

UPNG Students' Voices: On vernacular education

Is vernacular education in Papua New Guinea doomed to failure?

Jaylo:

The vernacular education system in PNG is ineffective, and most schools are way back to reach the standard of education, especially in the rural areas. ... Vernacular education is failing simply because, when it was introduced, the educational system was not prepared for it – the teachers were not prepared, the infrastructure were not in place, and they also had not planned the numbers of students per classroom. This created problems for schools throughout the country. The effect of it was, they collected Grade 6 to Grade 10 dropouts on the streets to teach students in the class. Most of the teachers are not qualified enough to teach students on what they should learn. Most teachers teach them garbage in class. They do not even translate tok ples words into tok pisin or English word correctly. Students learn nothing in most classes.

Vernacular education should be taught properly, because it is the basics of the educational system. If it is well planned and organized, it should be a very effective education system. The teachers should be qualified enough to teach the basics. The teachers should be graduated with degrees in teaching, so that they do not confuse their students in class. The teachers must know their own language fluently, so that they can translate words correctly into English or tok pisin.

Vernacular education system was not taken seriously into consideration by our government, when introducing the system into the country. It took it lightly, and now this vernacular education is falling apart. The government should work something out to improve the system by collecting the teaching degree holders to teach the students, and also to improve school infrastructure, i.e., build new classrooms to cater for all the students, without causing rooms to be flooded with students.

Stefan S.:

Vernacular education in PNG has been doomed from the start. But, one might ask, is it not easier to teach a child in their first language, rather than teaching them a whole new language, i.e., English? It is a well-known fact that English is our official language, used at all levels of society and in government. As such, you can see that vernacular education is a flawed system that has more of a negative than a positive impact on any child's future.

Vernacular education makes it harder for a child to grasp English, as they progress in school; it can result in them failing their higher education exams, which are all written in English. It also teaches a child to have language and cultural barriers that make them isolated from social interaction with other ethnic groups in higher level educational institutions. It is expensive to create learning aids in vernacular, and as a result millions would be wasted, as PNG has over 800 languages.

Although it is good for cultural preservation, it divides us as a nation, so there is no national unity. It helps the child grasp concepts faster, but it also impedes them, as they will still sit for exams in English.

It helps in class participation, as they feel more open in their language, but creates barriers that make them shy in presenting in English later on in their education.

Vernacular education is riddled with flaws, and does not necessarily aid students with skills that benefit them later in life. In these modern times, we strive for national unity, as stated in our national pledge. It is true that cultural preservation is needed - but is it, at the cost of our children's education? A child's education is top priority, and the future of the nation rests in their hands. The future of PNG, united or divided, depends on what we teach our children today.

Jacklyn K.:

Vernacular education in PNG cannot survive, due to the changing world that we are living in.

Reasons:

1. Today, there is a lot of intermarriage from different provinces. A child can be of 4 or 5 provinces within PNG. It would be very difficult for them to learn a vernacular. Tokples from one province is different from another province, or even district to district. If that child grows up speaking or learning just one tokples, then it will cause dispute or disunity between the parents.
2. Most people today are not fluent tokples speakers, even the kids or people in the village don't know how to speak 'pure' tokples. Therefore, who will write and compose all the teaching materials? It takes a fluent speaker to do that. Even the policy makers holding high positions in the government, private sectors and NGOs are not fluent tokples speakers.
3. Some vernaculars have no counting system. Therefore, how will the students know how to count, when learning vernacular? Counting is a very important thing today.
4. You have to know your ABCs before you can write these vernaculars into teaching materials. Without knowing your ABCs, how will you read and write your vernacular?

Vernacular is not a standardized language used around the world. Therefore, there is no way anyone can understand you outside of your little village/district. Doing away with vernacular education in PNG is heading to success, because of the reasons stated above. Example: As you can see today in the city, all the schools, starting from the elementary up to primary and secondary, they don't learn vernacular. Even some of the rural schools in the village, they teach English instead of vernacular.

I would say that vernacular education in PNG will not succeed. Instead, English will be a successful language, taught at all levels of education, both in urban and rural areas of Papua New Guinea.

Elisha P.:

Vernacular education in PNG is doomed to failure. In the past two decades, the Government has been trying to impose this system, which aims to educate children from younger age in elementary to tertiary institutions in their own vernacular (in PNG, that means, in over 800 languages). When looking at this educational system, there are a few things that need to be considered:

First, it is impossible to impose a vernacular system of education in our country, because there are over 800 languages in PNG – in each province, every district, village, clan, sub clans and tribes have different vernaculars.

Second, looking at the economy of the country, the Government would spend more – on books that need to be written in each vernacular, on different teachers for different vernaculars, building more classrooms, etc. More money would have to be spent on this educational system, and this would create a budget deficit for our country, leading to more borrowing from other countries.

Third, looking at the political aspect: vernacular education could cause disunity amongst our parliamentarians – they would be divided by their vernaculars. This would lead to poor communication, which leads to poor organization and planning in the running of the country. Then, there wouldn't be what we used to say in our pledge – “one people”/”one nation” – because of disunity.

When we look at a case study in Kenya in East Africa, it has been proved that their government has wasted a lot of money, trying to impose that system. And also, it has shown that all the laws are written in the universal language, English, and as much as you want to impose the vernacular education system, it will do no good, because in the end you will end up with the laws in English and textbooks in English, in tertiary institutions. We cannot escape the fact that English is a universal language, and that we need it to communicate with our international friends, because no one can become an island. This study also shows that vernacular education in early learning results in poor English skills. For example, when looking at UPNG, you will see Engans going around with Engans and Papuans going around with Papuans. This is social disunity here, because of their vernacular and where they come from (culture). There is enough disunity here.

As you can see, vernacular education affects the country socially, culturally, politically and economically, and it is doomed to failure. It is just like trying to catch raindrops in different places with just one bucket – it is impossible!

Gordon P.:

In our educational system, the concept of teaching vernacular languages to primary school children is a very controversial subject. Now, is vernacular education in Papua New Guinea doomed to failure? Some people may think that it is the way forward, and a means to preserving our languages and culture. However, I strongly believe that this form of education is a doomed method, because:

First, children nowadays learn English and Tok Pisin before Tok Ples, or they don't learn Tok Ples at all. Children playing outside and in classrooms will most likely communicate through English or Tok Pisin, not the Tok Ples.

Second, it will be hard to choose which languages to study. In a place like the National Capital, where different cultures are living together, it will be difficult to choose a vernacular to study. Also, parents might not want kids to study other languages, apart from their own mother tongue.

Finally, it would be a difficult and costly exercise. Teachers in primary school may not be from the area; hence, they will need training also; hence, it will be redundant to teach the teachers and the children again.

Therefore, we should teach English, which is the modern day language people use to communicate. The world is communicating through English, and so we should get up to date. However, it should be the responsibility of the parents to teach their children vernacular, because languages are fast dying out.

Naomi M.:

Education is one of the goals in PNG Millennium Development Goals (MDG), to be achieved before 2050. The aim of vernacular education was that the students have a good foundation and understanding before they can correlate to English learning. Vernacular education was introduced to many parts of PNG, especially in rural settings, for early learning of children in elementary schools. The main language being taught there is Tok Pisin, since it is widely spoken.

Now, in the context of Tok Pisin and Tok Ples languages, there is no correlation or linkage with English – they are totally different. There are many words in English that Tok Ples languages cannot account for. So how can we lay a good educational foundation for children in early learning, when there is the difference that co-exists in the midst? This would greatly contribute to confusion in early learning.

It can be said that learning two or three languages will help in learning. But how can the children in their early years learn when their minds are still developing? It is better that English be taught, rather than the vernacular, so that the students are grounded in an early English foundation. It is also seen in most children learning vernacular that they find it hard to speak English. Now, English is the main language of communication, and how can you communicate or excel in your education, if you don't know how to speak English better?

Learning in English will lay a better foundation, as opposed to learning in vernacular languages, since they are different from English, while English is the medium of instruction at higher levels. Students find it hard to speak English when they are first taught in the vernacular language. This drastically affects their education. Hence, vernacular education in PNG is doomed to failure.

“Education is the best provision for old age (Socrates). So, PNG: the way forward for education in our nation for a brighter tomorrow is English!

Dinoke G.:

Vernacular education is education using vernacular (Tok Ples) as the language of instruction. I strongly believe that vernacular education has not, will not, and will never work in Papua New Guinea, simply because of the linguistic diversity in PNG. With PNG leading the world with over 830 different languages, how can PNG institutionalize vernacular education?

Vernacular education should not be implemented anywhere in PNG. It has serious implications for the economy, as well as in the socio-cultural and the political arena.

1. Economy: economically, it is **impossible** to implement vernacular education in PNG, as it is a very costly exercise. Having over 830 different languages means training teachers to teach in this huge variety of languages, and providing them with the necessary facilities to implement such programs. There will have to be so many schools, and the system becomes even more complex for both the teachers and the students. So, in terms of the expenses, vernacular education should not be implemented, as it will never work, due to the expenses involved!!

2. Socio-cultural factors: As diverse as we are now, regionalism already exists – it is an undeniable fact. All that vernacular education is doing is making the situation worse. People will not be able to communicate freely, and there will be misunderstanding among Papua New Guineans. “Every man for himself” mentality will grow, and there will always be miscommunication and misunderstanding among Papua New Guineans.

3. Politically: there will be diversity in the Parliament. In order for cooperation to take place, and for development to proceed, there must be one language and a common understanding among our parliamentarians. If vernacular education is implemented, how can the Parliament exist, and why should it exist, if members can’t communicate?

English is the language that has been guiding and creating a sense of commonness in PNG since development and the first colonization. Every kw, every textbook, every readings book and newspaper – everything is written in English! Through English, Papua New Guineans have been able to communicate amongst themselves! Vernacular education breaks that commonness and creates communication barriers amongst Papua New Guineans. For example, in the Sine Sine Yongomugl District, as you move from tribe to tribe and clan to clan, the language changes. There is variation in dialect, tone, and even the language itself. Vernacular education will be too costly to run, and it will create barriers among people of the same district.

Therefore, the English language should remain as the only language of instruction at all levels. Vernacular education is too costly, it creates cultural barriers, and it hinders development.

Robinson L.:

Re-introducing vernacular education in schools is not a step forward for PNG, for us to develop as a country. This is because vernacular education

1. Encourages linguistic and cultural division
2. Presents an educational challenge, and
3. Hinders economic and international affairs.

How does it encourage linguistic and cultural division? Firstly, vernacular education has the potential to impose linguistic and cultural divides among Papua New Guineans. A vernacular language carries with it the cultural values, beliefs and ideas of a distinct group of people; since PNG has 800 plus language groups, the introduction of vernacular education will further divide the beliefs of everyone living in PNG. For example, societies in the Highlands regions may have different approaches to solving issues, than those in the Southern region. There is no unified way of thinking, which vernacular education stands for.

What are the educational challenges that vernacular education would pose? It would be a costly and time-consuming task to research and produce school materials for a vernacular education system for over 800 plus language groups. Some languages themselves don't even have an alphabet or a counting system. The current government today has problems with education in the country, such as OBE, teacher shortages,, lack of school infrastructure and materials.

How would vernacular education hinder economic and international affairs? For Papua New Guinea to develop and make its mark on the global community, it is important that citizens of PNG know the language of trade and international relations, which is English. Vernacular education encourages people to speak other languages, apart from English. In countries, such as Korea and Malaysia, it is a known fact that most schools have changed their syllabuses into English, because the majority of people living in these countries do not know how to speak English, and that makes it difficult for them to communicate with the outside countries.

If there is any hope for Papua New Guinea to move forward, then it is a must that the people be united. Vernacular education is a barrier to unity and development – it threatens to isolate PNG from the rest of the world, and so, it is important that vernacular education is not re-introduced.