

## Community Based Curriculum Development in Papua New Guinea: A CASE STUDY

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### Introduction

In recent years in Papua New Guinea (PNG) there has been a nationwide promotion of vernacular literacy for all ages. However, the teaching and learning of vernacular literacy is not an easy task for a nation of 860 languages, as vernacular literacy for oral languages involves setting up their orthography, preparing materials and training teachers. These time-consuming tasks only can be successfully accomplished by collaborative work between the local people and expatriates.

This paper presents a case study of collaborative work in establishing a vernacular school for young children. When I began work as a literacy consultant and trainer with the Maiwala people in 1990, I also initiated an associated research study (Nagai, 1993). It was not conducted using a conventional style of well-planned or well-organised inquiry. Rather, it was an experiential process of collaborative inquiry tailored to the Maiwala people and myself. It also was a process of developing a close human relationship between the people and myself. On the basis of this first study, I explored other possible approaches to research methodology. Then, I returned to Maiwala to conduct the second study in 1995 and 1996.

During the first study, we developed a curriculum and a method of teaching for the Maiwala Vernacular Preparatory School1, and for a teacher training programme for the Milne Bay region. During the second study, we developed methods of assessment and evaluation within the same curriculum.

Through the processes of these two research studies, the Maiwala people and I have made a break-through from the typical relationship between the expatriate as a 'superior researcher' and the local people as the 'inferior researched'. This paper commends the advantage of having the local people as co-researchers in the development of research

methodology as well as in the development of a school curriculum and a teacher training programme.

#### Education in PNG

Since Western schooling was first introduced by missionaries in the late 19th century, PNG has had a history of changing education and language policies. Initially most primary education was provided by various church missions. In the mission schools, the local vernacular or lingua franca of that region was used as the language of instruction. On the other hand, colonial governments used English in government schools. Then, after World War II, the Australian government established the first curricula for the territory of PNG that emphasised the teaching of English. After independence in 1975,

the English language policy continued, due to the resistance to change by influential expatriate staff of the University of PNG and various Government departments. As a result, children lost their control over thinking and expressing themselves freely in their first language:

[In the school] all conversations had to be in English despite the fact that at this stage I had no English vocabulary. Teachers made sure we followed this 'golden rule' . . . Children caught breaking this rule were punished with grass-cutting, extra work or smacks. I remember being completely inhibited during my first years at school. I could no longer chat idly with my mates. . . I was like a vegetable. I was controlled by the limits of my vocabulary. My days were spent listening to my teacher. Many questions I wanted to ask remained unasked because I did not have the ability to express them in English. Eventually, I found it much easier just to sit and listen rather than attempt to speak, so I sat and listened. (Giraure, 1976: 62)

The problem of the English policy was becoming acute, and many parents began to complain about the alienation of their children from community life and local culture. As a result, teaching in the vernacular prior to commencing primary school began in the North Solomons Province in the late 1970s. It was not to replace the existing English policy, but to "ease children's transition from home into a Western-inspired education system" (Delpit and Kemelfield, 1986: 7). This Village Vernacular School (later, called Vernacular Preparatory School) inspired other provinces such as East New Britain and Enga to make similar adaptations.

Thus the original ideas of vernacular education grew out of the need of local people as a bottom-up model. However, it was promoted by the PNG government as a top-down model when vernacular education was officially recognised as part of the education policy in 1986. Once it had become a nationwide policy, everybody was expected to turn around and believe that "knowledge of local history and tradition is best transmitted through the mother tongue" (National Department of Education, 1986:18).

Moreover, every community or language group was expected to begin their own community-based vernacular school.

For example, in Milne Bay Province, the officer in charge of vernacular schools at that time was very keen to start several around the Alotau area in order to show advanced progress to visitors more easily (Nagai, 1993). When I was asked to assist to get such schools going in three communities around the Alotau area, I discovered that the people of these communities lacked conviction of the necessity for such a school.

However, Maiwala was different. The officer did not count on them, but the community caught on to the idea of vernacular preparatory school and asked for the officer's assistance. Although he could not offer financial assistance, he suggested to the community that they seek assistance from me, a literacy consultant, for materials production and teacher training.

The Government policy on children's vernacular literacy has developed further in recent years. From the late 1980s to 1993, initial vernacular literacy was encouraged through one year of vernacular preparatory school or grade one of primary school throughout PNG. Then, in 1994, a new system of three years of initial vernacular education was established prior to transfer to English language education.

#### The Research Community

A choice of a research community is often justified by various reasons. In this research, however, I simply chose Maiwala community because of

my close association with the people there. I sensed my on-going association with them right at the beginning in 1990, when I was invited to help them establish their vernacular preparatory school. Since then, I have developed a sense of belonging or 'bonding' (Brewster and Brewster, 1982) to the community. I believe that 'bonding' is crucial to the understanding of social interaction from the insiders' point of view.

The Maiwala community is one of 860 language/culture groups in PNG. It is a small community with a population of approximately 550. It is situated at the neck of Milne Bay. Members of the community speak the Maiwala language that belongs to the Taupota language family in Milne Bay Province. Many of the older people at Maiwala also speak Kwato Suwau, the mission language developed and used by the Kwato Mission.

During my association with the members of the community, I have discovered the unique features of the community during this period. One of the unique features of the Maiwala community is the writing of their language. Oral languages were often written first by outsiders who were non-native speakers. However, it was the Maiwala people who first wrote their own language themselves in 1990. They also had

strong ideas on the spelling of their language2.

Another unique feature is the Maiwala canoe. In the pre-missionary days, Maiwala warriors were the fiercest in the Milne Bay region. However, today Maiwala is known as one of the best organised and closest-knit communities (Loney, 1995). Moreover, Maiwala people are the only people who paddle canoes without outriggers in Milne Bay Province. Because of the community being spread along the Maiwala River, and there being no bridge over the river, canoes are an essential part of everyday life. The Maiwala paddlers won the canoe race at Samarai during the Pearl Festivals held in 1973 and 1995. Maiwala people's pride in paddling a canoe is well expressed in the following song:

Maiwala wamna wam ahiahina.  
Lava hai ani hakwa.  
Ta duhuna gogona, ta voevoe.  
Apaiyaina vigeduwei?  
Apaiyaina vigeduwei?  
Haugana ma apo tau.(Maiwala canoe is an excellent canoe  
For the people to ride.  
Let's sit down together and paddle.  
Who will be the captain?  
Who will be the captain?  
I may be the one.)

#### Tailored Research Methodology

In universities, research methodologies are taught to the students, who are expected to put the theory into practice in their subsequent research. My approach to research methodology, however, was the other way around. I put my practice in the field into theory at university. In other words, my research methodology did not begin in a university classroom but in my experiences. For example, I did not choose to use participant observation because I agree with its theory. Rather, on the basis of my own experience, I am convinced that it is the best way for me to learn about different cultures and languages. Throughout my learning, I have made frequent inquiries. Such informal interviews in a meaningful context also have helped me to understand implicit meanings embedded in culture and language.

My experience of participant observation and informal interviews began in 1973 when I stepped out of Japan. Ever since I have learned to live among different kinds of people: Australians, Australian Aborigines, Americans, and the people of PNG. As I moved from one culture to the other, I tried to learn to speak the language and adapt to the lifeways. By doing so, I have experienced and learned that every culture has its uniqueness, and within the culture, there exist unique individuals.

There is a tendency among my colleagues to apply the same method of teaching or the same method of research elsewhere in the world. However, I disagree with the assumption that a method that works well in one situation should work in another. There may be very similar situations. However, it would be extremely rare to have identical situations especially when different people are involved. If we respect each culture and acknowledge its uniqueness, we should not fall into the situation of imposing one particular approach in other settings.

However, history tells us that people in PNG went through a period of being dominated by European missionaries and colonial administrators. Under European domination, people in PNG were expected to learn European ways that were considered superior to the ways of local people. Both missionaries and colonial governments did their best to educate the local people in European ways. For example, the founder of the Kwato Mission, that influenced the Maiwala community, considered that local people needed "the virtues of the evangelical middle class family -- industry, polite speech, cleanliness and sportsmanship" (Garrett, 1992: 38). Colonial government also expressed the necessity of educating the local people up to the standard of the Western civilisation that was considered "incomparably richer than the native's" (Williams, 1951).

Thus, local teachers were taught English language and culture, and in turn were trained to transmit it to the children. Through this education system, relationships between 'superior' Europeans and 'inferior' locals became deeply rooted in PNG. Even now, the majority of expatriates still expect to teach local people, and local people still expect to be taught by expatriates<sup>3</sup>. However, I could not accept that I was one of the 'superior' expatriates who should teach local people who were 'inferior'. It was mainly because I strongly agreed with my university lecturer in Tokyo who warned us in late 1960s, saying: "You should not give out your knowledge like shop assistants in a delicatessen, who sell luncheon meat bit by bit." I did not deny that I knew many things that the local people didn't know. At the same time, I also could not deny that I didn't know many things that the local people knew. Therefore, when the Maiwala community invited me to come to teach those who wanted to become teachers, I also wanted to learn from them. I believe that teaching is not just to deliver one's stored knowledge, but to learn to determine what is appropriate for teaching and to encourage and support students' learning. Hence, I needed to develop not only a method of teaching but also a research methodology that would suit the Maiwala setting.

#### First Research Study

The Maiwala community did not choose me as their trainer without checking who I am and what kind of work I do. When the local Department of Education told the Maiwala people to contact me, a couple

of women (Z and G), who wished to be trained as vernacular preparatory school teachers, came to visit me. They were delighted to see the big books we had made in another community, and wished to make such books in Maiwala. When I briefly showed them how to use a big book for

teaching, Z said, "Oh, that's the way we teach children at home!" Then they decided to join the women of the other community in book production.

Z was a trained and experienced primary school teacher. As she used to teach children in English, she knew the children's difficulty in learning a foreign language. In the late 1980s when the promotion of vernacular literacy became wide spread in PNG, Z also caught on to the idea of teaching Maiwala children in the Maiwala language. Later Z told me that she had previously been to another materials production workshop for vernacular preparatory school. She said, "The teaching method was dull and stories were not interesting. So I was looking for something more exciting and relevant to our ways of teaching." When I heard this, I immediately knew that 1) Z was taught the Gudschninsky method<sup>4</sup> that teaches fragments of language, and 2) Maiwala people learn things in a meaningful context.

In everyday life at Maiwala, children learn by observing their parents.

In return, parents allow their children to learn by personal experience through trial and error in a meaningful context. Parents also explain verbally and show them how, if necessary. Since Z confirmed such a way of learning in relation to the method of teaching by big books, I decided to use the same pattern of informal teaching and learning in the materials production and teacher training workshop.

However, at first, Z and others did not expect such an informal approach to teacher training from me, an expatriate. Although Z and other trainee teachers identified the method of teaching by big books with their informal teaching in everyday life, they were still thinking of teacher training according to the old system of teaching at school. As a result there arose a conflict between the expectations of trainee teachers and myself, the trainer.

Here in the case of Maiwala, Z and others have voluntarily chosen to participate in the change when they found dissatisfaction in the previous method of teaching. However, they were expecting a different teaching method within the same old system. In other words, they were not expecting to alter fundamental belief systems, but to improve old ways by substitution (Spindler and Spindler, 1982; Cuban, 1988; Fullan, 1991). On the other hand, I expected a fundamental change that would involve a new regeneration (Verhelst, 1990). Nevertheless, I did not want to impose new ideas on them but encouraged them to have plenty of time to think and experiment.

Thus during the next three years, I tried to have a dialogue<sup>5</sup> with the

teachers by asking them to think what and how they wanted to teach children by using big books. I also asked them why they wanted to do certain things. They often answered that it had been that way and they had never thought about its reasons. When they had a strong idea of teaching new ways in their old system, I let them experiment in the way they preferred. In this way the teachers could discover what needed to be changed by trial and error<sup>6</sup>. Then we had another dialogue on the outcome and made some modifications for further trial. This process of involving teachers in constructing and reconstructing the method of teaching and curriculum was very similar to Action Research<sup>7</sup> (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). The difference was that I involved leavers of grade eight and nine, who were not formally trained as teachers, but being trained through informal teacher training workshops. Therefore they said that they were just 'grassroots' people in the village.

Involvement of grassroots or low-ranking people, such as in agriculture and industry, as co-researchers in Action Research is identified as Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Whyte, 1991; Maclure and Bassey,

1991). My research is very similar to PAR because of the involvement of grassroots people as co-researchers, but unique in conducting it in education. At first these trainee teachers were perplexed by being given opportunities to think and express their thoughts as co-researchers. During the course of the research, however, they became increasingly involved in the collaborative process of joint problem-solving and positive educational change (Schensul and Schensul, 1992). Indeed, PAR is an experiential methodology that contributes to "the acquisition of serious and reliable knowledge upon which to construct power, or countervailing power, for the poor, oppressed and exploited groups and social classes -- the grassroots -- and for their authentic organisations and movements" (Fals-Borda, 1991: 3).

Thus Maiwala teachers and I continued to develop a method of teaching and curriculum through the workshops and teachers' inservice courses. Through this process many alterations<sup>8</sup> have been made in their teaching practices. This process also became one of tailoring a research methodology specially for the Maiwala setting. However, at the end of the first study, I knew that my co-researchers were not yet fully convinced of their equal status to me, but still retained the relationship of 'superior' expatriate and 'inferior' village people.

#### Second Research Study

When I reviewed the first study, I recognised a few points that hindered a break-through to the barrier between myself as expatriate and the village people. Firstly, I lived in the regional SIL centre at Labe, 12 km from Maiwala, and commuted to Maiwala each day during the workshops and inservice courses. Although I ate everything the people served, and sat and worked on the floor with them, I did not fully participate in the everyday life of the Maiwala community. In fact

Maiwala people didn't think that I was fit to live in the community, as they had a stereotyped view of an expatriate from their previous experiences of working for the missionaries who lived on a mission station.

Secondly, I expected the local people to assume equal status as co-researchers, rather than placing myself on the same status as the local people. The local people could not believe that I had much to learn from them, as they had never seen me learn the things of their everyday life. Historically in PNG schools, English culture and language have been taught, and the local culture and language have been almost ignored. Now the recent education reform promotes local cultures and languages. However, local people were not fully convinced of the value of their culture and language above English language and culture. Therefore, they could not see anything that I could learn from them. For example, when I said that I wanted to learn to cook in their way, they said, "Why? You have a stove at the SIL Centre."

Thirdly, the research was conducted in my time frame. Because of my extremely busy schedule of travelling extensively in PNG, I was under constant time restraints. As a result Maiwala teachers had to fit in to my schedule. From time to time, I felt that they did not have enough time to reflect on what they thought and to experiment by trial and error. No wonder the teachers did not feel equity with me in controlling the research.

Therefore I aimed to improve on the above matters in my second study. I explained to the teachers what I intended to do. I also apologised that I had put them under time restraints during the first study, and assured them that we would work together in their time frame. At first everybody was worried about the living conditions in the community. However, the people became increasingly at ease by seeing me living

there. As a result, a total of eleven different families took turns to let me live with them over a period of eight months. Every time I moved to the next family, I explained to the new host or hostess that I wanted to learn to do the things they did in everyday life, and to understand how parents teach, assess and evaluate their children. I also said that I would write stories of the family on index cards (7.5 cm X 12.5 cm) and would ask him/her to check for their accuracy. I also assured him/her that I would not show the stories of his/her family to any others. By asking him/her to check my data, I placed myself in the position of learner. At first the host or hostess just said "OK," after reading my data. However, eventually, he/she began to comment on certain points or corrected my misunderstanding on certain events, or my misspelling of Maiwala phrases. This interaction with the individual members of the community helped me build a relationship with them as co-researchers regardless of their educational background9.

During my stay at Maiwala, I learned to do many things in the meaningful context of everyday life, such as scraping a coconut, making a fire, and paddling a canoe. I even owned my own canoe! I participated in the everyday life of the Maiwala community and observed the people and events. Since I was the first expatriate who had ever lived with the people at Maiwala, everybody was very curious to find out what and how I was doing. They observed me as much as I observed them (Nagai, 1996). Whatever I was doing, I almost always had someone watching me, even when bathing in the river.

Living with the people made them feel that I was not different from them. They soon discovered that I was not superior to them but inferior, when I attempted to learn many things. Especially my attempt to learn to paddle a canoe made the people think that I was a completely ignorant novice in the community. By watching the process of my learning and achievement, I began to hear comments like, "You are not a 'dimdim' (expatriate) but 'keduluma Maiwalei' (Maiwala lady)!" "Yasuko 'vigesuwei' (captain)!"

By seeing my struggles in learning, teachers began to understand teaching at school also involves learning<sup>10</sup>. When having a dialogue with them about assessment and evaluation in the vernacular classroom, I shared with them my discoveries on assessment strategies in everyday life and let them check their accuracy. By doing so, they began to recognise the mismatch between their new methods of teaching and old system of assessment and evaluation. Every time I had a dialogue with the elementary school teachers about teaching, assessing, and evaluating children, I referred to relevant events in everyday life. This exercise of bridging school and everyday life helped teachers to think clearly how they wanted to develop assessment and evaluation strategies in the school. In the past, most of the learning at primary school has not been relevant to the everyday life of the community. However, the process of developing assessment and evaluation strategies made the vernacular school teachers feel that the school and community were coming together, as the change began to take place in their belief systems.

Real change does not come about easily but involves uncertainty, anxiety and frustration (Shön, 1973; Marris, 1974). The case of Maiwala was no exception. However, during the second study, anxiety and frustration were lessened, As I lived my life with the local people, I came across many incidents that related to things in the vernacular school classroom. These incidents had been written by myself, and checked by each host or hostess. This process often developed into a further dialogue. Since I lived with each vernacular

school teacher and her family, I was able to help the teachers identify the areas of change in their classroom with their own experiences in

everyday life. I also encouraged them to think about the areas of change and experiment with them in their own time frame.

There also was a significant change in the research methodology during the second study. According to PAR theory, asymmetrical relationships between researcher and researched need to be broken down and transformed into symmetrical relationships of researcher and researchers (Fals-Borda, 1991). During the first study, I acknowledged the local people as co-researchers and became a facilitator or catalyst<sup>11</sup>. However, they could not fully understand my supportive role, and they expected me to tell them what to do. During the second study, I changed my approach and tried to place myself as one of the local people. I was willing to live my life with the local people and to share my thoughts with them in their everyday life. I tried my best to identify myself with the local people, rather than expecting them to identify themselves with me as co-researchers. As a result, local teachers were able to break through the preconceived asymmetrical relationship.

Towards the end of the second study, I asked three vernacular school teachers to check my paper that was prepared for a conference. By this time, these teachers were fully convinced of their relationship with me as co-researchers. To my amazement, they made comments on my paper freely in relation to their own experiences. They said, "In the past, expatriates used to look down on us and call us 'natives'. But now we know that you have respected us and treated us as equal to you." They think that I have taught them so much as a trainer, but I think that they have taught me even more to feel and think from the insiders' perspective. It was a great privilege for me to work with them and see them becoming empowered to think and act independently.

### Conclusion

The processes of the two research studies at Maiwala gave me an opportunity to learn to be an effective facilitator and catalyst who can assist the local people 1) to develop their own curriculum, and 2) to take major roles in PAR.

During these two studies, the Maiwala curriculum was developed in the meaningful context of the local community. The curriculum is relevant to the everyday life of the community, as it has been developed by the local teachers from their perspective. Their role was not just as helpers but as major developers and users of the curriculum. Thus the curriculum they developed is tailored to the Maiwala Elementary School, and it was not intended for wider use. However, it has the potential for adaptation<sup>12</sup> in other communities. In the process of adaptation, participation of the local people is crucial in order to make it their own. As I have presented in this paper, the users of the curriculum can best develop the most suitable one for themselves, while an expatriate plays the role of facilitator.

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main purpose of the vernacular preparatory schools is to teach literacy and basic numeracy in the local vernacular, as it is too difficult for the children to learn in a foreign language such as English from the beginning of grade one.

2Although the glottal stop occurs frequently in the Maiwala language, the native speakers did not want to mark it with an apostrophe. When a linguist, without careful analysis of the language, tried to persuade them to mark glottal stops, the Maiwala people resented the linguist's behaviour. They also wanted to use a digraph ('gh') for the velar fricative sound rather than a single letter such as 'x'. I respected the Maiwala people for their ideas, as they are the owners of the language. However, they appreciated my help in determining word breaks and appropriate punctuation marks (Nagai, 1993).

3My colleagues have often asked me how I have trained vernacular school teachers at Maiwala. When I said that I have trained them, or rather assisted them to develop skills to 'think', many of them said, "Oh, it's a big job! We don't have time to make them think. It's a lot easier to give them what we think is best." On the other hand, when I was encouraging the trainee trainers to think for themselves how to keep a record of assessment, many of them said, "Why don't you tell us what to do like other lecturers?"

4The Gudschinsky method was developed in the Americas during the 1960s and widely used among colleagues of SIL all over the world. This method involves five kinds of syllable drills: analysis, synthesis, identification, contrast, and word building. By repeating these drills on different syllables, more and more words are built for making short simple sentences. However, simple sentences built with a limited number of syllables in the early stages are often unnatural and irrelevant. This linear approach was based on the belief that a unit larger than a word is hard to focus on. However, it is difficult for a holistic person to focus on a syllable or word in isolation from a meaningful context (Nagai, 1993).

5Senge (1990) differentiates 'dialogue' from 'discussion'. He defines 'dialogue' as from the Greek 'dia-logos' meaning "a free-flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not

attainable individually" (Senge 1990: 10). He also defines 'discussion' that has "its roots with 'percussion' and concussion', literally a heaving of ideas back and forth in a winner-takes-all competition" (*ibid*).

6For example, nearly forty children were kept together in one class, as in the primary school. Although I suggested the teachers divide the children into two classes, they did not pay attention to what I said. They thought that it would be better for teachers to work together in the same class. As a result, teachers spent more time in organising children, rather than giving close instruction to individual children.

At the end of the school year, Z said to me, "Now I know what you meant by having two small classes rather than one large class."

7Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 5) define action research as "a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out."

8For example, teachers discovered that children did not become fluent readers by learning through the syllable method from workbook activities. So they looked for an alternative way. Then they began to try using phonics and we developed a systematic way of teaching sounds in a meaningful context. As a result, teachers began to see how well children began to read and write in Maiwala.

9Many of the hosts and hostesses were school leavers at grade six.

10I did not mean 'learning' as mere acquisition of more information for teaching in the school, but a lifelong generative process of expanding our ability to produce something we truly want in life (Senge, 1990).

11Catalytic, supportive role of the researcher is one of the basic elements of PAR when working with low-ranking people (Rahman, 1991).

12For example, many big books developed at Maiwala have been made available by the National Department of Education (NDOE) for adaptation in other languages.