school teachers who enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in Education program offered by the University of Papua New Guinea, through the UPNG Open College. The students studying this program are sponsored by the European Union. Most of them are teaching in remote rural community schools. To get to Madang town was in itself a difficulty. Speaking with the teacher students I learnt that materials, administrative responsibilities, role reversals in learning environments and difficulties of getting to the Open College in Madang were some of their major problems. Most of them were happy that I was in Madang in person to talk to them about the course that I wrote, which they are currently studying.

The main difficulty that teachers have is in essay writing. I am not surprised to learn that teachers have problems with research as expressed by one teacher to Michael Unagi. The skills of research are very much the backbone of good essays and articulation of ideas. Everyone studying *Introduction to Literature* submitted essays and reviews that did not meet the elementary principles of composition or essay writing. Problems in developing written arguments, poor understanding of ideas presented in the reading materials, poor paragraph development, stylistics problems ranged from sloppy and awkward writing, poor in text referencing and improper styles of writing bibliography, are areas where teachers have great difficulties. The essays were written as shopping lists and have no sense of the elementary principles of composition used in literary essays. Most teacher students argue that becoming a student again is a challenge. The point to be made is that good writing is the result of understanding the different forms, rules of stylistics, designs, and expectations of an essay. It is necessary also to mention the importance of good reading and research. Good writing makes full use of extensive reading. This means

doing background research before writing anything. Many of the teachers argue that relevant local materials such as books, libraries, and physical and electronic resources were absent in their schools. This prevented them from teaching anything new and challenging. It also prevented them from learning more about their subjects. Relevant local materials are in great demand and of course, are available in various places. What is hard to understand is that the curriculum division of the Education Department is not active in acquiring locally written and published books to supply to all the schools in the country. Even if local materials are hard to find, the Curriculum Development Division must facilitate the production of new books.

### **Writing Skills Workshops**

One suggestion is to conduct writing workshops in various parts of the country. The kinds of writing workshops I have in mind, are about skills of research, writing, editing and production of books. Many of our teachers in primary and top up schools show so much interest in writing and producing their own books. Last year I visited the June Valley Primary School to talk to teachers about writing their own books for use in their classrooms. As it turned out the interest was there, but the time and resources for conducting a writing workshop was not there. I also observed that the teachers have the skills to write their own books, but need harnessing and guidance. The techniques and methods of writing were very basic and need a total change of direction. Basic mechanics of writing techniques, editing skills using principles of stylistics, and book production techniques need to form the basis of such workshops.

Last year, half of the students at UPNG who studied *Introduction to Literature* scored below average level and one quarter of them failed the course. The difficulty I have with this category of students is with their level of understanding university texts and course requirements. Most of them seem to think that writing an essay is as straight forward as writing a letter or making a shopping list. With this level of understanding inherent in students, I am concerned that perhaps we are missing a critical point. I think that point has to do with the training and learning aspects of teachers. Teachers encounter the reality that they are also students of their students as well. This is what Paulo Freire means when he talks about liberal education and non-authoritarian learning processes. If teachers who were students in my *Introduction to Literature* course had difficulties in understanding and writing essays then the students whom they teach will also have difficulties understanding what they are being taught. Learning is a two-way activity or a dialogical process.

### **Freire's Seven Literacy Principles**

This brings me to the issue of providing literacy education in the formal and informal education sector. Literacy education at the elementary level is in the local vernacular or in the language of the community. Most providers of literacy education in both systems need to understand the dynamics of successful literacy education. Paulo Freire gives eight principles that are useful for our purpose:

1. Literacy education is an act of knowing, an act of creating, and not the act of mechanically memorizing letters and syllables.
2. Literacy education must challenge learners to take on the role of subjects in learning both reading and writing.
3. Literacy education must originate from research about the vocabulary universe of learners, which also gives us their thematic universe. The first codifications to be “read,” decodified, by the learners offer possibilities to discuss the concept of culture. To understand culture as a human creation, an extension of the world by men and women through their work, helps to overcome the politically tragic experience of immobility caused by fatalism. If men and women can change, through action and technology (whether incipient or sophisticated), the physical world, which they did not create, why can't they change the world of history—social, economic, and political—which they did not create?
4. Literacy education must be characterized by dialogue as a path to knowledge, which does not invalidate informative discourse, without which there is not knowledge.
5. Literacy education must not dichotomise reading and writing. One does not exist without the other, and it is fundamental to exercise both systematically. Moreover, learning to write and read must also help improve oral expression, thus the need for exercising both.
6. Literacy education must be premised on remembering what it means for thirty- or forty year-old adults, used to the weight of work instruments, to manipulate pencils. At the beginning of this new experience, there may be some discrepancy between the strength exerted and the strength of the pencil. Adults must become reconditioned, little by little, through repeated practice.
7. Literacy education must also be premised on remembering the insecurity of illiterate adults, who will become upset if they feel they are being treated like children. There is no more effective way to respect them than to accept their experiential knowledge for the purpose of going beyond it. Working with learners to create a climate of confidence in which they feel secure is beneficial to the learning process (1996: 128-9).

These principles apply to both adult learners and young school children. The principles are useful because they remind us that providing literacy education to both adults and children is a mammoth task. Even teachers providing literacy at the elementary and primary level have to learn without feeling intimidated, belittled or as a waste of time. The critical point is that even teachers too must become students of their students or of the subjects being taught. Through the process of learning from their students they become aware of the level of difficulties and challenges of students in their learning process. Elementary teachers must learn also to avoid dichotomising reading and writing only, they must improve their oral and written expressions as they teach. Literacy education must be characterized by dialogue as a path to knowledge, rather than serving the need to learn to read and write only.

### **Freire's Principles of Education Practice**

Freire points out that literacy education is not only for the children. It is also for the teachers who provide literacy education. He says:

If the first principle of educational practice is the importance of pedagogical space, the second principle is the existence of subjects, educators and learners, which does not mean they are equal to each other. The fact that both are subjects of the practice does not nullify the specific role of each one. The former are subjects of the act of teaching; the latter are subjects of the act of learning. The former learn as they teach; the latter teach as they learn. They are all subjects of the knowing process, which involves teaching and learning.

A third principle is the importance of content or the object of cognition; given that practice is cognitive by nature, it cannot exist without the object of knowledge, which must be taught by the teacher and learned by students.

On the one hand, and now I speak about the fourth principle, there can be no educational practice that is not directed toward a certain objective, which does not involve a certain dream, and idea of utopia. The direction of educational practice explains its political nature, and this is the fifth principle: the impossibility of an 'asexual,' neutral endeavor.

The educational practice cannot be neutral, however, and must not lead educators to impose, subliminally or not, their taste on learners, whatever those tastes may be. This is the ethical dimension of educational practice, the sixth principle.

Finally, a fundamental starting point is respect for the learner's cultural identity and the aspects of class that mark this identity: the learner's language, syntax, prosody, semantics, and informal knowledge, realized through the experiences the learners bring to school (Freire 1996: 127).

### **Elementary and Primary School Teachers**

The advocacy based on these principles is that educational practice is really a dialogical experience in which educators and learners educate and learn from each other. The learning process involves the experiences of the educators and the learners; the knowledge of the educator and the learner, the language of the learner and the educator—all in constant negotiation and interaction. This is sometimes referred to as the negotiated classroom. To develop a negotiated classroom I suggest that selected schools in both urban and rural areas are monitored closely and evaluated. The findings from this research can then be used as yardsticks to measure the success or failure of a negotiated classroom. If it is a success, a model should be developed and used in many schools. At

the moment, we assume that the curriculum reform is working effectively in Papua New Guinea schools. I think the opposite is true. In the book, *Community Teacher Education in Papua New Guinea* (1996), Denis McLaughlin and Thomas A. O Donoghue point out the importance of a reflective teacher. Their comments support the researches done by others on the importance of teacher education (see Kenehe, 1981; Otto 1989; Fife, 1993; Kian 1996; Avalos, 1989, Pearse et. al, 1990; MaNamara 1989: 24):

Changes in teacher education are necessary in PNG. Community school teachers do not appear to speak English well enough to be able to teach the language effectively. Many teachers do not really understand all that they are teaching. Teachers generally fail to provide for individual differences, focusing on prescribed lesson detail rather than on pupils' needs. While schools display a variety of working conditions and problems that require different, appropriate responses, most teachers are unable to analyse the situation, diagnose needs and develop relevant strategies to enhance the children's learning (MacLaughlin and O' Donoghue 1996: 89).

For the reformed education system in Papua New Guinea to work effectively, it must take into account the ideas and concerns raised here. At the receiving end of the product of the reformed education system is the university level of education. Many students coming through the reformed education system to the UPNG have so much difficulty in their written expressions, especially with essay writing. Many students have great difficulty writing essays and their written expression is so poor that I wonder how they were taught in schools before entering the university. Some of these students should never be at the university at all. Students write without using resources from the library; arguments made in essays are poorly researched, structured and presented. The staple diet of good essays is about using secondary references in supportive arguments. Most students do not read the recommended readings and texts for a course. Students ignore the importance of reading to help them to write persuasively and effectively. They come up with all kinds of excuses for the lack of reading materials outside the course studied. I assume this kind of habit was instilled in them at the earliest age in the education system.

### **Reading Interests of Teachers**

In their study, McLaughlin and O'Donoghue (1996: 108) observed the reading interests of teachers studying at UPNG was restricted to daily newspapers (33%), school text books (31%), study books (32%), Bible (27%), religious books (15%), and magazines (11%). Such reading practices suggest that learning is only limited to certain texts thereby limiting a broader understanding of concepts and their applications. The problem created as a result of this, is that students struggle to grasp concepts at their embedded level:

For Papua New Guineans, it is not a matter of translation but concept acquisition. They have to understand the reality that the symbols represent, before they can use the symbols intelligently. For those attempting to negotiate higher education, reading text books can be an incomprehensible and tedious experience. For no

matter how many times a dictionary is used, the meaning of individual words do not assist in cracking the language code, that has its meaning embedded in alien concepts. Educated Papua New Guineans often exemplify this phenomenon in their own use of a variety of language when explaining a topic (McLaughlin and O'Donoghue 1996: 108)

The culture of reading compliments the culture of writing. Students must be taught to read and write effectively. We are witnessing students' inability to read beyond the primary texts and so their writing suffers from what is described as impoverished forms of writing. The result of impoverished writing is that students perform poorly in their studies. I couldn't agree more with McLaughlin and O'Donoghue's conclusion on teacher education and university learning:

Traditional illiterate cultures describe learning as a transferral of knowledge, which is based on inspiration and memory (Lindstrom 1990): "Acts of learning in a culture which is illiterate by necessity, have to be orientated towards reproducing" (Saljo 1987: 104). Because such conceptualisations are so contrasting, PNG teachers experience a type of academic culture shock during their initial months at university. In time, students either develop metacognitive skills to promote complex thinking (McLaughlin 1991c) or resort to tried survival tactics (McLaughlin 1995) or a combination of both. Associated with this is the conclusion that learning problems in English for these PNG students are not necessarily language code problems but conceptual ones. Clearly then, those with the responsibility of teaching teacher educators should undertake an in-depth cultural analysis of the PNG context. This must be a prerequisite if quality education is to be promoted in PNG (1996: 111).

Perhaps we need to consider alternative approaches used in developing literacy practice in Papua New Guinea. Several models used are those undertaken by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) as revealed by Graig Spaulding and Mike Trainum (see Spaulding 1996; Trainum 1996). In a developmental research model, Sakarepe Kamene and myself conducted a workshop on developing the writing skills of villagers with basic literacy skills. In the workshop based environment, we observed that most were willing to learn beyond the basic literacy level. Important as it is, we emphasized a non-intimidating learning environment that is blended into their daily routines, their lives, cultures, ecology, and social behaviour. The product of this workshop is the first book ever written by any villagers on their own, in the languages they use in their lives, (see *Zia Writes of Waria: Raitim Stori Bilong Laip*). A conclusion I draw from this experience is that our assumptions about literacy, often are based on standard evaluation methodologies that are structured on perceived results. Improvement in literacy level is often attributed to the success in a formal education system, but where this fails we argue that there is nothing much we can do. This is a false myth that has affected our understanding of the dynamics at various levels of literacy development in both the formal and informal system of education. I suggest we re-evaluate our methodologies in developing literacy programs in Papua New Guinea.

The delivery of literacy education at all levels of the education system must be consistent with the requirements of the Department of Education. These requirements are there to assist teachers to effectively prepare their students to be effective communicators and citizens. Without these, students face more difficulties in their lives. As providers of education to the young people of Papua New Guinea we must concern ourselves with how we are teaching our students in the education system.

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