

Enhancing the relevance of learning in Upper Primary, High and Secondary Schools – experiences from Simbu Province

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Abstract

The need to enhance the relevance of education is a central component of the Government's Education Reform Agenda. This is reflected in the education policy and curriculum environment that encourages schools to ensure learning of practical skills, knowledge and attitudes is relevant to the needs of local communities.

Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), an international development agency that works through volunteers, is working with Simbu Provincial Government to enhance the relevance of students' learning. The programme adopts an integrated strategy for improving the relevance of learning by focusing on skills, knowledge and attitudes that will enable people to undertake activities that enhance rural livelihoods, such as food security, income generation, and associated appropriate technologies. This approach recognises that whole-school changes are necessary to support the preparation of students for productive living in local communities. School-community and school-school linkages will be developed and strengthened to enable schools to identify and promote post-school livelihood opportunities. Teachers at the primary and secondary level will be supported to develop teaching materials focused on local resource management and community development needs, and to develop mechanisms to continue to review and update teaching content to ensure it remains relevant. VSO PNG currently has ten international volunteers working towards the objectives of the programme, with around five more placements expected to begin over the next year.

This paper will describe the joint Simbu Education Division and VSO programme, and its strategies for overcoming challenges on the ground, in order to contribute to an understanding of ways to implement the vision of enhancing relevant education for school leavers.

Joseph Wainge dropped out of school in Grade 9 because he had achieved only "average grades", and knew he had no hope of continuing into Grade 10. He started to grow rice, which he had learnt about at school, and started experimenting with the use of pesticides and herbicides to increase the yield of both the rice and his coffee garden. However, he found he lacked budgeting and money handling skills. He was able to use some of what he learnt in Maths lessons to help him with the budgeting while Agriculture lessons had taught him to grow rice. Joseph is one of 74 school-leavers in the Kerowaghi and Kundiawa districts of Simbu who were interviewed in 2004 to identify what subjects they perceived as useful after they had left school. Fifty of the interviewees identified Agriculture as useful to their post-schooling income generation activities, while money handling skills learnt in Commerce and Maths were also valued. Generally, the academic subjects were perceived as being less useful than practical subjects (Lloyd-Cape, 2004).

The research complements the widespread acknowledgement that schools in PNG are failing to equip the 80% of school leavers who return to live a village based lifestyle with skills and knowledge relevant for a productive life after school (Matane, 1986 and DOE, 1990, 22). The bias within schools towards the needs of formal employment – the emphasis on academic subjects - is well entrenched. Community expectations for students to find formal employment after leaving school are rarely fulfilled, fuelling a sense of individual failure and helplessness on the part of the student, and community disillusionment with the education system (Dinnen, 2001, 195). It is a significant challenge to rebalance the focus of schools so that all school-leavers are equipped with skills and knowledge relevant for a productive life after school. One approach is being developed in Simbu Province where the Provincial Education Division and Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) are working together to support relevant education in Upper Primary, High and Secondary Schools. The programme adopts a holistic and a whole-school approach which supports the Government's Education Plan (DOE, 2004), the drive for self-reliance and the Government's Program for Recovery and Development, by facilitating export-driven economic growth and rural development (DONP, 2004). It enhances recent curriculum developments, including the Upper Primary subject *Making A Living*, and planned developments of the lower secondary school syllabi.

Simbu Province is the smallest but most densely populated of all Papua New Guinea's provinces. A population of approximately 280,000 is spread over 6,000 km² of extremely rugged and often inaccessible terrain (Hanson et al. 2001). Ninety-six percent of the population lives in rural areas. Simbu is a relatively poor province and most people have low to very low incomes. Agriculture is the most common productive activity with low and moderate intensity sweet potato gardens adopted as typical subsistence strategies. A very minimal cash economy has developed in the province, mainly from smallholder cash cropping of coffee. Subsistence activities are particularly important for women, accounting for 81% of employment, with the selling of food crops and cooked food being common activities for generating income. The province suffered from severe droughts and frosts in 1997/8, attributed to the El Nino weather pattern, which left around 55,000 people with no food in their gardens and forced them to survive on famine foods (Allen & Bourke, 1997). The drought highlighted the vulnerability of existing agricultural strategies and prompted efforts to diversify village garden plantings to reduce the dependency on traditional staples. Wheat and rice cultivation have been advocated in the last few years as additional strategies, however agricultural extension services are constrained and communities lack access to sources of agricultural information.¹

There is a widespread desire in Simbu to prevent a repeat of the drought, and this has contributed to a general acceptance of the need for change, and a willingness to take risks to bring about development. The Simbu Education Division has identified the need to move away from the safety of business as usual towards a vision of education that provides skills and knowledge to help all school leavers lead productive lives. VSO has built strong relationships with Simbu High and Secondary schools and the

¹ Agricultural extension services are constrained by lack of resources and capacity and within Simbu. The ratio for extension workers to farmers is, on average 1: 13,000.

Simbu Education Division and this has enabled shared change objectives to be identified that target the root causes of problems. The Simbu Education Division and VSO have a shared vision, and are now partners in a joint programme, to prepare students in Simbu for productive living in local communities.

VSO is an international development agency that works through volunteers and supports partner organisations by bringing together people from different cultures and backgrounds, enabling them to share skills and learning. VSO recruits volunteers from developing countries in Kenya, the Philippines, and India, and from Western societies through agencies in Canada, the Netherlands and the U.K. VSO represents a way of working in development that is about more than providing money. Volunteers have a facilitating role in working towards shared change objectives that target the root causes of problems, asking questions from an outside perspective and sharing skills and experience from one context that that can be adapted in another. The approach has consistently proved to be an effective way to create new solutions to problems. VSO PNG is one of the very few non-religious based organisations working in secondary and high schools, where it has been active for more than 40 years. VSO PNG has developed an in-depth understanding of the education sector, and has developed strong relationships with schools and government. It is therefore ideally positioned to implement school-based change programmes. Recently VSO has begun to disengage from placing volunteers in purely service delivery positions, such as teachers teaching, to focus instead on capacity building, support and training. The overall aim of the VSO PNG Education Programme is: “To enhance learning opportunities within Upper Primary Schools, High and Secondary Schools and Vocational Training Centres to enable people to use more skills, knowledge and attitudes to live productively within their communities”. VSO is in the process of finalising a partnership agreement with the Department of Simbu (Division of Education, Division of Primary Industry, and Division of Community and Youth Services), and is in the process of developing partnership agreements with key high and secondary schools.² The partnership agreements make explicit the goal of working together to achieve the programme aim. There are three key programme objectives, and support for HIV and AIDS and gender is mainstreamed within them:

1. To enable high and secondary schools to plan, teach, assess and evaluate practical skills, knowledge and attitudes in a way that is relevant to local community needs.
2. To develop a vibrant network of organisations and communities that will help foster school-community linkages.
3. To enable Upper Primary Schools to plan, teach, assess and evaluate *Making a Living* in a way that is relevant to local needs.

² Support will also be given to help build the capacity of organisations that VSO has developed partnership agreements with.

To enable high and secondary schools to plan, teach, assess and evaluate practical skills, knowledge and attitudes in a way that is relevant to local community needs.

VSO has developed a strong relationship with Rosary Secondary School in Simbu. In 1999 two VSO International Volunteers, Peter and Janet Cradock, were able to support the school's initiative to develop a school-based 'Rural Technology and Enterprise' curriculum. The idea was to focus on integrated skills that students would be able to use once they returned to a rural lifestyle within Agriculture, Practical Skills, Home Economics, Commerce and Business Studies. Innovative ideas emerged at the school, including the formation of a Rural Technology and Enterprise Department to formally integrate the practical skills-based subjects, and extension of agriculture support into surrounding communities. Students and surrounding communities enthusiastically embraced rice cultivation and today the National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI) is conducting trials on rice varieties in the school grounds. Teachers from the school are now sharing lessons learnt with the Curriculum Development Division to inform the Lower Secondary Curriculum Reforms. This focus at Rosary Secondary School, on meeting the socio-economic needs of school leavers returning to the village, and on the needs of surrounding communities, has paralleled the Government's Education Reform Agenda. It has now evolved into recognition of the need for a whole school approach, and for a school development plan to support this approach. Three VSO international volunteers are currently working at Rosary Secondary School. Two are working as teachers to support the Rural Technology and Enterprise Department³, while another⁴ is helping the school to prepare a school development plan.

Learning from Rosary Secondary School, and in particular the realization that a whole school approach is necessary to support relevant education, has become the basis of the VSO PNG Education Programme to meet its objective at secondary level. The whole school approach is given backbone by a goal-setting and communication tool - the 'relevant education matrix'. This matrix provides a way for high and secondary schools in Simbu to identify the whole school changes necessary to support relevant education, to assess their current situation, and to set goals. The matrix also serves as a monitoring and evaluation tool, which allows high and secondary schools to assess their progress. The 'relevant education matrix', based on a similar tool developed in Bangladesh, was developed at a three-day workshop in Minz with key personnel from the Simbu Division of Education, Head Teachers and Principals from the 12 high or secondary schools in Simbu, and VSO international volunteers working in Simbu. The matrix was refined at a follow-up workshop in Port Moresby, with the help of National Department of Education officials and at a workshop in Mt Hagen with VSO volunteers and partners. Through this participatory process a high level of ownership for the matrix has developed amongst secondary level stakeholders.

The VSO PNG Education Programme is exploring how to support all of the province's 12 high and secondary schools, and joint research is being undertaken to identify agricultural teaching needs. Ideally, the implementation of the whole-school approach would be supported by a range of interventions, which could include placing

³ Jane Madden and John Whaley

⁴ Mark Bower

international volunteers in Simbu high or secondary schools. However, identifying the funds to allow this to happen is still a challenge. Support is already being provided for Mt Wilhelm High School through a VSO international volunteer.⁵ The school is keen to develop wheat cultivation, and is exploring the integration of Practical Skills, Agriculture, Home Economics and Commerce, to better teach students the skills needed to design, manage and review their own agriculturally-based micro-enterprise projects. VSO is also in the process of recruiting an English Teaching Advisor to work with the High and Secondary schools in Simbu, to help address concerns about maintaining standards in English language teaching.

To enable Upper Primary Schools to plan, teach, assess and evaluate Making a Living in a way that is relevant to local needs.

Simbu Division of Education has identified a number of challenges with implementation of *Making A Living*. The syllabus is outcomes-based, and involves a paradigm shift in teacher pedagogy and methodology. It is also ambitious, with high expectations of schools, teachers and surrounding communities. Limited pre-implementation training is being provided for teachers, while District Education Officers are expected to ensure communities understand the content and expectations within the new syllabi. There are indications that this is not happening. Simbu Province is one of the provinces where *Making A Living* was trailed, however teachers, head teachers and school inspectors are reporting problems with implementation, and in particular problems with developing appropriate new resource materials and practical projects. Without support from people who are skilled and experienced in these areas, and who are working with local communities and government agencies to achieve sustainable changes, there is a real risk that the introduction of *Making A Living* will founder.

The Simbu Division of Education and VSO will work together to deliver training and support to *Making A Living* teachers through the placement of at least one peripatetic international volunteer. The volunteer is expected to be in place for the 2006 and 2007 school years. The key tasks for the volunteer will be to work with Primary School Inspectors to conduct *Making A Living* in-service training, and to support the development of project-based units of work and effective assessment and evaluation strategies. The volunteer will also work with District Education Officers to help identify and develop links between schools, communities and other stakeholders. The merits of a matrix style goal-setting and communication tool will be explored, to scaffold changes identified by local stakeholders as necessary to promote relevant education at the Upper Primary level. Although the focus of interventions will be province-wide, the VSO Education Programme recognises that support at different levels within an education cluster provides greater opportunity for mutual reinforcement. The ‘relevant education matrix’ for high and secondary schools includes the challenge to build linkages with feeder upper primary schools, and interventions at the upper primary level will encourage schools to build vertical and horizontal linkages with other schools in their education cluster.

⁵ Eugene Ezebilo.

The Division of Primary Industry and VSO are working to develop a project to reduce vulnerability to soil erosion and soil fertility decline in the Sinasina/Yonggamugl District of Simbu. The proposal that has been developed integrates with the VSO PNG Education Programme, and is built around assistance for teachers to develop and implement *Making A Living* units of work that address problems related to soil erosion and land degradation. *Making A Living* units of work have already been developed as part of the research for the project, with the help of Rachael Konaka from the DOE Curriculum Development Division. The VSO international volunteer Making A Living Trainer will work to identify and promote examples of ‘good practice’, and to identify organisations and ‘experts’ that could be linked with Upper Primary schools to help in the planning and development of *Making A Living* units of work.

To develop a vibrant network of organisations and communities that will help foster school-community linkages.

If the vision of relevant education for all school leavers is to be achieved, there need to be mechanisms developed, at the school level, through which the skills and knowledge relevant to productive living in local communities are identified and integrated into the teaching. This involves the development of school-community linkages, and linkages between schools and organisations involved with identifying the skills and knowledge needs of local communities. However there are significant challenges with this. A VSO international volunteer⁶ recently completed a study for the VSO PNG Education Programme on school-community linkages at the primary level in Simbu (Brooks, 2005). He found that although there was genuine enthusiasm in communities for more relevant and practical teaching, there were few if any links between the school and community to support planning, teaching, assessment and evaluation of curriculum at the schools, including *Making A Living*.⁷ Schools feared that community members, if involved in the school in new ways, would request payment, while teachers perceived allowing community members into the classroom as a threat to their responsibility to provide the teaching. Neither the schools nor the community thought that involvement in the curriculum was a role for the School Board of Management. Enhanced community involvement in schools requires parents and communities seeing their involvement as a worthwhile investment in the education of their students, as part of a changed vision of school as a tool for the community to meet its own needs.

Simbu Youth Motivators is a High School-leaver national volunteer scheme that emerged from the community extension work conducted by Rosary Secondary School. The vision is for grade 10 school-leavers to volunteer as agriculture extension and social development workers in their home communities, increasing the take-up of new practical skills and agricultural strategies, and demonstrating the value of school-leavers to their home community. Simbu Youth Motivators will also identify the skills and knowledge needs of the school-leavers’ home communities,

⁶ Andrew Brooks.

⁷ The study found that teacher and head teacher mobility worked against good school-community relationships, although the benefit was that ideas and models of good practice can spread quickly.

passing this information on to the high or secondary school. The Simbu Division of Community and Youth Services is interested in incorporating the scheme within its activities, and VSO international volunteer⁸ is working alongside a local counterpart from the Simbu Division of Primary Industry to identify and support the first group of school-leaver volunteers from Rosary Secondary School. VSO is funding a month-long study visit to the Philippines for three of the project's managers to undertake a Certificate Course on Volunteer Programme Development and Management at Xavier University. An adaptation of the Students' training in Agriculture-Related Reliance Through Schools (STARTS) programme in the Eastern Highlands is being considered. The idea is for grade 10 school-leaver volunteers to work as mentors with grade 8 school-leavers in their home community, to support practical enterprise projects. The local Upper Primary School and the local High or Secondary school would jointly organise the scheme. Additional enterprise skills training and basic start-up resources for the projects will be sourced from the local high or secondary school, using funds contributed by grade 8 school-leavers and matched by the Provincial Government or an external funding agency.⁹

A VSO international volunteer is currently being recruited as a music and drama trainer for youth and church groups in Kerowagi District. The idea was developed in a workshop at Wagi village with representatives from local communities, church groups and schools. The international volunteer will teach music and drama skills to village-based youth and church groups, who will then be supported to go into local schools to teach music and drama. There is currently no music or drama teaching in schools in Kerowagi District. Music and drama will also be used as a vehicle for awareness messages about such issues as HIV and AIDS, drugs, and the environment. A successful project will provide a model for ways that communities can become involved in local schools, and use schools to both meet their needs and the needs of the school.

The VSO PNG Education Programme is holistic, seeking to help partner organisations make changes across different levels and sectors of the education system in Simbu. Although many operational decisions are made by VSO's partner organisations in Simbu, it has become increasingly difficult to support the programme from the VSO Programme Office in Madang. To overcome this difficulty two VSO staff members¹⁰ are now working in Kundiawa as on-the-ground facilitators. Their role is to help partner organisations and VSO international volunteers work towards the shared change objectives of the VSO PNG Education Programme.

Conclusion

Although the programme is in an introductory stage and has yet to be formally evaluated, there are a few tentative conclusions that can be drawn. VSO's experience in Simbu has demonstrated that complex issues such as enhancing relevant education for school leavers requires multiple interventions within a province, which need to be developed in partnership with the education authorities. The adoption of a whole

⁸ Athar Masoodi.

⁹ There is also scope for grade 10 school leaver volunteers to work with MAL students within their local Upper Primary School, assisting teachers.

¹⁰ Robert Barneveld and Clarieke Hidden.

school approach, and the development of the matrix to enable high and secondary schools in Simbu to assess the extent to which their teaching is relevant to local needs, is a reflection of the need to build consensus and trust before trying to implement change. A range of interventions, at a number of levels – Upper Primary, High and Secondary – can be mutually supporting and this enhances the likelihood of the change being sustainable.

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