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THE IMPACT OF TOK PISIN AND LOCAL VERNACULARS ON CHILDREN'S LEARNING IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a recent study which investigated the use of Tok Pisin and local vernaculars in Papua New Guinea's education system. Tok Pisin, an English lexifier pidgin (Siegel, 1977), was introduced in the mid 1990's alongside vernaculars to help bridge to English at a later stage. This led to on-going public debates on their significance and appropriateness in schools. The purpose of initial education in Tok Pisin and vernaculars is to establish strong cultural bonding between children and their community (Waiko, 2003) thus enabling students to use what is already known to learn new skills such as reading, writing and numeracy in familiar contexts, enhances active interaction and communication in school from the first day, and enables students at a later time to use their abilities to learn a foreign language and to gradually transition to education in that language when they are ready. I first provide a brief synthesis of the literature that emphasizes the need for pidgins and vernaculars in schools. I then discuss the significance of these languages in transitional bilingual programs in PNG then put forward an argument that there is a need to understand fully both the continuity and discontinuity of these mediums when bridging to English. Finally, I discuss the findings which include a wide range of factors that influence the way Papua New Guineans perceive these languages and the mismatch in policy and practice which call for a possible review of the current language education policy and practices.

INTRODUCTION

Bilingual/trilingual or multilingual education which includes either a vernacular language or a lingua franca for children and starting at an early age is now a common practice in many countries around the world. Increasingly, the world over, different cultural groups are realising the need to ensure the transmission of cultural heritage to their younger generations through education systems and Papua New Guinea (PNG) is no exception. This conforms to UNESCO's mandate and strong commitment to quality education for all and to cultural and linguistic diversity in education (UNESCO, 2003).

Although some researchers still contend that bilingual education is an ineffective teaching tool (Duignan, 1988: 7), and that it is too costly to implement and thus impedes children's academic success (Ball, 2010), a large body of international research has demonstrated the importance of instruction in the mother tongue (MT) in the early years of a child's schooling. It is now well established that when a child begins learning in his or her first language (L1), that this child is more likely to succeed academically and is better able to develop similarly high levels of conceptual abilities in their second language (L2) as stated by (Benson, 2000; Cummins, 1991; Kale, 2005; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Some researchers, for example Baker (2006), Benson (2000), Cummins (2000), Dutcher (2001) and Youssef (2002), have provided evidence that bilingual schooling can improve basic education in developing

countries, with a demonstration of pedagogical advantages of bilingual education (Igboanusi, 2008).

A widely accepted definition of bilingual education was detailed by Ball (2010: 18) as using eight different approaches. These are described below:

1. *Mother tongue-based instruction* where the language is delivered entirely in children's L1.
2. *Bilingual education* (a.k.a. 'two-way bilingual education') also known as 'dual language instruction' in which minority and majority language children are taught in both minority and majority languages.
3. *Mother tongue-based bilingual education* (a.k.a. 'developmental bilingualism') in which L1 is used as the primary medium of instruction for the years of primary school while L2 is introduced as a subject of study in itself and in preparation for its eventual use as the means of instruction for academic subjects.
4. *Multilingual education* which involves the formal use of more than two languages in the curriculum.
5. *Transitional bi/multilingual education* (also called 'bridging') in which the objective is a planned transition from one language of instruction to another. 'Short cut' or 'early-exit' is a term given to programmes that involve an abrupt transition to L2 instruction after only two or three years in school. 'Late transition' or 'late exit' refers to a switch to L2 instruction after a child has become fully fluent academically in L1.
6. *Maintenance bi/multilingual education* (also called 'additive bilingual education'). After L2 has been introduced, both (or all) chosen languages are media of instruction. L1 instruction continues, often as a subject of study, to ensure children become academically proficient in L1. Even though one or two more languages are added, they do not displace L1.
7. *Immersion or foreign language instruction* involves the entire education programme being provided in a language that is new to the child.
8. *Submersion* (a.k.a. Sink or Swim) occurs when speakers of non-dominant languages have no choice but to receive education in languages they do not understand. This approach promotes subtractive bilingualism: that is L2 learning at the expense of L1.

The scope of the above definitions indicates that a wide variety of bilingual education programs have been and are currently implemented in multilingual countries and the choice of approach lies heavily with the language education policies of a country. This study explores bilingual education in PNG primary schools which follows the fifth approach, 'transitional bilingual education' ('bridging') in the first three years of primary education using Tok Pisin and vernacular languages as a bridge to English.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The primary purpose of the study was 1) to examine the attitudes of curriculum officers, teachers, parents and students towards the use of Tok Pisin compared to the use of local

vernaculars in the current education reform; and 2) to investigate the effectiveness and impact of Tok Pisin (an English-lexifier pidgin/creole) on PNG children's learning compared to their learning by means of Tolai (or Kuanua, a local vernacular) in the school system. Although Rickford & Traugott (1985) point out that pidgins and creoles have been condemned by some linguists as illegitimate languages, Kale (1990: 107) argues that pidgins and creoles are linguistically speaking languages with equal status to other languages and not merely broken forms or second-rate varieties of some other language. For these reasons, Kale (1990) claims that there are no well-founded reasons why pidgins and creoles could not be part of a school program alongside local vernaculars. Siegel (1997) supports this view by stating that there have been numerous reported cases of favourable outcomes of pidgin and creole education in other parts of the world such as by Murtagh (1982) on Australian Kriol, Kephart (1992) on Carriacou Creole in the Caribbean, and Siegel (1997) on Tok Pisin in pre-schools in PNG. There are also some unfavourable views presented by researchers such as Shnukal (1982) on Torres Strait Creole and Charpentier (1997) on Bislama in Vanuatu. This study adds to the existing literature on the use of pidgins, creoles and vernacular languages in bilingual education.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND DESIGN

In order to achieve its purpose, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- a) What are the attitudes of curriculum officers, teachers, parents and students towards the use of Tok Pisin as the language of instruction in the Lower Primary classroom compared to the use of vernacular languages?
- b) Is there a difference on educational achievements of students in a bilingual program using Tok Pisin and English compared to a bilingual program using Tolai (a local vernacular) and English?

The study employed a mixed methods approach in order to provide a holistic and comprehensive view of the type of bilingual program currently practised in PNG schools. The study contributes to an understanding of the role played by pidgins and creoles and vernacular languages through an exploration of how Tok Pisin and Tolai are used during the transition to English period in Lower Primary schools.

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sampling

The population for this study was defined as primary teachers of Grades 3-5 (n=85) who were categorized into Tok Pisin/English Teachers (n = 48) and Tolai/English teachers (n=37), Parents of children in participating schools (n=86) who were categorized into Parents in Tok Pisin/English program (n=40), and Parents in Tolai/English program (n=46), Grade 3 students (n=242) categorized into Grade 3 students in Tok Pisin/English program (n=124), and Grade 3 students in Tolai/English program (n=118), Curriculum/Education Officers (n=8)

Letters were sent out to all head-teachers of the six schools in early February 2009 informing them of this research study and also to seek approval to use their schools. At the same time a letter to the Curriculum Head office in Port Moresby was sent to seek approval to include education/curriculum officers in the research.

Schools and selection criteria of participants

The primary school teachers were from six schools in the Kokopo District, East New Britain Province, PNG. Teachers were chosen according to whether they had been teaching in both the English-only education system and the current education reform system (Vernacular & Tok Pisin Education). Parents were chosen randomly as long as they had a child attending one of the six schools. Grade 3 students in all six schools were used in order for comparison purposes. Curriculum and education officers only included those who volunteered and were available for the interviews during the limited time the researcher had in the capital, Port Moresby.

Measures

This study utilized Grade 8 national examination results to accomplish the first research aim whereas questionnaires and in-depth interviews were used to accomplish the second research aim. However, in this paper, only results of the questionnaires are partially reported. The national examination results and in-depth interviews are reported in the bigger project that is yet to be completed.

In this particular study, questionnaires were designed to investigate the attitudes of parents, teachers and students' attitudes towards the use of Tok Pisin as the most common language of instruction in Primary schools in Papua New Guinea compared to the local vernaculars. A total of six questionnaires were designed for the six different categories of participants in this study namely primary school teachers in the Tok Pisin /English bilingual school, primary school teachers in the Tolai/English bilingual school parents in the Tok Pisin/English bilingual school), parents in the Tolai/English bilingual school, students in the Tok Pisin/English bilingual school and students in the Tolai/English bilingual school. These questionnaires were used to elicit attitudes and perceptions about the use of Tok Pisin, compared to Tolai and English in the current bilingual education system in lower primary schools in Papua New Guinea.

All questionnaires were written in English as it was difficult to use Tok Pisin and Tolai to construct a formal written questionnaire however, in situations where there was a need for translations or clarifications to be done, the researcher who is a native speaker of both Tok Pisin and Tolai did the translation orally at the start of the dialogue.

All six questionnaires employed closed questions (questions that had a fixed number of responses) as the primary means of data gathering with the occasional open-ended questions for elaboration. The primary measurement for the closed questions was a five-point Likert scale, a form of measurement in which subjects are asked to 'agree or disagree' with a sample of propositions about personal perceptions and beliefs, evaluations and actions held by an individual' (Bradburn et al 2004). The questionnaires were given out to

participants after prior arrangements were made with participating schools. This included pre-meetings with headmasters and Grade 3 teachers/coordinators in the schools who decided on when, where and how the questionnaires were to be disseminated and collected back from the participants. An allowance of one week was given for the completion of the questionnaires.

A small number of studies similar to the present research have been undertaken in the past (Paraide, 2002, *The PNG Curriculum Reform Implementation*, 2004; and Siegel, 1997), but they were based primarily on students' academic achievements. By comparison, the focus of this present study is on the attitudes of curriculum officers, teachers, parents and students towards the languages used for learning and students' academic achievements. Arguably, there remains a need to incorporate observations of actual classroom behaviour of teachers and students towards the use of Tok Pisin and vernacular languages in order to verify the findings from the questionnaires and interviews (more precisely, to verify 'word-of-the-mouth' with actual practices in the classroom).

The dynamic aspects of 'language shift' from vernacular languages to Tok Pisin over time, was largely ignored in previous studies. This study provides a more comprehensive evidence of this language shift phenomenon and identifies factors that contribute towards attitudinal differences that exist among curriculum officers, teachers, parents and students. More importantly, it also provides evidence of the remarkable finding of a mismatch in policy and practice also known as the 'policy gap' (Sayed, 2002: 9) within the current bilingual education program which uses the 'early exit model' which Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) argues is a subtractive form of bilingual education and what Ball (2010) describes in Section 1.2 as a 'short cut' model which is less effective than the 'late exit' model.

The study found that although the National Department Of Education (NDOE) makes provision for bilingual education in Tok Pisin/Vernaculars and English to help maintain PNG languages and cultural values as stipulated in PNG's Philosophy of Education (Matane, 1986), this policy is bedevilled by several impediments which call for a major review. In order for the vernacular/Tok Pisin based bilingual education to be effectively implemented in PNG, the NDOE should take heed of following possible suggestions;

1. PNG's education system seems to be encouraging the use of bilingual education but only as a bridge to learning English and not much focus is given on preserving or expanding children's knowledge of their L1. The early exit model to bilingualism conveys both to schools and the community (e.g. parents), the 'higher' value of English compared to other languages, which is typical for a subtractive model. A radical review of the education policy should be carried out to reflect the introduction of either an 'additive approach' (see Ball's approach No.6) where students develop both their L1s and English to align with the Philosophy of Education or, a long term bilingual education of six years in primary school instead of the current three year 'early exit model'.

2. More commitment on the part of the NDOE to implement the bilingual education policy is needed. The department has a duty to develop and implement uniform bilingual schooling systems that will serve the entire school-age population and guarantee relevant basic education.

The results of this study may therefore be of benefit to pidgin and creole education and also bi/multilingual education and they demonstrate the importance Tok Pisin and vernacular languages play in children's education in PNG.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant for the following reasons. Firstly, the quality of education in PNG needs improvement. In order for this to occur, there must be quality teachers in the school system. This means traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers from the previous English only Curriculum, need massive re-training in bilingual education and its pedagogies so they are able to comply with the current bilingual education language policy.

Secondly, the increasing number of students dropping out of school at the end of primary school is alarming, clearly indicating there are major deficiencies in the current bilingual program. This calls for a major review of the current policy.

Thirdly, as will be seen, the 'language shift' phenomenon (shift from vernacular languages to Tok Pisin) is permeating all schools, a phenomenon which confirms earlier findings by Sumbuk (2006) and Kulick (1992). This suggests that a review is imminent to accommodate Tok Pisin in the school system, thus fully developing it on a larger scale basis with support material from the NDOE.

Apart from the reasons given above, this study also assessed the views of Papua New Guineans on whether or not they fully accept the bilingual program in the current education reform and whether they want to see it continue in future. The study also investigates whether the current language policy matches teachers' practices in the classroom and suggestions were made to rectify problems which are increasingly becoming obvious.

TOK PISIN AND LOCAL VERNACULARS IN THE CURRENT EDUCATION REFORM IN PNG

Papua New Guinea's current education system which began in the 1990s is unique as it uses over 850 languages with different dialects in its elementary and lower primary schools. The purpose of initial education in local vernaculars including Tok Pisin was to establish strong cultural bonding between children and their community (Waiko, 2003) thus enabling students to be more conformed to their communities and meet the need of the nation for self-reliant, co-operative, progressive and problem-solving citizens in whichever sphere of national life they choose.

Waters (2000) reported that the implementation of the reform throughout the nation was going to be a gradual process taking ten years or more. Vernacular and Tok Pisin education allows students to use what is already known to learn new 'skills' such as reading, writing and numeracy in familiar contexts and that it enables active interaction and communication in school from the first day. This concept thus enables students at a later time to use their abilities of knowing and learning to learn a foreign language (English) and gradually transition to education in that language when they are ready.

Children begin elementary classes (elementary 1 & 2) at the age of six to eight. Elementary schools are established in local communities and are manned by local community members with the help of churches and missions in some provinces (Honan, 2002/2003). The NDOE has very recently stepped in to assist with the training of elementary teachers and their salaries. The language of instruction in these elementary schools is the language of the community in which the school is located (commonly known as 'tok ples' or Tok Pisin, the major *lingua franca* in PNG).

As children enter lower primary school at the age of nine, they are introduced to English in Grade 3. Teachers in this grade who are also known as 'bridging teachers' are instructed to use both languages (English & tok ples or Tok Pisin) in their classrooms. This bridging period is expected to continue up to the end of Grade 5 when the child is eleven years of age. When students enter upper primary school (Grade 6-8) at the age of twelve to do Grade 6, the main emphasis in their classroom is on English as the language of instruction however, the use of the local vernaculars and Tok Pisin is still encouraged. The NDOE's initial expectation was that by the end of Grade 8 when students are fourteen years of age, they will have mastered the basic skills in English and be ready to enter secondary school (Grade 9-12).

Since the initial introduction and implementation of Tok Pisin and vernacular education in the early 1990s, there has been a mixture of feelings and attitudes among the bulk of PNG's population. In recent local newspapers, there has been a public outcry especially from parents on the use of Tok Pisin and the local vernaculars in schools as a result of the continuing under-achievements of students. Though Waters (2000) and other advocates of bilingual education claim that initial education in the child's first or home language is most efficient and effective for multilingual nations including PNG, the findings of my current study shows a negative impact on this concept based only on the survey questionnaires.

RESULTS

The themes that emerged from the questionnaires were in opposition to what previous researchers have found about the effectiveness and efficiency in early education in a home/vernacular language. In order to gain a greater understanding of what primary teachers, parents and students think about the current education reform in PNG which uses Tok Pisin and the local vernaculars in lower primary schools to bridge to English in grades 3-5, the researcher elicited two questions out of the 42 from the teachers' and parents'

questionnaire and one question from the students' questionnaire which comprised 30 questions which are discussed in this paper. Question 40 entails the following results:

Table 1: Teachers' Attitudes towards Tok Pisin and English Bilingual Program

Question 40	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
How would you describe the impact the teaching of Tok Pisi/English has had on your students?	15 (31.25%)	33 (68.75%)

Tok Pisin/English teachers n= 48

Table 2: Parents' Attitudes towards Tok Pisin and English Bilingual Program

Question 40	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
How would you describe the impact the teaching of Tok Pisin/English has had on your child?	10 (25%)	30 (75%)

Tok Pisin/English Parents n=40

Table 3: Teachers' Attitudes towards Tolai and English Bilingual Program

Question 40	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
How would you describe the impact the teaching of Tolai/English has had on your child?	7 (18.91%)	30 (81.08%)

Tolai/English Teachers n =37

Table 4: Parents' Attitudes towards Tolai and English Bilingual Program

Question 40	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
How would you describe the impact the teaching of Tolai/English has had on your child?	6 (13.04%)	40 (86.95%)

Tolai/English Parents n =46

Results from Question 40 indicate very clearly that although Tok Pisin and Tolai are used in the classroom, as mediums of instruction in the bilingual education programs in lower primary schools as stipulated in the National Language Policy to prevent students from being alienated from their society, they are both not highly thought of by the bulk of the teachers, parents and students. In the Tok Pisin/English bilingual programs 68.75% of teachers (Table 1) and 75% of parents (Table 2) showed negative attitudes when they were asked to describe the impact the teaching of Tok Pisin had on their students or children. Similarly in

the Tolai/English bilingual program, 81.08 % of teachers (Table 3) and 86.95 % of parents gave negative views on the use of Tolai the local vernacular.

Results of Question 41 are displayed in the following tables and discussed below.

Table 5: Teachers - Bilingual Education in Tok Pisin/English and English only Education

Question 41	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Which do you prefer Tok Pisin & English bilingual education or English only education?	10 (20.83%)	38 (79.16%)

Tok Pisin & English teachers n=48

Table 6: Parents - Bilingual Education in Tok Pisin/English and English only education

Question 41	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Which do you prefer Tok Pisin & English bilingual education or English only education?	10 (25%)	30 (75%)

Tok Pisin & English Parents n=40

Table 7: Teachers - Bilingual Education in Tolai/English and English only education

Question 41	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Which do you prefer Tolai & English bilingual education or English only education?	1 (2.7%)	36 (97.29%)

Tolai & English Teachers n=37

Table 8: Parents - Bilingual Education in Tolai/English and English only education

Question 41	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Which do you prefer Tolai & English bilingual education or English only education?	2 (4.34%)	44 (95.65%)

Tolai & English Parents n=46

Findings from this particular question (question 41), does not support Papua New Guinea's NDOE language policy guidelines which emphasizes the significance of using Tok Pisin and vernacular languages in lower primary schools. Instead it reveals that teachers and parents in general were totally against using vernacular languages including Tok Pisin for instructional purposes. As shown in the results tables above

79.1 % of teachers (Table 5) and 75% of parents (table 6) in the Tok Pisin/English bilingual program opted for the English only education to be re-introduced instead of the Tok Pisin/English Bilingual program. Similarly 97.2% of teachers (table 7) and 95.6% of parents

(table 8) had negative views towards the Tolai/English bilingual program and that they would be very happy to have the English only education re-introduced.

This particular group of teachers and parents in this study had the most negative attitudes towards using and teaching vernacular and Tok Pisin in the classroom and believed that elementary grades including grades 3 to 5 in lower primary schools should be taught exclusively in English and that English should be the only language taught in the curriculum to all students.

The results of Question 29 from the students' questionnaire are displayed in the following tables and discussed below.

Table 9: Students' Attitudes towards Tok Pisin & English

Question 29	Tok Pisin	English	No Response
Which of these two languages; Tok Pisin or English is an important language to you?	3 (2.4%)	113 (91.1%)	8 (6.45%)

Students in the Tok Pisin/English Program n=124

Table 10: Students' Attitudes towards Tolai & English

Question 29	Tok Pisin	English	No Response
Which of these two languages; Tok Pisin or English is an important language to you?	7 (5.93%)	106 (89.83%)	5 (4.23%)

Students in the Tolai/English Program n=118

A very similar pattern emerged from the students' questionnaires. From the students' responses in both bilingual programs, 91% of the students (Table 9) opted to have an English only education rather than the Tok Pisin/English bilingual program and similarly, 89.8% of students (Table 10) in the Tolai/English bilingual program also preferred to have an English only education instead of the Tolai/English bilingual program.

The most common reasons for opting for English were: a good job, a good future, all books used in school are written in English not Tok Pisin or Tolai, learning English will help students read and comprehend tests and exam papers which are all in English, English is an international language not Tok Pisin or Tolai, the education department does not produce text books in Tok Pisin and Tolai so teachers spend most of their time creating learning materials locally for students, some teachers and students do not speak the local vernacular/Tolai so they struggle to understand students/teachers in the classroom, learning English will make students' families happy as they will have status in their communities.

Findings from this study reveal that the differences in teacher attitudes exist based on the type of certification and endorsement, years of teaching and ethnicity. Parents' attitudes on the other hand, are largely influenced by the English-only education system which they were confined to and part of during their own learning journeys in schools which has had a major impact on their children's choice of language in lower primary schools. These participants' attitudes towards Tok Pisin and vernacular languages either in supporting or not supporting their use in the classroom, send messages about what is valued and not valued in school (e.g., bilingualism).

DISCUSSION

Many people throughout Papua New Guinea hold negative attitudes towards the use of Tok Pisin and the local vernaculars in schools thus describing them as major contributors to the low level of English spoken by students at the end of Grade 12. These attitudes are of great concern when they are held by teachers. Despite the inadequacy and insufficiency of teaching materials, resources and curriculum plans, the most salient variable is the teacher.

Findings from this study indicate that the type of teaching qualification that the teacher holds has an effect on their attitudes towards the current vernacular/Tok Pisin education system. Recent teacher-graduates who are bilingual certified teachers were much more supportive of the current education reform in the country which uses Tok Pisin and the Local Vernaculars. Teachers who were trained in the previous education system which used the English only Policy were very critical with the new concepts in the education reform and were not ready to fully accept the changes that were expected of them. The findings reveal that the major problems which contributed to the reluctance of teachers in accepting change was lack of teaching resources. Teachers in all the six schools reported that the NDOE was not providing either enough or the necessary materials needed to supplement the lesson topics or themes to cater for their growing number of class sizes.

Findings also indicated that parents had similar perceptions to that of the teachers regarding teaching resources. Most parents reported that their children were being deprived of their rights in not having a text book provided by the school and that they had to dig deeper into their own pockets to pay for their children's learning materials from certain designated bookshops.

Despite the notion of teaching resources, this study revealed that attitudinal differences exist among primary school teachers. Recent-graduates who are bilingual certified teachers had the highest and most positive attitudes towards the vernacular languages of their students which included Tok Pisin and were most receptive of using these languages for instructional purposes. Older teachers who went through the English only education system on the other hand, expressed more negative attitudes towards the local vernaculars and Tok Pisin and were generally against using the languages for instructional purposes.

Parents in general had a lot of negative perceptions of the current education reform using the local vernaculars and Tok Pisin. The findings reveal that the most common reasons parents gave were, lack of learning material for their children, large class sizes hindering the learning process of their children thus resulting in children's work not thoroughly marked. Children's low level of English was rated very high which meant that most parents were highly in favour of the English-only education to be re-introduced.

As a result of parental influence on the English language, students in this particular study also opted for the English-only education to be re-introduced as it would bring them a lot of fortune in the future as well as a good standing in the community in which they live. Generally most students described English as 'the language which is the key to a successful life' compared to Tok Pisin and the local vernaculars including Tolai.

CONCLUSION

Although advocates of bilingual education claim that initial education in a child's first or home language is most efficient and effective for multilingual nations including Papua New Guinea, the findings of this current study show negative impacts on this concept based on three focused questions from selected survey questionnaires. It is evident throughout the questionnaire analysis that the bulk of the participants which includes teachers, parents and students would like to see the English only education system re-introduced in Papua New Guinea rather than the current education reform which uses Tok Pisin and the Local vernaculars. In this particular study, the findings indicate that neither the Tok Pisin/English bilingual program nor the Tolai/English bilingual program is superior than the other as results indicate that the 'English Only' education far outweighs both programs. These findings which is part of a bigger project yet to be completed sets yet another pace in the history of PNG's education system which send messages about what language(s) is valued and not valued in schools.

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