

## **The dilemma and challenges of educational leadership in Papua New Guinea**

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### **Abstract**

Quality leadership in educational institutions is constantly a topical issue. High expectations are put on the shoulders of those who are placed in positions of leadership to perform and produce the desired outcomes. The paper joins in this discussion by looking at some of the factors and challenges faced by these leaders who have to perform under the established paradigms of Western education system and the concepts of leadership the colonisers introduced.

### **Introduction**

Papua New Guinea is a land of many contrasting features. Populated by numerous tribes with diverse cultures, languages, customs and traditions, Papua New Guinea is not only a land of geographical contrasts but of cultural and linguist ones too. A difficult geographical terrain and weak transportation services isolate whole regions with little access to basic services such as education and health (The joint Country Strategy, 2003). Therefore it is logical to begin looking at educational leadership from this perspective as physical and cultural constraints impinge on leadership. This is because leadership culture does not operate out of a vacuum. The social, physical and cultural environment of the people also determines how leadership functions in this context.

Given the geographical and the cultural constraints, educational leadership has been a challenge and a dilemma for many Papua New Guineans who found themselves entrusted with the responsibility of running educational institutions immediately after independence. These Papua New Guineans were expected both by their colonial predecessors, government, as well as the parents of students to emulate or live up to the style of leadership displayed by the colonial educators and administration.

The discussion will focus on the following topics:

- Educational leadership in context
- Appointment of education leaders versus traditional leadership
- Clash of Melanesian and western ideas of education
- Dependency theory and practice in the education sector
- Challenges of educational leadership
- Community attitude.

## 1. Educational leadership in context

Quality educational leadership in formal learning institutions has become a talking point for many in the field of education, administration and management. Writing on various development issues and social impacts on Papua New Guinea, many authors have referred to Papua New Guinea as being on the crossroads (Smyth, 1997, p. 4). One area that can be referred to as being on the crossroads is the area on leadership. There has been a major shift from the traditional forms of leadership to the modern style and this has created confusion and much anxiety among the leaders and the followers. With the establishment of colonial administration, new structures, forms and styles of leadership were created for the purpose of maintaining the new form of governance and rule of law.

These new structures of governance and government institutions created a new breed of leaders who had to be vested with new leadership styles. Many of these new leaders imitated the colonial masters style of leadership, which was essentially authoritative and autocratic. These newly established forms undermined to a great extent the role of village leaders who were operating from the traditional forms of leadership styles and differed greatly in their leadership structures.

The challenges and dilemmas of educational leadership go back to the colonial days when the colonial administrators introduced the new system of education and learning. Young Papua New Guineans who had received some formal education were now engaged by the Education Department to take up positions of leadership. In traditional Melanesian societies there was no formal institutionalised form of education. Equally, there was absence of institutionalised teachers (McLaughlin, 1994, p.71). Education and learning was by way of observation and participation. There was no one person instructor or teacher who taught students but rather knowledge was passed onto the young through word of mouth, trial and error and through the process of self-discovery; learning by observation and imitation (ibid, p.70). Therefore the question of leadership in education and learning was not an issue in the traditional context.

However, this changed with the arrival of the Europeans who introduced and imposed a new routinised and organised form of education and learning that required a structured system of leadership. Someone had to be placed in charge of an institution called school and the school had to be administrated and managed by one person who was appointed as the leader. In other words, education and school institution was now headmaster centered. This was the beginning of the institutionalized culture of education in Papua New Guinea.

The concept of acquisition of knowledge through an open system of learning that was particular to Melanesians was now institutionalised and could only be handed down through a formal institution known as the Education Department with a defined curriculum. The body of knowledge contained in the curriculum was based on foreign values and beliefs. From this day on, Melanesian values

and knowledge was considered inferior and the ways knowledge was imparted considered irrelevant. The colonisers believed that traditional knowledge was primitive and inadequate; therefore they felt that it was their moral obligation and duty to replace it with Western knowledge, which was deemed superior. However on hindsight one can say, their action was more destructive. As Ansu-Kyremeh suggests, 'had Western formal education and concept of development originally recognised the indigenous village educational and communication forms and institutional systems; co-operated with village community authority by granting it participatory and enabling powers in the affairs of the school as well as in development planning; the dysfunctions of Western education and Western models of development would have been less destructive' (1997, p. 102).

In his thesis on the Leadership of the Department of Education in Papua New Guinea, Pagelio (2002) refers to Edward Said writings on post-colonialism who points out that knowledge and power is a key concept in dependency theory. Said, in his analysis of colonial discourses, argues that the colonisers had the power and because of this they were able to conquer the colonised and then developed their knowledge about the colonised without any regard for the reality of the colonised or for local knowledge which existed prior to colonisation (Pagelio, 2002, p. 10). Paulias Matane speaks of the experience of loosing ones cultural identity through education:

Education has made me a foreigner to my own tradition, culture and beliefs... I wish that my proud father could come back to me now, take me and transform me into one of them so that I would be like them – a colourful, articulate, skilful, proud, confident and brilliant man. But I have lost all these values because I went to school (Waiko, 1993, p.130).

The reason given for the drive to establish Western formal education was to accelerate broader social change. More often than not the system had negative cultural consequences. As Smith and Guthrie put it:

In providing formal western education, the missionary society and the colonial government saw schools as powerful agents of change. There was never any intention that the schools should serve merely to reproduce the values, beliefs and life-styles of the societies in which they were placed: in fact their explicit intention was the opposite (1993, p.130).

From these two statements we can deduce the two different viewpoints. One is coming from a colonised person and the other from the coloniser. Matane wishes to be rooted in the past with traditional knowledge being the source of his strength. However, Smith and Guthrie provide the justification behind the drive for Western formal education, which was for the purpose of accelerating broader social change for development as perceived by the colonial administration.

## 2. Appointment of education leaders versus traditional leadership

One of the important aspects of leadership in Melanesia, I believe, is that leaders were not appointed. Traditionally, people were becoming leaders either through hereditary or individuals gained leadership roles, through their own prowess such as being a good orator or a strong warrior or a skilful hunter. Leaders were not appointed to take up leadership roles. However during the colonial period, appointment of leaders became the norm of government administration as a way of supervising the running of newly established institutions and infrastructure.

Schools were opened and educated Papua New Guineans were appointed to take up positions of leadership as Headmasters or Principals. Since they became leaders through appointment they now had to cope with the new set of values and measure up to the new styles and practices of leadership as dictated by the new system. The recognition of them being leaders came from the administration rather than the people. Subsequently the administration was the one responsible for providing support for this type of leadership. Hence to get this recognition they were dependent on the administration for direction and the execution of powers. And in many instances as Watson says 'these educated indigenous became westernised in manners, their behaviour, outlook, dress, interests, style of living changed and as a result, once in the seat of power, became more colonial in their attitudes than was the white-man' (in McLaughlin 2000, pp. 27-27).

There was a major shift from the traditional forms of leadership to the modern style and this created confusion and much anxiety among the leaders and the followers. With the establishment of colonial administration, new structures, forms and styles of leadership was created for the purpose of maintaining the new form of governance and rule of law.

These new structures of governance and government institutions created a new breed of leaders who had to be vested with new leadership styles. Many of these new leaders imitated the colonial masters style of leadership, which was basically authoritative and autocratic as they themselves were answerable to their bosses. These established forms undermined to a great extent the role of village leaders who were operating from the traditional forms of leadership and differed greatly in their leadership structure. I believe they had to do this because that was the only way they could survive. Also there was the clash of ideas with regard to how people learn and how they are led to learn. This leads me to the issue of literature on leadership.

Literature on education and leadership has been written based on Western education structure and how leadership fits within this framework. For Papua New Guineans, understanding leadership from this perspective has not been easy. And it is almost impossible when relationships are founded on colonial discourses and assumptions (McLaughlin, 2002, p.29). It is talking about leadership out of context as education and leadership in Melanesia existed on totally different concepts. Therefore I believe there is a need to rethink

leadership in education within the Melanesian context. As long as we depend entirely on Western literature to assess leadership relating to education it will continue to perpetuate dependency. In this way as McLaughlin puts it, 'neo colonialism will remain the lasting legacy of colonial past firmly embedded in the mind of Papua New Guineans' (2002, p.12).

### **3. Dependency theory and practice in the education sector**

As already highlighted, the introduction of western schooling inevitably brought dependency. The colonial administrators felt that Western knowledge was superior to Melanesian knowledge. Their knowledge was to be imposed on the people in order to become civilised by embracing western values and ways of thinking. Since knowledge is power, the administration wanted to instill in the minds of the natives that if they desired western power they had to acquire western knowledge, and this had to come through formal learning.

As far as education was concerned, the dependency model was best played out. And today this legacy lives on. A British sociologist Michael Young and his associates clearly highlight this aspect when they speak of knowledge as having power over society. They argued that those in positions of power defined what was regarded as knowledge and, more importantly, how it was to be organised. They tended to define their own form of knowledge as superior, to institutionalise it in educational establishments and measure educational attainment in terms of it. This was done to maintain established order and to ensure that power and privilege remained within the same social group (Haralambos in Smith, p.268). Writing on the issue of post-colonialism, Hindson (1992) says that when this practice is still maintained, it contradicts the essence of development, which is self-reliance and development without dependency.

### **4. Clash of Melanesian and Western ideas of education**

Nationals in positions of leadership such as teachers, principles, or headmasters of schools were to act as gatekeepers of the newly introduced knowledge. They were to act, think and see the world according to the Western worldview. Natives had to put on a new mindset in order to lead the new institutionalised environment. For many this was a traumatic experience, not only mentally but spiritually as well. As a fish taken out of the water finds it difficult to survive on dry land so too these leaders faced the challenge of how to perform as leaders in a new environment. They had to assimilate new knowledge and work under new terms of reference and work ethics. Caught in this struggle between Melanesian and Western concepts, leaders in educational institutions have been facing many challenges such as exercising leadership in the framework of western system and also facing the reality of cultural constraints.

For example, a headmaster from one ethnic group will not get the kind of support he/she would like from people who are not his or her 'wantoks', those from his/her own ethnic group. For women this is even more difficult as Papua New Guinea is a male dominated society. Two years ago a woman was

appointed the Headmistress of Warangoi High School in the East New Britain Province. She had to step down from this position because male teachers and members of the community around did not support her. So gender is an issue that also has to be considered since leadership in Melanesia favours men. This next section will discuss the functioning of appointed leadership and the community's attitude.

## **5. Community attitude to appointed leadership**

Having mentioned that Melanesian leadership was based on recognition rather than appointment, let us now look at how the community viewed appointed leaders. It would be fair to say that the community's attitude toward appointed leadership was one of scepticism. The community saw the school Principal or the Headmaster as somebody who performed his or her duties for the sake of the government. Schools were government institutions and the leaders in charge were part of the government since it was the government who appointed them. As this attitude became entrenched in the minds of the people, nationals who were in these positions of leadership were now faced with huge challenges and dilemmas. How could they be received as leaders and supported by their own people? And even so, how could people from different ethnic groups work together in an educational institution?

Today this dilemma is played out practically in all schools in the country, from elementary to primary, to secondary and even to tertiary level. The leadership in schools such as Principals and Headmasters have experienced lack of support from the community and this has given rise to lot of frustration. The only support comes from the education department or the government. Generally, most Papua New Guineans have not come to the concept of ownership with regard to education. They believe that education is something that needs to be done to them rather than something that they could do for themselves. Many, especially in the rural communities have not taken time to reflect on how to participate in the education process.

The following example from my own community demonstrates this lack of support. Once I attended a Parents and Citizens Meeting (P&C) and the Headmaster asked for volunteers to help bring fuel drums from Angoram to Biwat Community School (a day's boat trip). I could hear mumbling amongst men and nobody volunteered. Upon asking why nobody volunteered, these are some of the responses I got: "Em wok bilong gavaman,(it is governments' responsibility) em wok bilong kaunsil,(it is Councils work) husat bai baim mipela? (who is going to pay us) mipela i nogat piul, (we have no fuel) em wok bilong hetmasta (it is the responsibility of the headmaster). This story I believe is a story of most, if not all schools in the country. The Headmaster or the Principal of a school operates almost independently of the local community's support.

The running of the school is headmaster centred. If the Headmaster is community friendly then people do help, however not really in a big way. If the Headmaster is not judged to be community friendly, people show indifference.

And if the school is run down, the blame lays squarely on the shoulders of the Principle or the Headmaster. This non-participatory attitude speaks volumes with regard to education, as being foreign owned which can be seen as a by-product of colonial legacy. People were not involved in the first place to have any say on the curriculum content and the disrespect shown to their customs and traditions may also be a contributing factor to their lack of involvement. Besides, many still think that education is a Western institution putting out people with western values.

## **6. Challenges of educational leadership in contemporary PNG**

Since the first contact, Papua New Guinea societies have changed. Global thinking and practice is becoming the way to do things. Papua New Guinea must move on. This next section looks at how contemporary educational leadership must perform to build bridges of understanding and mutual partnership in providing educational services to the public.

The theories of post colonialism seem to suggest that educational leaders are to take on a new dimension. Hence today there is a big challenge for Principals or Headmasters to create new concepts, have new vision and provide the kind of leadership that involves the community. Since the community sees that person as an individual who runs an institution on behalf of a government, as a leader he or she must employ leadership qualities that can involve the community. Therefore the leaders must demonstrate quality of leadership that can draw support from the community.

School leaders must create successful home-school partnerships and mobilize parents, community members, and social service agencies to engage in true collaboration on behalf of children and their families (Jehl & Kirst, 1992). This view of school leadership sees the school in the much broader context of the community and asserts that children's life chances are not likely to get better without collective action in many arenas - the schoolhouse, the local health clinic, the neighbourhood, the block, the home, and so on (Comer, 1988; Ascher, 1990).

A principal who functions within this broader context possesses the mobilization and advocacy skills of a community organizer, advocating for the school as a provider of child-and family-centered educational and social services (Ascher, 1990). The principal must facilitate and provide leadership in forging partnerships with churches, health and human service agencies, and other youth agencies (Nettles, 1991). In this way the principle or the headmaster will promote ownership of the school within the community and with the community's support.

This challenge is far greater than was experienced in the past where support was given by the administration. However today it is expected that people take ownership of education. Yet the people cannot take ownership if the leadership does not include them in the vision, goals and objectives of the school. Schools are likely to be more successful in achieving in-depth learning when leaders

work with staff and the community to build a collective educational vision that is clear, compelling, and connected to teaching and learning within the local context. This collective vision helps focus attention on what is important, motivates staff and students, and increases the sense of shared responsibility for student learning.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion let us look at some leadership models that might help bridge the gap between community support and leadership in schools. What sort of Leadership can help? McLaughlin (2001) speaks of Authentic Leadership thus:

Authentic Leadership is essentially a journey of self-discovery by deliberately and reflective choices to achieve an evolving and collaborative vision which is aiming to promote the fullness of Human Life through the nurturing of Right Relations (p 6).

This style of leadership encourages building human relationships, fostering self-growth and discovery in the goodness and ability of one another. Authentic leadership promotes self-reflective choices in nurturing growth, orchestrate connectedness, and energise self and others. In other words, it engages the community and build on their participation.

### **Transformational Leader**

Based on Burns (1978) differentiation between ordinary and extraordinary leadership and transactional and transformational leadership, some people especially in school environments can become strong proponents of transformational leadership. There is the belief that this style of leadership will change the image of the schools. Those in support of this model would like transformational leaders to be appointed in positions of leadership whereby they can raise followers consciousness levels about the importance and value of designated outcomes and ways of achieving them. And as Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) implies, these leaders are seen to be sensitive to the organisation building, developing shared vision, distributing leadership and building school culture necessary to current restructuring efforts in schools” (p 9).

However, there is one major drawback as pointed out by the researchers (Leithwood et.al.) to transformational leadership. That is, it concentrates a lot on building a school culture that lacks emphasis on teaching and learning relationship between teachers and students. They went as far as to say that it may be presumptuous to advocate transformational leadership, per se, as being the best way to achieve school restructuring in the twenty-first century.

By its very nature leadership is a communal participation; it is a relationship thing. Sharing leadership enables others to take part in the decision-making that can be seen as an important dimension of leadership. To make or not make a decision is crucial to every other stage in the process of leadership. The research conducted by Hipp and Huffman on How Leadership Is Shared and



Vision Emerge in the Creation of Learning Communities clearly demonstrated that schools whose leadership shared vision with the learning community fared better than the schools whose leadership did not (2000, p. 299). The research indicated that sharing leadership and aligning people to a vision is crucial and leads to a “leadership-centred culture”. Establishing and sustaining leadership involves people. The deeper the relationships, the stronger the potential for leadership.

In the school environment this is crucial. The principal or headmaster should not dominate leadership, as it was in the past. The vision of the school should be seen, communicated and shared by the stakeholders, parents, teachers, students, and people who have some responsibility in delivery of services to the school. In Papua New Guinea it is essential that everybody who is in any way associated with the school is encouraged to share in the vision of the school. People must be heard irrespective of what they express may not necessary be productive or good for the school. In the professional learning community where people have been artificially put together from different, social cultural and educational backgrounds, it is of paramount importance that there exists a common shared vision.

### **Vision shared leadership**

Leaders must help develop collaboration and partnerships between schools, community and other agencies be it government, commercial, or church run. Leaders must break away from the legacy of the past of working in isolation from other entities of the community and only depend on the education department to run the school. This form of internal dependency has also created unnecessary hardships. For example, there is a practice of departmentalisation of duties and functions. The Department of Agriculture people or Health Workers will not be prepared to assist people working for the education department such as teachers to bring school material to the school. So if you have school supplies waiting to be transported you must arrange your own transport to collect them.

This is another challenge facing leadership. Schools are serving as core organizations, collaborating with agencies in the community and providing a central location where multiple agencies can come to assist with the needs of the school. In order to do that the school must have a clear mission and vision statement with definite achievable goals and objects. The leadership must focus on promoting and fostering collaboration. School leaders should develop a clear, educational focused vision and a well-defined mission statement, collaborating with school staff and community members to agree on the type of learning, beliefs, and goals that are important.

A *vision* means an image of what the school can and should become. It is deeply embedded in values, hopes, and dreams. A *mission statement* is more specific and often defines what the school is trying to accomplish and for whom. It can be developed from the vision itself. *Goals and objectives* are still

more specific and concrete, are derived from the vision, and can be used to focus change and improvement efforts.

Collective visions often grow out of collaboration, teamwork, and empowerment. Many schools broaden this goal by establishing collaborative and partnerships with outside agencies that serve students and enable conducive teaching and learning environment.

The school's vision also can incorporate values and goals related to equity and justice, respect and appreciation for cultural diversity, and concern for the academic success of all students. These views of the school determine how people spend their time, what problems they have to solve, and how resources are distributed. Moreover, a clear understanding of the school's vision and mission statement may lead to greater parent and community support. Thus, having a clearly defined and communicated vision supports active improvement and accomplishment. This is a major challenge both for the leadership as well as the community where certain culture of thinking that education is the work of the government has established deep roots.

Some of the changes leadership in education must introduce to get the community involvement would be the following: establish teams involving members of all major groups in the school to work on a shared vision for the school.

The process of developing and implementing a vision should include the following actions:

- Contact organizations that help schools develop a vision through staff development, conferences, and workshops.
- Learn about the components of a vision by observing leaders as they develop vision and mission statements with staff.
- Review examples of mission statements from other schools to find out how they communicate the school's ideas, values, and dreams, and how they target student learning. Then, work together to write a mission statement or statement of beliefs that can be displayed prominently in every classroom.
- Listen to leaders talk about their vision - e.g., through videotapes on organizational leadership.
- Observe how another school responds to a shared vision - e.g., what the team sets out to accomplish, how it brings in new members, and how it celebrates success and recognizes team members' contributions.
- Developing a vision in isolation can mean that those who were left out of the process will not buy into it. A collective vision by definition requires input and discussion from all of the major stakeholders in the school community.
- Spending too much time developing a vision before taking action can decrease staff motivation. Fullan (1994) and others suggest starting with small changes, then developing a formal mission statement. Otherwise,

school staff and community members may lose the energy, motivation, and momentum to work on reform.

- Having a shared vision is not sufficient for school improvement. School leaders also must communicate and articulate the vision regularly and consistently.
- The vision must include student learning. Emphasize lateral thinking, problem solving, and other features of high-achieving learning environments to keep staff's attention focused on student learning.
- Do not expect the vision to improve student achievement right away. Research shows that student achievement levels often plateau or even drop while innovations are being introduced.

Some school improvement experts argue that schools should develop the vision and mission *prior to* planning and taking action. Fullan, (1994) point out that devoting too much time and attention to vision setting can be counterproductive and that school change efforts and concrete improvements can begin before the vision-setting process is complete.

Moreover, strong visions can be restricting, if they discourage teachers from suggesting alternative approaches to helping students (ibid). Schools that develop non-inclusive visions, for example, may exclude important groups or values. Teachers and community members should not be forced to adhere to a single, inflexible vision. Transformational leadership involves working with diverse groups to develop a shared conception of what the school should accomplish.

- An uninspired or narrow vision can do more harm than good. The school vision and mission statement should connect to powerful dreams and positive values of staff, students, and parents.
- Failing to understand and appreciate the complexities of leading and managing change and improvement can mean that the vision never gets translated into actions, plans, and real changes. The vision will become a reality only through often challenging and time-consuming change and improvement efforts

To change the legacy of dependency, principals and headmasters of schools now must take the lead in working in partnership with all stakeholders. These should include parents, health and social service agencies, community organizations, businesses, universities, educational institutions, and so forth.

Finally, education leadership in PNG must find ways to adapt to the changing times yet not succumb to dependency. Because experience tells us that schools and leadership which have been based on western models and concepts have not been able to shake off dependency.

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