

Rural Training Colleges in Melanesia

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Abstract

Rural Training Colleges have been a significant part of the educational provision in Melanesia. In recent times, the role of the Rural Training College (RTC) has been challenged. The goal of the RTC is to raise living standards in villages and this goal is directly related to the sustainability of village life in small population centres separated by geography as typifies much of Melanesia. Some international funding agencies seem to be promoting a vocation-for-employment model to the detriment of the goals and successes of RTCs. It is argued that this education-for-employment model does not address all the needs of developing Melanesian countries and that the sustainable village living model must be vigorously promoted.

Keywords: rural training colleges, RTC, Melanesia, vocational training, education for village living, appropriate rural education

Introduction

This article explores the lived experience of the rural training college in Melanesia. There are many rural training colleges, and rural training colleges in Melanesia are as diverse as their social settings. This article takes a single case of a rural training college in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands (SI).

The case study is of St Dominic's Rural Training College at Vanga Point on Kolombangara Island. The nearest town is on the smaller island of Gizo, about forty minutes by speed boat. While it is possible to land a helicopter in the grounds of St Dominic's, there is no airstrip on the island. The nearest air strip is across from Gizo, a ten minute boat journey. St Dominic's Rural Training College was started in 1971 by two Marist Brothers under the auspices of the local Catholic Bishop (McCane, 2004). The College started on a property once logged for its timber, and former buildings were used for educational purposes. Embedded within the original concept of this school was the notion of self-sufficiency: the college would need to pay its own way and not rely upon external funding for running costs.

History of rural training colleges

In the year 2000, in the Solomon Islands, there were 34 Rural Training Colleges (RTC), of which 24 were associated with churches, and a further six RTC were community based (Ramoni, 2000; AusAid, 2003). The typical curriculum was diverse.

Larger, well-established centres provide training in rural vocational skills, while smaller centres, particularly community based ones, offer a more limited range and often to a lower level of competency. These offer course subjects for boys and girls in agriculture, business studies, accounting, wood work, building and carpentry, mechanics, sewing, typing, plumbing, health and nutrition, home economics, religious education and leadership training. Maths and English are also included. (Ramoni, 2000, p.18)

The curriculum described by Ramoni was not a trade qualification or specialised certification process. The curricula address a variety of skills that would enhance village living and enable a subsistence farmer to raise his/her standard of living with a range of appropriate skills. Some of these courses might also allow graduates to run a small business, at least to supplement the village garden staples, and to contribute to cash generation for the family.

Residential and non-residential vocational RTCs were established in a number of places by the churches in the 1970s and 1980s, in particular the Catholic Church agricultural training centre at Vanga Point on Kolombangara, Western Province. RTCs have proved to be effective and remarkably durable, because they have community support and church and donor backing. (AusAid, 2006b, p.15)

An early commentary on Solomon Island education noted the high level of approval among SI village living people for the statement 'Education should prepare children for life in the village' (Francis, 1978, p.61). RTCs were a response by educators to provide a meaningful and appropriate education for those who were likely to reside in a rural village and earn their livelihood from subsistence activities.

Francis (1978) noted that the earlier focus of Solomon Island education was towards rural education, rather than urban and hence employment oriented schooling. Clearly, these rural educational goals were greater than education for employment and addressed the holistic education of the human person. Rural Training Colleges were also a feature in PNG as an alternative to secondary, work-focused education. Up to the 1990s, there were 'nearly 100 centres within the national education system. In the mid-1980s they had some 370 staff and 6500 trainees' (Preston, 1993, p.103).

More recently, the government of PNG has moved its focus from RTCs as a separate educational group or sector to the local community schools providing life skills and vocational training for those who might not become part of the formal employment sector. In the Medium Term Development Strategy for PNG, the elementary curriculum is described:

Literacy, basic numeracy and problem solving skills are key determinants of a person's capacity to take advantage of

income-earning opportunities, including in rural areas. They are necessary for the effective transfer of agricultural extension services and other vocational and life skills. They are also necessary to equip subsistence farmers with the basic know-how and, indeed, confidence to enter the cash economy (Department of Planning and Development, 2004. p.23).

Within the Solomon Islands this same trend has surfaced, encouraged by international donors. A recent Solomon Islands government review of RTCs opines:

In-country agricultural training is currently provided by the network of secondary schools; at technical level through rural training centers; and at tertiary level (undergraduate) through the SICHE School of Natural Resources. There are no in-country institutions for further high-level training of sector specialists and professionals. With a few exceptions, the quality of the curricula and teaching at rural training centers is inadequate. (Ministry of Planning and Aid Coordination, 2007, p.35)

The focus of the quote above is towards certification and approved levels of training, the specialisation of knowledge. By describing RTCs as 'technical level' this report moves the focus away from support of subsistence farming and the sustainability of village living. A World Bank Report recommends that:

Rather than training generalists with little employment prospects, focus more on actions to train technicians and other professionals. Improve the relevance of RTC curricula and explore the possibility for more specialization of rural training centers (World Bank, April 2007, p.35)

The specialisation that the World Bank prefers is that of certificates and trade qualifications. Ramoni (2000) correctly asserts that this perspective assumes that 'inherent in the formal primary, secondary and tertiary education system is the belief that on completion of formal education, some kind of a job awaits the school graduate' (Ramoni, 2000, p.18).

In Melanesia, where subsistence farming is the livelihood of 80% or more of the population, where rural communities are geographically isolated from provincial centres and without efficient transport and communication networks, one might wonder how such employment prospects can be realised. PNG has about 85% of the population in agriculture (CIA, 2008a) and SI about 75% in agriculture (CIA, 200b) and most of these people are subsistence farmers.

Case study of St Dominic's Vanga Point, Solomon Islands

St Dominic's College Vanga Point is situated on the north western side of Kolombangera Island in the Western Province of Solomon Islands. A former

logging concession, the school was established in 1972 and has been in continual operation as a RTC since that time.

There are four church-run RTCs operating in Western Province, with a combined capacity of about 300 students: St Anne's (girls only) at Nila, Shortland Islands; St Dominic's (boys) at Vanga, Kolombangara; Batuna (mixed) in the Marovo Lagoon; and Tambaka (youth) at Munda. The first three RTCs offer residential courses in agriculture. Vanga offers multidisciplinary courses in food production, horticulture, livestock and sustainable forestry, and includes an RTC teacher training school (AusAid, 2006a, p.135)

Presently, the staff of Vanga Point consists of one expatriate and fourteen teaching national male staff. Associated with Vanga Point and sharing the campus is a community primary school and a Rural Training Teachers College. This paper intends to exclusively discuss the RTC aspect of Vanga Point.

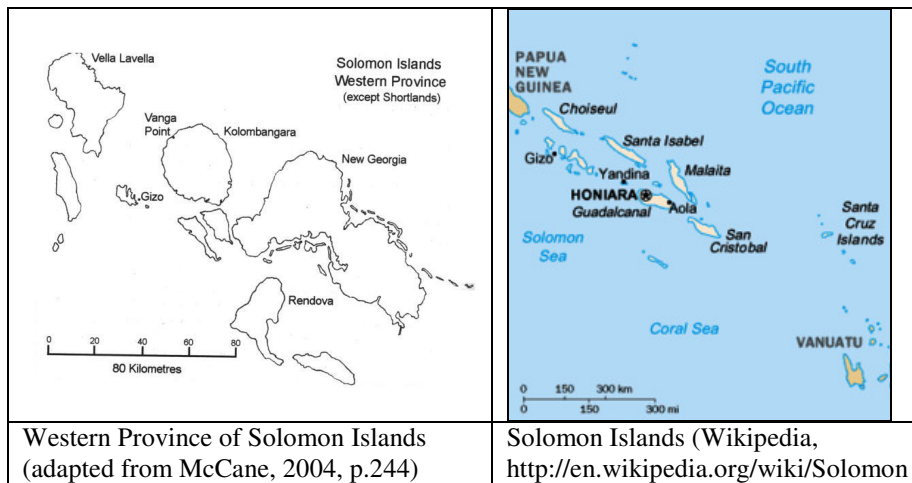
Vanga Point RTC is selected as a case study. The selection is determined by the author's personal experience as a visitor to Vanga Point during June 2008. While other Solomon Island RTCs were visited in June, the Vanga Point visit was of the longest duration, permitted extensive observation of college life and function, and impressed the author as an excellent and appropriate education facility. This term 'appropriate education' will be further explored later in this paper.

This study is a case study. It is a single case where the College is the single unit of analysis (Yin, 1994), but it is not claimed to be an extreme case. As a short case study, it does not claim to deliver a 'best' solution but to clearly explicate an issue of concern (Scholz, 2002, pp.11-13).

The limits of this study, the case boundaries, are those of the RTC on Vanga Point: its activities, students and staff that comprise the functioning educational institution of the College. In this sense the study is an instrumental case study, by studying this example we may get to understand some critical forces operating in similar institutions (Stake, 1995, p.3).

Location of Vanga Point

Vanga Point is relatively isolated. A flight from Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands, takes around one and a half hours, intermediate stops withstanding, to Gizo airport. Gizo airport is on a small, purposively terraformed island ten minutes open boat journey from Gizo town. There are no regular boat journeys from Gizo to Vanga Point, the College sends its boat to collect visitors. The trip from Gizo wharf to Vanga Point is about 80 minutes across the open sea. Figure 1 attempts to describe the relation of Vanga Point to the Western Province within the Solomon Islands group.

Figure 1. Vanga Point, Solomon Islands

The College has a radio phone which assists communications, and post is collected from Gizo as and when the College boat visits. The Principal has email, which he reads when he visits Gizo, which is usually weekly. The College generates its own power, so lighting is restricted, pumps water from the nearby creek, and as much as possible is self-sufficient in food. The College is also self-sufficient in most trades: mechanics service the boat engines both outboard and inboard motors, generators and other equipment, electricians likewise service College equipment, carpenters build and renovate College buildings.

Vanga Point curriculum

In 1971, the founding Principal¹ wrote of the Vanga Point curriculum;

Our object ... is to train our students for improving their village life. We teach the essentials of the school curriculum ... with a practical knowledge of village craft, gardening, carpentry and whatever else might fit them for a more comfortable and happy life in their villages. We aim to develop in the students self-reliance, leadership skills and community responsibility. (quoted in McCane, 2004, p.244)

Today, the curriculum still includes those elements as well as both outboard engine and diesel engine mechanics electrical skills, building construction, sustainable forestry, and organic agriculture. The curriculum is organised in three week blocks.

¹ Br Faber Turnbull fms, Principal of Vanga College from 1971 to 1974, died 6th August 2008.

Upon entry to the College, students are divided into groups. These groups will be their learning groups. So a group will do three weeks of intensive carpentry, and after that block will move to another activity which might be chicken husbandry. The rotations continue throughout the year. Within each week a certain time is assigned to gardening. All students participate in these times which grows the food on which the College depends for its sustenance and its cash crops in the Gizo markets which permits the purchase of rice, one crop not able to be grown in Vanga. Lastly, upon arrival, each student is presented with a piglet and a packet of seeds. In his spare time he cares for and husbands these resources and keeps any profits made throughout the year.

The curriculum includes the following practical subjects: carpentry; chicken farming; pig farming; vegetable farming, bee keeping, sustainable forestry and sawmilling; electrical skills; diesel mechanics; outboard engine mechanics; furniture making and building construction and business skills. Each subject is undertaken intensively, the three weeks is wholly devoted to this one subject. Theoretical knowledge is taught in a 'hands-on' manner so that the practical application is always present. In this manner, the College is convinced that skills are rapidly and persistently learned. When a group of students are on chickens, that group is responsible for buying and mixing feed, purchasing, collecting from the airport and caring for day-old chicks, feeding, egg collection, marketing and expenses, sale of older birds to the local Gizo businesses. In essence, the students are responsible, with guidance, for the whole activity. In a similar manner, groups are assigned to gardens for food production and market vegetables, or pigs for consumption and local market sale. Carpentry classes build and renovate school buildings. In June a new College chapel was opened to cater for 200 people. The renovations after the 2007 earthquake were completely achieved by the students. At the time of writing, these students are renewing the College dock and pier, also damaged by the tsunami of 2007, and renovating one of the older dormitory buildings. The mechanics ensure that the College boats are seaworthy and safe, the electricians are responsible for the College electrical generation and the distribution of electricity around the campus.

Second year students have a little more 'free' time. Second year students are given a plot of land that they may cultivate as they wish. The profits of this plot are kept in a College account, and the student receives his profits at the end of his second year. Some students have returned to their villages with as much as SI\$1000, a sizeable sum to bring to a village, although some students take less. As the present Principal remarked 'You do not have to say a lot to the first years about hard work and application, the second years tell them clearly enough' (A Burrows, pers. comm. 2008).

The purpose of this curriculum is determinedly not to train 'tradesmen quality' or certificate level people. In most of the villages in SI there is not sufficient work for a mechanic and so to train a motor mechanic simply adds to the drift to the major provincial centres. The purpose is to increase self-sufficiency in the villages, so a person will be able, for example, to fix common mechanical or engine problems other than the most serious. Additionally, a graduate will

know enough to develop and run a small piggery or chicken farm, and have the book keeping skills to manage the proceeds and expenses.

Student selection

The College is seen by the SI population to be very successful. The College can take 66 young men per year, and the course lasts for two years. For the 2008 intake, to start in January 2008, the College received over 600 applications. College policy in the last eight years has been to select areas in rural contexts that have the most need. These places of most need are identified through personal contacts and information supplied by local officials and clergy. Then the College selects three or four young men each year for several years from identified communities of need. The rationale is that a single graduate might find it hard to bring ideas back to a village, traditionally conservative as most villages frequently are. Indeed, some reports of village conservatism indicated that a single student had little chance to employ 'newer' methods, ie from outside village experience, in traditional activities of garden management but a small group of young men, who know each other and know how to work together can form a group that is supportive and productive. Such small groups can employ innovations and bring in new practices. Thus small groups of graduates can and do make significant contributions to village living, which the goals of Vanga Point RTC address.

Vanga Point self evaluation

Several questions about the effectiveness of the Vanga Point experience were put to College staff, students and ex-students. These questions were informal, but generated energy, so that some responses came to the author after his departure. The names reported are pseudonyms, assigned by the author to preserve the confidentiality of the informants. Hand written notes of the author and the letters received are the data, as interviews were not audio recorded. The ex-students have a strong sense that the College program makes a real difference. This difference is seen, not just in the ex-students themselves, but in their communities as well.

Many of our ex-students are returning to their rural communities and becoming involved in very significant community development programs at the community level. They are using their skills to build classrooms, clinics, housing. They are upgrading water supply and sanitation facilities in the villages. They are improving the gardening and food production techniques. (James, ex-student)

James highlights the aspect of community building. The ex-students can return to their communities and contribute skills that improve the quality of life for the village community.

We know of at least six examples of ex – students setting up Community Based Learning centres at which they are

passing on the skills they have acquired to the local people. Often they are doing this with little outside funding. This has the effect, not only of increasing the general level of skills of the people but improves the standard of health and allows the community to generate income. (Mexy, ex-student)

Graduates have also been involved in setting up similar training programs in other places. This is a strong endorsement of both the communities' approval of the College program and the efficacy of its graduates who strive to pass their experiences on to more students. The founding of new RTCs by ex-students might contribute to the earlier perception of limited skills in some RTCs: 'With a few exceptions, the quality of the curricula and teaching at rural training centers is inadequate' (quoted earlier: Ministry of Planning and Aid Coordination, 2007, p.35). However, the same argument means that Vanga Point graduates are very capable, motivated and skilled enough to establish new educational enterprises, which is a strong claim for the efficacy of the Vanga Point program.

Other students have built up small businesses. One group of graduates runs a very successful building company partnership on Gizo.

Ex-students are using their skills to set up income generation projects for themselves and their families. Because they have a variety of skills they are able to do this without relying on grants or loans for starting the project. They have learned at St Dominic's that it is possible to successfully generate income and save money by starting in a small way and build up to something bigger. An example of this is two students who began by going around their local villages repairing sewing machines (of which there are very many) which are broken. It is a simple project which requires little start up capital and is fulfilling a real need in the community. (Francis, ex-student)

The administration of Vanga Point has been sponsoring for several years a partnership program with Divine Word University Madang to train staff in pedagogy. Entry to undergraduate programs was determined under Recognition of Prior Learning grounds. Staff from other institutions also attend these intensive programs and the cohort of these undergraduate students is about to graduate.

The staff perceive that they bring something special to the Vanga Point program. Many are products of RTCs themselves and hence struggled with 'failing' in the formal education system, usually at Grade 6 or Grade 8 level, and then blossoming in the opportunity offered by the RTC. One student said of his friends 'most of the students have only had Primary education. Some have had some Secondary education. A few have had no formal education'

(Menas, student 2008). So graduates have pride in their achievements in the RTC appropriate education.

I would see one of the main outcomes of my time at Vanga as having trained local people to take over management of the Centre. The people now running the Centre are all young men who were rejected by the formal education system. They have gained trade qualifications, teaching qualifications and school leadership and management qualifications. (Anthony, staff)

Staff see a particular contribution in offering courses that are 'realistic' and suited to village needs. The fact that most staff are graduates, familiar with and grounded in village life is seen as an assurance of village appropriate education for the young men of Vanga Point.

Having been educated in the Rural Training Centre themselves and coming from isolated villages from throughout the country they have a realistic idea of the needs of the village people. So courses do not become too theoretical, technical or involve technology that will not be available in the village. On the other hand new technologies appropriate to village life are continually introduced to the courses. (Anthony, staff)

The students are very conscious of the different opportunities they have.

Because they have been put out of the formal education system many have a low opinion of their ability and worth when they arrive. Because of the nature of the learning, (hands on, on-the-job practical skills training) they soon realize they do have ability and develop skills in all areas of the curriculum. (Finan, student 2008)

Finan emphasises the practical nature of the work that overcomes student lack of confidence in theoretical topics by using a practical teaching technique. This practical focus is clearly successful and efficient. Frederick adds that participants are also equipped with management skills.

The programme is organised to give students as much experience of leadership, responsibility and management of projects as possible. This is an important aspect of our work as it helps to ensure that when they return to their village communities their projects do not fail. (Frederick, student 2008)

The reported conversations with staff, students and ex-students offer a picture at variance with that earlier quoted of the World Bank (2007). Indeed, the people who know the Vanga Point RTC best, and who also arguably know village needs in Solomon Islands best, agree with Ramoni (2000) and AusAid (2006b) that the founding vision of Vanga Point (McCane 2004) is being

achieved. This divergence in opinion is explored in the following Discussion section.

Discussion

It could be argued that not all RTCs are as successful as St Dominic's at Vanga Point. This case study has demonstrated a range of data that is indicative of the success of this case study in providing appropriate education in the context of the Solomon Islands. In this fashion, Vanga Point demonstrates that a worthwhile contribution to SI village living is being made, and that this successful educational approach deserves support, better funding and encouragement because it is meeting the needs of the local people and communities.

A recent review of RTCs in Solomon Islands offered a different view. The recommendations included one that seems to directly counter the rationale of the RTC. This recommendation was to 'better integrate rural training centers and Solomon Islands College of Higher Education with a strengthened research and extension system' (Ministry of Planning and Aid Coordination, 2007, p.35). This recommendation seems to be moving back to a school and certification oriented education. Already quoted, the World Bank seems to be focusing on employment, quite overlooking the fact that the Solomon Islands is still, and in the foreseeable future will remain, a country where the main employment is subsistence agriculture.

Rather than training generalists with little employment prospects, focus more on actions to train technicians and other professionals. Improve the relevance of RTC curricula and explore the possibility for more specialization of rural training centers (World Bank, April 2007, p.35)

Vanga Point does not see its style of education as a universal or even SI wide ideal. It is an appropriate style of education where unemployment is very high, not because of lack of skills but because of a lack of need and ability to pay for such skilled services. Attention is drawn to this matter because clearly the SI government is influenced by the World Bank Report, it reprinted the Report as its own under a separate cover (Ministry of Planning and Aid Coordination, 2007). Indeed, the World Bank is highly influential in its funding and capacity to set agenda.

There is another view of appropriate development. While employment in towns is important, most people in Melanesian island states are going to be living in villages, and many of these villages are remote from government services.

Food security and sustainable livelihood development at the village level are increasingly important issues in the Melanesian countries of Papua New Guinea, Solomons Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji. The development of these things, based around village agriculture and natural resource

management, are critical to addressing population growth in the region. Population growth exerts pressure on resources in a context of economic deterioration, decline in government services and the reality that about 85 per cent of the population of Melanesia are semi-subsistence farmers living in small, usually isolated rural villages. A high degree of self reliance at the family, clan, community and local level is an important security net and a key ingredient for a reasonable quality of life for the majority of Melanesia's people.(TerraCircle Association Inc 2003)

The Asia Development Bank (ADB), in another recent Report on South Pacific education, recommends for Solomon Islands both training for the 'informal sector' ie not employed and a series of 'mobile short term skills training' (ADB, 2007, p.87). Clearly there is some lack of consensus among donor and aid organisations. Some aid groups seem to be recommending actions that are focused upon full time employment. While such recommendations will be suitable for urban and capital city dwellers, rural people and those living in remote locations need a different approach.

The term 'appropriate education' has not yet found a space in Wikipedia. 'Appropriate technology' 'is technology that is designed with special consideration to the environmental, ethical, cultural, social and economical aspects of the community it is intended for. In developing nations, the term is usually used to describe simple technologies suitable for use in developing nations or less developed rural areas of industrialized nations' (Wikipedia). By analogy, 'appropriate education' might be described as education designed with special consideration for the environmental, cultural, social and economic aspects of the community for which it is intended. Appropriate education may employ more simple technologies and less formalised structures to support the aspirations of local people. Appropriate education does not mean 'second best' or 'dumbed down' but an education that is supportable within the social context and supportive of the local social context. Appropriate education is the means of raising living standards and supporting the social fabric.

This paper argues that the present RTC curriculum, as exemplified at Vanga Point, offers an appropriate education for rural dwelling Solomon Islands people. The curriculum is appropriate because it offers the students skills that relate directly to village subsistence farming, using technologies and principles relevant and applicable in the village. The College has a high reputation which is some evidence of support of village communities for the Vanga Point curriculum. While offering village subsistence agricultural skills, the curriculum also offers small business skills appropriate to managing a small cash flow enterprise from marketing surplus crops or mechanic or industry skills. Hence the curriculum supports those students who can market produce and skills towards their inclusion into the cash economy, while recognising that most village based farmers will have limited exposure to the cash economy other than the sale of excess goods for trade items, clothing and some imported foods, eg rice.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the role of Rural Training Colleges in Melanesia is sometimes misunderstood. Rural Training Colleges, over the last 30 years, have provided an important means of raising the quality of village life in far-flung and isolated communities in Melanesia. RTC agricultural training is an appropriate education for these Melanesian societies at this time, and for the foreseeable future.

International donor agencies are recommended to re-evaluate education policies and initiatives that do not promote appropriate education. To create a large group of young people with skills requiring the concentration of large urban areas and cities, when the financial structure of the local economy cannot support the employment of these skilled people, leads to an increasingly demoralised and marginalised lower class or group of people. These people may be chronically unemployed and without resources or the capacity to sustain themselves without resorting to crime or questionable activities. These people settle around the urban centres to add to the problems of settlements, peri-urban slums. To move the 'problem' of lack of skills in the villages to a lack of employment in the urban centres is no improvement at all.

While Melanesian states face the prospects of large proportions of their populations at a distance from services and communication networks, the sustainability of quality village life must remain a high priority. The RTCs offer the potential to add value to village living and to increase the capacity of village subsistence farmers to provide a quality of life for their families. The investment of RTCs should be further capitalised and enabled to offer greater benefits to local communities with the support of international funding agencies.

The author would like to thank the staff, students and ex-students of Vanga Point Rural Training College for their input and helpfulness. Their contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

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