SEARCH FOR ETHICAL, HUMANISTIC AND CULTURAL VALUES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEAS' EDUCATION SYSTEM

Mark Solon

Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the largest island state in the South West Pacific. It has a population of four million people, is blessed with abundant forests, minerals, marine and agricultural resources and is rich in social, cultural and human values. Acceptance of introduced political and economic values through education has brought its leaders to a conflict between 'modern' and traditional cultural values and forced them to re-examine the philosophical foundations of the education system and curricula.

A review of PNG's educational policies, evaluation of their accommodation of traditional, ethical and cultural values of the indigenous inhabitants and educational attempts to promote such values in the curricula and the education structure are the subject of this article.

National Principles

Papua New Guinea achieved political independence in 1975 and developed a constitution based on five principles of humanistic, ethical and cultural values:

(a) integral human development principle - challenges every citizen to work or aim to freely and fully develop their talents as a person in their society, in harmony with other fellow beings and the environment;

(b) equal opportunities and participation in national development principle - calls for every citizen to share opportunities to participate in and benefit from nationally generated wealth. This principle embraces traditional values of communal living and
sharing in village communities;

(c) national sovereignty and self-reliance principle - challenges Papua New Guineans to strive to free themselves from political, economic and cultural domination, to develop self-confidence and reliable attitudes in their lives;

(d) protection of natural resources and environment principle - calls on every Papua New Guinean to guard and share his or her natural resources and environment for the common use and benefit of all, and future generations. This principle similarly encourages the people to develop concern for the needs of their countrymen and women and to share the benefits of their gains with others and the future generations, and

the maintenance of Papua New Guinean ways - this principle urges Papua New Guineans to appreciate valuable norms and traditions set by their fathers, and weave them into the political, economic and social fabric of a modern PNG state.

(Summarised from the PNG Constitution 1984: 2-7)

These were significant guidelines for every citizen: to strive for freedom; to develop human characteristics of equality, honesty and self-reliance; to acquire wisdom and skills to develop, protect and cherish their natural resources and cultural values and to apply them in national development practices. Educational policies, however, strongly promoted introduced political and economic values, and provided little emphasis on humanistic, ethical and cultural education.

Pre-and Post-World War II Policies

Pre-World War II education policies were non-existent. Christian biblical schools provided the educational foundations for Papua New Guineans (Solon 1990: 4). Promotion of Christian values and basic literacy were the schools’ primary aims. Critics, however, maintained that Christian education replaced much valuable cultural practice in traditional Papua
New Guinea.

Formal education policies were established by the Australian administration in the 1940s. An education act in 1945 provided for joint educational responsibilities by Christian denominations and the territorial government; financial grants were allocated to Christian schools which adhered to government-approved curricula.

Post-war education policies in Papua New Guinea favoured a broad-based and gradualist approach to indigenous education. They emphasised basic literacy and numeracy education, and Christian values. Papua New Guinean cultural, social and humanistic values received little attention in the formal education curricula.

Critics (U.N. Report 1962: 13) of the territorial administration suggested that serious consideration be given to drawing up educational policies which would prepare a select group of citizens to assume political and economic independence from their colonial counterparts. This motivated the colonial government to initiate ambitious and skill-specific education programmes in the sixties, favouring elitist approaches to education. Rapid expansion and development occurred at primary, secondary and technical levels. Selective training for a limited number of specially qualified students was initiated at the tertiary level to prepare them for national, political and administrative responsibilities (see Figure I). This policy culminated in the achievement of the country's political independence in 1975.

While political independence may have been the hallmark of success of this elitist approach to education, basic human, ethical, and cultural values did not receive enough attention. Furthermore, social and economic expectations of Papua New Guineans were unrealised. Dreams of increased opportunities for employment and personal accumulation of western consumer items, and enjoyment of an improved life-style following political independence descended into the dreaded abyss of unemployment, social disorientation and frustration for many Papua New Guineans (Cheetem 1979: 87-88).
Questions About Education for Employment

Policies for rapid educational growth to meet public service and employment needs were seriously questioned (Conroy and Skeldon 1979: 2-3) and the cause of educational relevance gained prominence. Many perceived post-independence education as irrelevant to the large rural-based population. Policy evaluation for the period revealed a need for re-orientation of education toward the needs of traditional communities. Calls for community responsibility over elementary and primary school curricula; community participation in early primary education of their children; and government fiscal support for village educational schools and non-formal education centres were exemplary initiatives to focus education curricula on teaching traditional, cultural, ethical, and humanistic values to young citizens.

Initiatives

The Matane Committee (1986) suggested that Papua New Guinea's search for humanistic, ethical and cultural values must become a primary responsibility for educational planners and leaders. The Committee's task was to evaluate these values in the existing plans and
practices of the national education system; to determine the consistency and the extent to which such activities related to the five national constitutional principles and their manifestations in curricula materials and educational activities; and to provide an analysis of the situation with possible future implications for educational planning (Matane 1986: v).

Challenges

Matane (1986: 50) established that humanistic, cultural and ethical values were the principal foundations of traditional Papua New Guinea societies and fairly evident in educational policies and materials of the post independence era. However, implementation and articulation practices to promote the concepts in the country's education system were lacking.

Among the many obstacles were: undefined value concepts; confusion over administrative functions among levels of government, resulting in duplication of responsibilities, apathy and inefficiency; unqualified and inexperienced personnel; low financial commitments from government; and inadequate reforms of archaic and inappropriate institutional and curricula structures. Furthermore, diverse cultures, traditions and rapid changes in political, economic and social institutions created complications for the nation in defining common traditional values, let alone accepting introduced ones.

Alternatives

Matane (1986: 30-46) proposed modifications in principles and instruments of management, and budgetary support and institutional structures to accommodate and promote national values as well as economic and political developments. The restructuring of the education system in Papua New Guinea is a significant example - see Figure 2.
Figure 2: Restructured PNG Education System

Revisions of Organic Laws for provincial governments were made to facilitate decentralisation of educational functions to provincial, community and local authorities.

The National Education Act was revised to clarify functions among various levels of education authorities in order to promote cooperation, participation and effectiveness in the system. Redirection of fiscal, curricula, personnel and institutional resources is under way to emphasise and promote spiritual, ethical, cultural and humanistic values at all levels of the system with particular emphasis on community, non-formal, and village-related education.

Financial resources are being redirected to promote curriculum innovations for community, non-formal and village vernacular schools. Initiatives which aim to promote the cause include: the creation of a social and spiritual section within the curriculum unit of the education
department; involvement of teacher education staff in developing related curriculum materials for schools, and teacher education programmes to develop teachers' awareness of and sensitivity to human, ethical and selected cultural values of their societies.

Summary

Formal education policies in Papua New Guinea were non-existent before World War II except for Christian school policies which encouraged basic literacy skills and biblical studies. While critics argue that Christian schools effectively eradicated the sound ethical, humanistic, and cultural values of traditional Melanesian societies, some Christian, humanistic and cultural values were encouraged.

Pre-independence (1965-75) education policies and structure encouraged elitism and social stratification in Papua New Guinea society. Education during this period was narrow, and promoted specific skills for jobs in the formal economy and the public service.

Post-independence policies lacked an integrated approach to education. Educational planners re-orientated Papua New Guinea's education policies toward creating a broad-based system of education, emphasising significant humanistic, ethical and cultural values to complement modern economic and political values.

Some research (Tetaga 1989: 10; Anis 1989: 20; Department of Education 1989) suggests that Papua New Guinean educationists and leaders have reached developmental and ethical crossroads between modern capitalistic orientations and practical socialistic practices and values.

Modifications of relevant mechanisms are being employed to create a balanced appreciation of all values. Organic laws on provincial governments are being revised to facilitate further decentralisation of educational functions to provincial, community and local authorities.

The Education Act is being reviewed to define the various levels of
authority in order to promote cooperation, participation and effectiveness in the education system. Redirection of fiscal, curriculum personnel and institutional resources is under way to emphasise and promote spiritual, ethical, cultural and humanistic values at all levels of the system with particular emphasis on community, non-formal, and village-related education. As well as the provision of funds for the development of resources in the local vernacular languages, parents and church leaders are encouraged to participate in vernacular education in community schools.

Finally, to promote the planners' aims, financial resources are being directed towards creating new curriculum materials and curriculum workshops to raise teacher awareness of these aims.

Conclusion and Generalisations

While reviewing the degree of policy and curricula emphasis placed on ethical, cultural and humanistic values in an education system, and pointing out continuing challenges for educators and planners, the paper further highlights possible negative impacts of a narrow and specifically designed education system and policies on a nation's population. It resurrects fundamental questions on the role of education in a society: should an education system educate citizens for formal employment or should the system educate citizens to be civil members of their societies and communities?

Much effort and many resources have been utilized to re-orient the curricula, and restructure the PNG education system to re-discover ethical, cultural and humanistic values in Papua New Guinea societies. Nevertheless, the impact of an elitist approach to education is deeply entrenched and the negative results are highly evident with much unemployment compounded by mass migration of an uneducated and unskilled labour force into PNG's urban centres. Increasing law and order problems in the country may be a by-product of a narrow and employment-oriented education philosophy and system.
Implications for Research

The success or otherwise of the nation's effort in reforming curricula and a structural mechanism emphasising holistic, ethical, human and cultural values and integrated education for social development remain significant aspects requiring research.

References


