# Building a Responsive Life-Embracing Infrastructure for Multilingual Education – the Abau Program of Papua New Guinea

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### Abstract

The Abau Multilingual Education (MLE) program in Papua New Guinea (PNG) entails a three year curriculum in the Abau language for children living in various villages along the Sepik River. The MLE program also offers a variety of courses for adults that enhance their Abau literacy and provides them new skills from simple bookkeeping and typing to arts, English and study skills. The development of the infrastructure of the Abau MLE program has been shaped by responding to a variety of existing realities such as cultural values, logistical constraints, limited financial resources, etc. The infrastructure of the program is also shaped by keeping in mind that the goal of our education is not about teaching isolated skills but about connecting people with relevant life, each other and their creative self.

In this paper four important themes are suggested that need to be built into an MLE program. Examples are given how the Abau Program attempted to incorporate these themes in the context of existing realities and limitations. The four themes can be remembered by the acronym FIRE.

(a) Framework – Lack of proper infrastructure rather than lack of money is the most disruptive element to an MLE program. A good infrastructure satisfactorily addresses issues such as remuneration, method of teacher selection, monitoring of performance, the production, storage and transport of school materials, the purchase and distribution of school supplies, etc

(b) Interconnectedness - A student is not a faceless recipient of information, but a unique individual who desires to relate and interact with the world around and within him.

(c) Relevance - The learning outcomes and the study process itself need to be meaningful in the context of the learner's life, world view and future.

(d) Enjoyment or Energizing – An education program, especially for adults, needs to be non-threatening and shame-free. Teaching will be enhanced if it builds on learning styles that students enjoy.

## 1 THE CHALLENGE

How do you plan and implement a sustainable Mother Tongue-Based (MT) Multilingual Education (MLE) program? What do you need most of all and what is your major potential pitfall? Popular opinion views sufficient funding as the most important single factor in an MLE program. Even if this opinion is given with the footnote that too much dependence on outside funding should be avoided, it reflects the widely held belief that an MLE program short of money is a program in trouble. This paper argues that lack of meaningful infrastructure, rather than lack of money, is the major threat for the well-being of an MLE program.

An MLE program that has as its single focus to teach people the literacy skills in their first language (L1) might end up with a very low success rate. Meaningful learning is so much more than knowing how to carry out an isolated skill. Many other factors are important to make learning last and meaningful. First of all courses need to be organized in such a way that they remain affordable, accessible and manageable. The new skills need to be formed in a meaningful context and need to be considered as relevant to the goals and dreams of the students. The importance of group interaction

should not be forgotten and the set-up should facilitate the process that students can be known as people and not as mere receptors of information.

This paper contains a description of the Abau MLE program in Papua New Guinea. This program was initiated by SIL International by assigning two of its members to the Abau language group. The first years were spent in language learning and linguistic analysis. When the wider language community expressed a desire for mother tongue education, the Abau Project was born. In the beginning it was not more than a group of dedicated Abau men and women who were committed to see mother tongue education established in their language group with the facilitating help of the 2 SIL members, Arjen and Maija Lock. The Abau MLE program got a formalized structure in 1999 with its own constitution, elected board and its own appointed executive officers, along with a large group of trained teachers. The role of the SIL members became advisory.

Shortage of money was a problem for the Abau Program and it was sometimes painful to see that not more could be done to reward the local Abau teachers. Still, the MLE program's principal hurdle was not money. The biggest challenge was building an infrastructure with a meaningful ethos that would truly support the work not only for today, but also for the years to come.

Reflecting back on the development of the program we realized that the Abau Project team never had a blue print of what the infrastructure of the Abau MLE program should look like in the near or far future. Over the years the Abau Project team responded to various requests, challenges and waves of interest. With each new initiative or expansion it was discussed whether the inherent new challenges in the areas, for example, of supplies, logistics, production, training and finances could be handled. The infrastructure followed, rather than directed the literacy efforts of the Abau Program. New developments and initiatives took place as answers to the expressed educational and social needs of the community. The Abau project responded by constructing a life-embracing infrastructure. Any program is in need of a framework that gives clear directions on topics like procedures, logistics, training, reward systems etc. But a framework within itself can be cold, soulless and disconnected from life. A life-embracing infrastructure will do more. It will not only answer how-questions but also why-questions. It takes into account people's search for meaning, need for belonging and desire to find joy in life. With various levels of success, the Abau Project team tried to build these elements into the overall infrastructure and ethos of the MLE Program.

## 2 SHORT ABAU PROJECT PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Building a life-embracing infrastructure for an MLE program has to take into account diverse issues like logistical challenges, the local economy and cultural constraints. Below follows a short description of the educational initiatives developed by the Abau MLE program. One section discusses the development of our Vernacular School Program for children in the various villages. In another section the education program for Abau adults is discussed. (SIL International 2007).

### 2.1 General background

The Abau live mostly along the Sepik River or its tributaries starting at the East Sepik Province border all the way upstream to the border with Papua, Indonesia (formerly known as Irian Jaya and West Irian).The Abau live in 25 villages and number around 7500 people. It is an area that can only be reached by plane. During most of the time my wife and I worked in the Abau area, the nearest airstrip was a three hour hike away from our village of residence.

Normally the area has a good supply of sago, bananas, coconuts, bread fruit and never a shortage of fish or even wild pig meat. It is a very swampy area and most of the villages are completely flooded for a number of days of the year. Recent years have been very wet and frequent floods have destroyed food gardens affecting the supplies of taro, sweet potatoes, greens and fruit.

There are no important cash crops and, because of its isolation, hardly any salary paying jobs. It is very hard to set up local business ventures. In other words, there is not a lot of money in the area and this has implications for the government education system as well as for the Abau MLE program.

The vast majority of the population regard themselves as Christians (Martin 1981) which explains why the Abau MLE program was asked to incorporate some courses with church related contents.

## 2.2   Schools for Abau children

The Abau MLE program started schools for children in all 25 Abau speaking villages. In 1990, a third of the villages had a literacy rate of less than 5%. The curriculum started out as a one year program, changed to a two year program in 1993, and in 2005 a third year was added. The Abau village school enrolment figures represent approximately 2000 children who learned to read and write through the Abau MLE schools. Children are tested yearly and more than 80% of these children qualify as *adequate* to *good* readers.

The table below shows enrollment figures and average results for the Abau MLE Schools for children. The last column indicates the parallel development of the Formal Elementary School System in the Abau area as set up by the government. In 1997-98 the Abau MLE program assumed that the Provincial Education Office would gradually start Elementary Schools[1] in all areas of the Abau Language Group. Because of financial constraints that did not happen. When the Abau villages without a formal Elementary School realized that it was not likely that an Elementary school would be started in their village, they came to the Abau Training Centre and asked if the old Abau school system could be restarted in their village. In 2005, a third year was added to the Abau curriculum to make the Abau school system comparable to the formal Elementary School system that also has three years. In the third year, children are exposed to daily oral English, but all reading and writing is only done in Abau, just as in the formal Elementary Schools.

| Year | AV schools in action | No. chld enrolled | No. chld tested | Average Test Result for all AV schools(Scale of 1 to 5) | ES Schools. (Elementary Schools) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1990 | 1 | 32 | *0* | *No year-end test* | |
| 1991 | 5 | 150 | *0* | *No year-end test* | |
| 1992 | 9 | 260 | *0* | *No year-end test* | |
| 1993 | 19 | 454 | 427 | **3.3** (*Satisfactory*) | |
| 1994 | 20 | 505 | 428 | **3.6** (*Satisfactory-good*) | |
| 1995 | 17 | 411 | 316 | **3.3** (*Satisfactory*) | |
| 1996 | 11 | 268 | 114 | **2.8** (*Adequate*) | |
| 1997 | 13 | 317 | *0* | *Transition year. No year-end test* | |
| 1998 | 10 | 191 | *0* | *No year-end test; various AV schools did not finish the school year* | Elem. Schools in 8 locations |
| 1999 | 0 | | | *AV schools cease to operate* | 9 locations |
| 2000 | 0 | | | | 9 locations |
| 2001 | 0 | | | | 8 locations |
| 2002 | 1 | 40 | 36 | **4.8** (*Excellent*) | 8 locations |
| 2003 | 4 | 126 | 104 | **3.4** (*Satisfactory*) | 8 locations |
| 2004 | 4 | 82 | 70 | **3.5** (*Satisfactory*) | 8 locations |
| 2005 | 5 | 163 | 149 | **3.4** (*Satisfactory*) | 8 locations |
| 2006 | 9 | 278 | 262 | **4.4** (*Very good*) | 8 locations |
| 2007 | 7 | 222 | 201 | **3.7** (*Good*) | 8 locations |

(In the table above AV stands for Abau Village school, as started by the Abau MLE program. ES stands for Elementary School, as set up by the Papua New Guinean Department of Education. Only the latter is officially recognized as formal education.)

## 2.3 Multi-literacy for adults

In the centrally located village, Yabru, a training centre was developed over time where courses can be run for groups of 50 to 60 people. This centre has become a very popular study place for adults especially in the last 6 years.

Most course units are only one week long and for the average Abau person this has proved to be a very manageable length of time to be away from other duties. The Abau MLE program has also developed a number of courses that can be run in any village.

### 2.3.1 Examples of Adult Learning Courses that can be organized in any village

a. Transfer Course: Over the years the Abau MLE program sponsored an 8-week transfer course for adults already literate in English or in the local lingua franca Tok Pisin, but not in Abau. In the past years more than 250 participants finished this 8-week course successfully. This course has been replaced by the 6-week course below.

b. School Leaver Course: A six-week course has been set up for students who did not get any schooling beyond the six years of community school. The topics offered are: English and Abau (bilingual books), Math, Health and Religious Studies.

c. Literacy for Women. A 16-week program to teach reading to pre-literate women. Simple books on the topics of health and childcare have been produced and are used in the classes for reading practice and discussion.

### 2.3.2 Examples of Adult Learning Courses that are only offered at the Training Centre

a. Simple Bookkeeping. It is a set of four separate week-long courses with topics like Abau literacy, typing, mathematics, calculator use along with simple bookkeeping.

b. Correspondence Courses done in groups. These are studies on marriage, family and Bible background that require lots of reading with comprehension and responsive writing. These courses are offered in units of one or two weeks at a time.

c. Improving Writing and Reading Comprehension Skills. This course is meant for literate adults who desire to improve their reading and writing skills in the vernacular before entering one of the courses mentioned above.

d. At the request of the local church, courses for its workers are organized to improve their skills in using and understanding the religious writings and giving them teaching tools to be used in its services.

e. Teacher Training to teach children. Since its start the project has trained nearly 100 'grass roots' teachers through a modular system. In this system teachers are trained twice a year at the Abau Training Centre. In each training period previously taught skills are perfected and new topics are introduced. Most teachers can teach both the first and the second year of the Abau curriculum. Teaching the third year requires a reasonable level of fluency in the English language. The Abau Project has trained Grade 10 students to teach at this level.

f. Teacher Training to teach adults. Up to 20 teachers have been trained to run two types of literacy transfer courses for adults in the various villages. (Both courses offer bilingual training. One is a six-week course in Tok Pisin (the widespread lingua franca) and Abau; the other 6-week course focuses on English and Abau.)

g. Specialized training for Abau Project Staff. This type of training has been done by invitation, often individually, by way of on-the-job training in the areas of administration, centre maintenance, conflict resolution, teaching in small groups – e.g. use of computers – or in a mentoring relationship (e.g. the staff who run the courses mentioned above).[2]

# 3  FOUR ESSENTIAL THEMES FOR ANY MLE PROGRAM

To advance the discussion on what essential elements are needed to build an MLE program the acronym FIRE is introduced. FIRE stands for Framework, Interconnectedness, Relevance and Enjoyment/Energizing. If one wants to call the first theme, *Framework*, the skeleton or the body of an MLE program, then the next three themes represent its soul. The framework of a program should never become a goal in itself, but it is there to serve the users. The Framework needs to be built into a program while having the IRE-themes or *Interconnectedness*, *Relevance* and *Enjoyment/Energizing* continuously in mind.

## 3.1  *F* for *Framework*, with the categories *Flexible*, *Fair* and *Functioning*.

If these values are applied well on the infrastructure of the program, a framework will develop that is:

a. *Flexible* enough to adjust to new realities;
b. *Fair*, in the sense that resources are managed well to everyone's satisfaction; and
c. *Functioning*, in the sense of efficient organization of the tools and training needed to accomplish the job.

A *flexible* framework of a program is never so rigid that it will not allow growth or changes in policy. A *fair* framework means that changes and guidelines are never made at the expense of perceived fairness. And lastly, a *functioning* framework ensures that workers are trained in a timely and sufficient way and that questions related to supplies and logistics are dealt with satisfactorily.

## 3.2  *I* for *Interconnectedness*.

If this value is applied well a program will emerge that promotes a sense of belonging and the strengthening of friendship ties. People will find they are interconnected with the world around and within them. It is important that the teachers and administrators who run an MLE program feel that they are an integral part of a social network that is rewarding in terms of its interaction and membership. If this sense of belonging becomes reality it is good news for a successful continuation of the MLE program, because its very structure nurtures its members.

## 3.3  *R* for *Relevance*.

This can be spiritual relevance, but it may also refer to significance derived from status and wealth. Relevance can overlap with Interconnectedness since people might experience their participation and place within a group as deeply meaningful. But relevance is not dependent on group approval or participation. One can have very personal goals and dreams for one's life. Relevance can also overlap with enjoyment, but relevance has to do with deeply felt meaning and can relate to personal spiritual values. Not everything enjoyed is rated as important, which explains our willingness to sacrifice enjoyment to reach meaningful goals.

## 3.4  *E* for *Enjoyment* and *Energizing*.

There is a strong correlation between performance and enjoyment. People tend not to last long or do well when they do not enjoy the task at hand. Even when work is enjoyed, there is a need to be able to celebrate and to find the balance between work and play. Enjoyment also refers to teaching that takes into account the students' learning styles and personalities. Such learning will be energizing and effective for the students.

## 3.5  The effect of FIRE on an MLE program

The FIRE acronym is relevant to both the users and the providers of an MLE program. It might be an unconscious process, but they will all evaluate the educational program on the basis of these four themes. Is its *Framework* in terms of finances and logistics acceptable to them? On the theme of *Interconnectedness*, will involvement in this MLE program make them a more integrated

person within the community? Is the educational program ***Relevant***, i.e. will it teach something that is truly important and might positively affect personal future? Is it ***Enjoyable***, something that is not too hard, boring or causing shame?

It is actually important for the successful continuation of the MLE program that students experience their study time as a significant new addition to their own world. Students, who feel their life was touched in a meaningful way by the school program, are likely to desire this same experience for their friends or children. These students form an important pool of people where new shareholders of the MLE Program may come from.

# 4   ACRONYM *FIRE* APPLIED WITHIN THE ABAU PROGRAM:

## 4.1   Framework

One can not circumvent discussions and decisions on how a program is run. Within PNG there are quite a number of MLE programs that are dependent on volunteers who are willing to teach for no or very little compensation. It has been observed that within these programs there is often a great hesitancy to talk openly about money and even a reluctance to establish rules and procedures how the work should be done. Their rationale is that you do not need regulations or procedures when you have highly motivated volunteers. They also believe that talk about money does not seem appropriate, especially when most or all of the volunteers receive no or very limited payment. This line of thinking is counterproductive, because even if none of the workers are paid, there is still a need to make decisions on finances. There are always program expenses related to the training of teachers, or purchase of school books and supplies. Certain ground rules on how to use common school supplies or how to administer tests will only improve the quality of education. Rules and infrastructure are needed, even among highly motivated people.

### 4.1.1   Flexible Framework

You need a framework that can respond to new challenges and that monitors change and finds constructive responses to change. A few examples taken from the history of the Abau Project:

a) **Responding to community interests.**

The Abau MLE program responded to a local request for training in math, finances and basic bookkeeping. In the beginning years the Abau program tended to offer courses that only focused on vernacular reading and writing skills. These courses did not draw many participants. When a church agency offered a course in managing church finances along with other church related classes it was a surprise how many people were eager to attend this course. They were fervently trying to find enough money for the relatively high course fee plus air travel to a coastal town. Only two people managed to find the finances to go to this course, but the level of enthusiasm that was expressed did not go unnoticed and the Abau MLE program decided to tap into this area of interest.

A four week course was developed that would improve skills in the following areas: typing (the Training Centre had manual typewriters), simple bookkeeping, math and calculator use skills, reading and writing. Most of this teaching was done in the vernacular. The course proved to be very popular and the number of participants had to be restricted for the first course. Many similar courses have been run after that, and are still popular to this day.

b) **Responding to the needs of women within the community.**

The Abau MLE program responded to a clearly expressed request from Abau women from another village to receive training that would be directed to their level. Most of them had done grade 6 or even grade 10. They saw the Abau Training Centre and they realized here was an opportunity for training. They had seen or heard of the first Basic Bookkeeping course run in 2001. This course had been mainly attended by men. They requested a similar course

specifically for women. They gave the Abau Training Centre staff a very broad invitation: "Organize a course, tell us what to bring or pay and we will come."

Organizing courses for only women was a cultural challenge. It could be viewed as very inappropriate that so many single and married women would be away from their normal context of husbands and extended family for at least five nights in a row. It was discussed whether the Training Centre could guarantee absolute safety and absence of any unwanted intrusions. The Abau Training Centre staff felt they could, but nevertheless felt uneasy about this solution. They knew that especially the villages the furthest away from the Training Centre would find it hard to trust safety guaranteed by people so far way from their own village. For the future of women courses it would be better and more natural if appropriate protection would come from their own relatives. Since the church in this particular village often plays a coordinating role in a variety of contexts, the Abau Training Centre staff suggested that the church would assign some men to come along to ensure cultural appropriateness and safety. This proved to be a very suitable and workable solution that has been used many times for all types of women courses.

c) **Responding to geographical challenges.**

The average distance between villages is around three hours paddling by canoe. The Training Centre is located in the middle of the language group, but it still means that teachers from the far away villages need to travel more than two days to come for training courses. The teachers are volunteers and need time to look after their local gardens to feed themselves. If they are too long away from their gardens and their domestic duties, they disturb the normal rhythm and economy of their daily lives. How do you train new and inexperienced teachers when you cannot keep them away too long from their normal village life?

The Abau MLE program introduced a system of modules for the training of new teachers. A module would last for three weeks and contain a lot of practice time. The goal was to get the teachers ready to teach for the next five months (two terms). After that period they would come back and they would receive training to be ready to teach the final two terms of the year. In the year following the teachers would again come for a module of three weeks and there would be more attention for e.g. mathematics, for story telling, or for means of evaluation. During every module there would also be a focus on improving their own reading and writing skills.

This pattern of training meant that teachers would come to the Training Centre twice a year. This schedule also helped with the issuing and handling of incoming and outgoing schoolbooks. So school books are distributed twice a year, taking care of two terms at a time. The books of the previous two terms are handed in and the new books for the next two terms are issued. This regular pattern also helped to bring focus to the training the teachers received with special attention to the contents of the two upcoming terms.

d) **Responding to the huge implications of the Elementary Reform**

The Abau Training Centre had started the first Abau school in 1990 and by 1995 all twenty-five Abau speaking villages had their own Abau school. In 1997, the Abau MLE program anticipated the transition to the new Elementary System that would start in the Abau speaking area in 1998. The new Elementary System as introduced by the National Department of Education was basically a system of three years of education in the vernacular with transition to oral English in especially the third and final year. After 3 years of Elementary School pupils would enroll in grade 3 of the primary school with its curriculum in English (DOE 1996a & 1996b, Wroge 2002, and DOE 2004).

The Abau people were awaiting the arrival of the formal Elementary System with mixed feelings. They were surprised to find out that the Abau Training Centre staff did not see the formal Elementary System as a competitor. The National Department of Education also came with a modular system of training. Every year there would be a training period of at least 6 weeks, for new teacher-trainees. The Education Department had their own selection process that disappointed many of the teachers who had been trained at the Abau Training Centre. A grade 10 certificate was required to be accepted for training. A good number of our teachers

had only finished grade 6. In spite of the problems, the Abau Training Centre wanted to do all it could to support the new Educational system. Our goal was not self-preservation but the best possible education for the Abau children.

The Abau MLE program made it possible for the newly formed Elementary schools to buy Abau schoolbooks from the Training Centre for little money. Although the Abau project team or SIL could not influence the selection process administered by the Department of Education in our province, we were pleased to see that at least 75% of the Elementary Teachers selected had gained knowledge and experience through our Abau MLE program. It was natural for them to come to the Abau Training Centre for advice and materials. The formal Elementary Education encouraged the use of cultural themes and the production of "big books" that contained short stories that related to those themes. These *big books* needed to be large enough for a class room of children to see. The production of these books proved to be a problem. Every teacher needed to make his or her own set of 40 handwritten *big books*, one for every week. This required a lot of individual creativity in terms of drawing, writing and producing. The Training Centre decided to help out by asking the Elementary Teachers to come, combine their efforts, and produce these big books with the help of computer, scanner and printer. The Abau Project had changed from a Teacher Training Centre into a School Material Production Centre. The efforts of the Abau MLE program did not go unnoticed within the country and were sometimes reported on:

"The impact of basic literacy and education has had a positive outlook for the Yabru community. Generally speaking, it has contributed basic educational benefits to Abau speakers. A clear example of this is observed amongst the younger generation of the Abau language community attending Green River High school, with high academic achievements, by those who went through Abau literacy classes. The high school is enjoying academic excellence which resulted from basic literacy and numeracy in early childhood educational development amongst the Abaus…The program had 25 Tokples skuls (TPS), and 88 teachers involved in literacy innovations, with active community participation and some SIL support." (Guy and Avei 2001)

e)  **Responding to the implications of a halt in the Education Reform**.

The Abau MLE program had to adjust again when the National Educational Reform did not reach all villages as was generally expected. The Education Reform started in the Abau speaking area in 1998 and increased it geographical scope a little bit in 1999. About half of the children in the Abau area had access to Elementary School. The other half was waiting to join them soon, but gradually it became apparent that the Department of Education did not have enough finances to start more Elementary Schools.[3] This situation lasted a number of years, until various village communities asked the Abau MLE program to restart the old school system for those villages without access to an Elementary School. Training of Abau teachers was started again and it was decided to add a third year to the Abau MLE curriculum to make it comparable to the formal Elementary School System.

### 4.1.2  *Fair Framework*

A fair framework needs to be fair to both the users and the providers of the educational system. A framework that favors the users at the expense of the providers or vice versa will not last. People have a strong sense of fairness and that needs to be reflected in decisions on course fees, reward systems, and time and work commitments. Finances quickly come into the picture.

When one uses outside funding one always needs to regard the question whether an unhealthy dependence on outside funds hinders the growth of a truly home-grown MLE program. In my opinion, though, the biggest enemy of sustained literacy is not the use of outside funding, but lack of community interest, that is, the lack of conviction that vernacular literacy is worth having or worth fighting for. Local motivation should not be measured exclusively by the question of where the needed finances came from. In economically depressed areas there are other ways how one can ask the local people to show commitment towards an MLE program. For example, teachers need to give their time

to be trained and to teach. The village community needs to construct a local school building and maintain it. These goals can often be reached in remote areas without any payments.

a) **The Abau MLE Program found a suitable local village infrastructure for each school.**
   The village community was involved in three important prerequisites for a good school: The construction of the school building, the selection of the teachers and the monitoring and the maintenance of this village school. Without the first two, the school could not start, without the last activity the school would not last. The school building has to be built with voluntary, local labor that makes use of freely supplied, locally available bush materials. Secondly, the community is actively involved in the selection of the teachers from their own village. The community needs to assess the teachers' character, diligence and record of behavior, since this teacher is educating their very own children. Thirdly and lastly, the community needs to maintain the building and needs to monitor the daily operation of the school. As far as the teachers are concerned, they will check on obvious issues like attendance, good moral standing within the community and meaningful interaction with the students. As far as the parents and children are concerned, they will monitor the payment of yearly school fees.

b) **An acceptable and transparent way to handle money.**
   The Abaus have a general distrust in regard to how money is handled. On more than one occasion they have seen promised government funding not come through. Although it violates their sense of fairness, when they suffer as a group it does not seem to outrage them. However, uncontrollable anger can play a role if they feel they are the only ones treated unfairly. Therefore, it is very important to have a transparent reward system. Ambiguity in this area will cause confusion or even unhappiness and in the end remuneration will be a hindrance rather than a help. The Abau MLE program has therefore spelled out very clearly how the reward system for teachers works. There is a clear outline what conditions need to be met before this amount can be paid out. The payment is dependent on how they returned the Abau school books they used, and whether they can show reports about the children's and their own attendance. The latter is done with the help of the local school board.

c) **A culturally accepted way to reward performance.**
   If an MLE program continues to be without any means to reward the teachers, it will eventually have a negative effect on the ongoing motivation of the teachers. However, one should not give too much importance to the role of money. Within the Abau MLE there does not seem to be a consistent correlation between the reward level and the performance of the teacher. Culturally, when an Abau is considered as a recipient of anything to be shared it is based on membership, not on performance. The implications for the Abau MLE are that teachers expect to receive their teachers' allowance based on their membership within the group of Abau teachers. End of year testing showed that some schools did far better than others and this was often related to the level of motivation and attendance of the teachers. How could the Abau program reward hard-working teachers and good performance in general? We needed to walk a fine line. The Abau MLE program needed to be careful not to introduce a pay system that could be viewed as a reprimand or a penalty for teachers at schools with lesser results. The reward was therefore introduced as an end-of-year bonus that teachers would receive if the pupils' results were above a certain average. This seemed to be very acceptable as the giving of this bonus was a reflection of the performance of the children and not of the teacher.

d) **Relationship between collection of school fees and teacher payments**.
   The school fees are collected in every village by the teachers. This requires some administration and paperwork since parents pay when they can. The teachers have to look after the money for long periods and frequently do not deposit the money at the central MLE office until the time of another teacher training course. The school fee money can become mixed up with their personal finances and they can not always explain at the time of the

handing the school fees why they are short. The Abau MLE administrators also noticed that the teachers were rather lenient on the parents who did not pay their school fees. There was no way for the MLE Main Office to know whether a deposit of school fee money was short due to parents not paying, poor financial administration or "borrowing" of funds by the teacher. The Abau MLE program needed to address this issue so that the deposit of school fees by teachers would not turn into a dispute between the teacher and the treasurer at the MLE Office on the whereabouts of the amount missing. Since all villages had more than one teacher teaching per year, it was stressed that overseeing the school fees was a collective responsibility. That simple statement made the local teachers accountable to one another. Secondly, it was explained that the Abau MLE program pays teacher allowances out of the school fees it receives from the various village schools. If the school fees are short the MLE treasurer cannot pay the teacher the full amount promised. This explanation was viewed by the teachers as fair and understandable. The results of this change were very positive. School fees were paid more promptly and deposits became more accurate. There was less potential friction between the MLE program treasurer and the teachers, because when money was short the problem could be resolved without questioning motives and honesty.

### 4.1.3   *Functioning Framework*

A framework, besides being flexible and fair, needs to be functional. The framework should promote efficiency and quality and diminish frustration.

a) **Suitable infrastructure for centrally organized training.**

The Abau MLE program organizes training courses for the teachers twice a year. Since the teachers are basically volunteers who are only marginally paid, the Abau MLE program wants to train many teachers so they can share the teaching load. Our goal is that each teacher only needs to teach two of the four terms.

When the Abau MLE program was overseeing schools in all 25 Abau villages, training courses were organized with as many as 80 teachers. A place was needed for them to sleep, as well as enough schoolrooms to teach them at three or four different levels, depending on their knowledge gained thus far. The Abau MLE program had started out by using existing village buildings as much as possible, but the growing number of teachers demanded a radical change. The MLE project began by building sleeping accommodation, followed by the building of one classroom, followed by others. This developed into the Training Centre as it exists today.

b) **Production of books.[4]**

The Abau MLE program had two major challenges in this area: Developing the contents of the school books in line with a sound curriculum and secondly, the actual process of producing the books. The first challenge requires sufficient knowledge of the language and background in the development of a curriculum, while the second challenge primarily requires money. When work on the curriculum was started, a group of influential and educated Abau speakers had already determined what spelling rules would be used for the Abau language[5] (Lock and Lock 1993). The Abau MLE program based the curriculum on the Multi-Strategy Method[6] (MSM) (Stringer and Faraclas 1987, Stringer 2006). This method divides the teaching into two tracks which are preferably taught by two different teachers. One teacher will follow the whole language approach, using stories, while the other teacher will use the analytical approach, starting with letters and syllables. The MSM is regarded as an excellent teaching philosophy, since it combines two very different learning styles. Rather than choosing the whole language approach over the analytical approach, or vice versa, the children are exposed to both methods at the same time. The results have been very good.

The printing of language specific books in relatively small quantities is very expensive. The Abau MLE program was able to obtain grants that covered the major part of these printing costs.

One seemingly small detail has been very frustrating to the point that the Abau MLE program decided to find its own solution. To save expenses, Abau books are printed within the country making use of non-expensive bookbinding options. The use of staples would have

been no problem if the print shop could have used rust free staples. Apparently, they cannot, in spite of the fact the issues was raised many times. Their big and fast stapling machine can not handle stainless wire. The hot humidity in the area where the Abau live causes regular staples to rust quickly with the result that books start to lose pages within three to four years. The Abau MLE program has solved this problem by buying its own staplers and doing all collating and stapling at the Training Centre. Though these staplers are smaller and less fast they handle stainless staples well.

### c) Schoolbook distribution logistics.

For MLE programs with limited funds it is often mandatory to keep using the same school books for many years. It is also helps the students financially if they do not have to purchase all the school books for themselves. The books remain the property of the MLE program. This requires good management, especially if these books are continually used at different locations. Failure in the area of proper book distribution might cause an MLE program to come to a standstill. Reprinting books is often a too expensive alternative, and does not solve the long term problem that the MLE program is unable to manage the available school materials.

Schoolbooks travel long distances in the Abau Area. It is not a good option to leave books in the villages, because cockroaches and insufficient protection against rain could damage the schoolbooks. Most villages enroll a new group of children every two or even three years and it is obvious that not all books are needed all the time. Experience has shown that unused school books are better cared for at the Abau Training Centre than in unlocked village school buildings. Secondly, these same books are needed to be sent to other school locations. The Abau Schools are supplied with school books for two terms at a time. When they are given the books for term 3 and 4, the school books for term 1 and 2 are returned. When teachers have to travel long distances over the river with the risk of rain, caring for books becomes a real challenge and at times a nuisance. It is very hard to be strict with the volunteers for 'forgetting' to return the school books.

The Abau MLE program came up with a new system that had benefits to all. The project team wanted to express appreciation to the teachers for their work and wanted the school books returned. So the Abau MLE program has come up with the "*looked-well-after*" reward system for returned books which is kept separate from the allowances given for teaching.[7] When all school books that were checked out two terms ago, are returned, the teacher receives an extra payment for the fact that he has used the Abau school materials well and returned them safely. If books are missing, the teachers receive less. This system has worked very well and school books get rarely lost.

## 4.2  Interconnectedness

Abau are rarely seen reading by themselves. Early attempts to start a library afternoon where village people could drop by to read Abau books were not a success. The idea to take a book and read by yourself was not appealing to the Abau and culturally not appropriate. Abau prefer group activities and even reading they like to do as a group.

### a) Learning is a social event.

Lively group dynamics color study time together as a positive experience. Animated interaction enhances existing friendship bonds and clan ties. Improved relationships might be considered as incidental by-products in the western world and therefore be labeled as non-essential. The Abau view this aspect as vital and fundamental. They value the knowledge gained at courses, but they do not want to get ahead at the expense of harmonious relationships. Learning that allows social interaction is therefore very popular. This principle was put into action when the Training Centre started to offer correspondence courses that were organized in a group setting. Students would set one or two weeks apart for such courses and make long days, reading and answering the questions in their books. The vast majority would

never study such long hours on their own, but the group dynamics inspires them. The correspondence books are self-explanatory and are regarded as "the teacher". The MLE program introduced, however, the role of tutors who are basically people who have done the same correspondence course at an earlier time. Their role is not teaching but encouraging and sharing. They also facilitate a daily session of group discussion where students are invited to share their discoveries and questions. The set-up of the course allows for a lot of interaction among students and between tutor and students. This type of course continues to be successful because it promotes the development of meaningful relationships.

**b) Sharing your skills is a way of contributing to society.**

The Abau were far more willing to share their knowledge and experience than anticipated.[8] The tutors, but also many of the other teachers or instructors at the Training Centre, believe it is one way they can serve the wider Abau community. For that reason they are willing to set apart long chunks of time to serve as a tutor of a small group. A high level of willingness was observed among the tutors and teachers to be responsible and accountable, if given the necessary training and accountability skills.

This volunteer spirit among teachers seems to be contagious since it was noticed that also students are very willing to make themselves available for various tasks. This attitude of willingness to share responsibility improves group spirit and breeds success. People are very willing to volunteer, and desire to perform well. They become more encouraged and more willing to contribute when they see that they are able to bring communal tasks to a good conclusion.

**c) Real learning affects attitudes.**

Although it is not an explicit goal to change existing attitudes, group discussions can be a very powerful tool to change the mind-set of students. In a correspondence course on family values, men started to question and criticize their own attitude towards sharing responsibilities in raising, feeding and comforting children.

Certain newspaper articles touch on a variety of challenges, ranging from issues like logging and planting vanilla to how to deal with crime and misbehavior within society. Health books raise issues such as hygiene, nutrition and proper use of medication. New knowledge will not become an integral part of society if it only exists as facts on paper. It has to move from the pages into the mouths and hearts of the people. It is only when they can put this new knowledge into their own words and recognize it as true that understanding truly grows and becomes accepted by the community.

## 4.3   Relevant

The most important challenge in MLE programs is not cutting costs or never using outside funds, but how to make literacy relevant and energizing within the local community. The crucial question is not so much whether ongoing vernacular education is deemed affordable, but whether it is viewed as vital and life changing.

MLE programs should entail more than just acquiring mechanical reading skills. It should be an empowering experience when written words interact with the individual in a meaningful context. The most important factor that makes an MLE program ongoing is not that the community thinks it is cheap, but that a community identifies enough people whose lives have been touched in a meaningful way by certain aspects of an MLE program. These people will remember their own joy of discovery and desire the same positive experience for their children. People are willing to spend the little money they have on what they deem important, not on what they think is affordable. Therefore, the program project team always needed to ask themselves, will this MLE program, not only in its end result, but also in its process, be meaningful to the users?

The following observations were made in regard to *relevance* within the Abau MLE Program:

**(a) Teacher allowances are first of all about recognition, not money.**

The local teachers who were trained by the Abau MLE program want to receive some form of reward for the work they do. Reward does not always need to be expressed in money. Their status as a teacher, the appreciation of the community, and the transformation of young children into readers are all part of a reward that is really meaningful. Therefore, the payment of teachers should never be reduced to a financial transaction. An MLE program needs to find meaningful ways to show appreciation for the teachers and to celebrate collective success. The Abau Program does so by linking its reward system to three areas. It values proper care of the Abau School Books, it rewards good end-of-year results and it expresses appreciation for teaching done.

Teachers are also looked after well and treated with respect during the teacher courses. Appreciation for their work is expressed during special celebrations.

**(b) Parents believe in the relevance of the Abau school and are therefore involved.**

The Abau schools for children would not be able to operate without the support of parents. They need to be willing to pay the school fees for their children. They are also expected to construct a school building and oversee the daily operation of the school without any payments.

The Abau MLE program was successful in getting the message across that children initially taught in the vernacular will perform better in the national school system than their peers who have been only taught in the national language.

**(c) A big difference between reading for sound and reading for meaning.**

When working with adults, literacy should not be reduced to learning the skill of spelling out words. Reading has to be attached to meaningful events and interest areas. The Abau MLE Program for adults pays attention to the choice of topics. Short newspaper articles are used, even with beginning readers. New readers need to see that written words on paper convey meaning. It can be read; it can be translated into their own language; it can be discussed. The words read are much more than sound; they form a message that can be agreed or disagreed with; that can touch emotions and even enrich life.

**(d) The importance of celebration in learning.**

Every week-long course at the Training Centre ends with a celebration meal where progress and accomplishments are recognized and where community is celebrated. These meals are major undertakings that would not be possible if the Training Centre and the students would not contribute to this closing event in a spirit of generosity.

Certificates and speeches are also an important part of this graduation meal. Celebration in the Abau context is always a meaningful event, since it celebrates accomplishment, confirms interconnectedness and, by its nature, is enjoyable.

## 4.4 Enjoyable and energizing

An important goal in adult education is to avoid disappointing learning experiences. When adults voluntarily decide to enter a course, they come with an inner motivation that nevertheless can easily be hurt by failure and embarrassment. It is therefore important that courses need to be organized in a safe climate where mistakes can be made. It is also much harder for adults than for children to find concentrated study time, since there are many potential distractions and needs that could disrupt their studies.

In PNG and certainly among the Abau, there is a good point of departure: Most communities consist of keen learners who are interested in a wide variety of topics. There is a willingness and motivation to make time available for study. But like everywhere, they are adults whose ego can be hurt by lack of success or shame and who have many other responsibilities that could take them away from their studies.

The Abau Program tried to respond to these challenges as follows:

**(a) Learning as a total event.**

Adult students come to the Training Centre Courses from many Abau villages and even from a different language group[9]. Some adults never had a chance to go to school. For many others their school career ended in grade 6 when they were not among the selected minority who were allowed to enter High School.

The courses offered at the Training Centre are set up in such a way that Abau students need to set apart one full week of study at a time. The students who come from other villages come to the Centre with enough food to live and study in the Training Centre accommodation for one week. This physical move helps the students to make a complete break with the daily routine of their normal life. It is also immerses them for a full week into studies which is very important for adults who have been away so long from any formal studies involving reading and writing.

**(b) Learning as an extraordinary event.**

It is not only a total event, it is also an extraordinary event. The return to school combined with communal-like living for one week has a strong appeal. It is viewed as a welcome change from everyday life. This is especially true for the women who view it as a luxury to have a full week off with friends and fellow-students to concentrate on learning new skills. The camaraderie during that week and the celebration together at the end add a lot of value to the learning experience.

**(c) Learning as a non-threatening event.**

The Abau Training Centre staff functions more as mentors and facilitators than as teachers. They do check the work of students but not with the goal to give the students a grade. When the student has incorrect answers he or she is asked to correct them. The Bookkeeping Course follows a similar format where working and correcting together is in focus. There is one test that is graded individually, but that is not until the fourth and final course module. The overall result of this approach is that it creates an atmosphere where students are not afraid to make mistakes, because in nearly all cases they have a chance to correct their work and learn from the process.

## 5   CONCLUSION:

The acronym FIRE helps to remember that an MLE program needs to have a *Framework* that is *Flexible*, *Fair* and *Functioning* to users and providers. Although an efficient framework is very important, it only addresses external issues like logistics, finances and procedures. Internal issues related to personal values and aspirations need to be addressed as well. How does the educational program promote *interconnectedness* that helps individuals relate to one another, and give them a sense of belonging? How does the program communicate *relevance* that is in line with an individual's core being and felt needs? And lastly, does it promote *energizing enjoyment* that keeps students focused and excited? It is a huge challenge to ensure that all these four themes are built into an MLE program, but also very rewarding, because students are not treated as objects, but as unique individuals. School should not be reduced to learning a few isolated skills, but school should be about life, and preferably about all of it: life-embracing education.

## *ENDNOTES*

[1] For more information on Elementary Education in PNG: See articles by David Klaus and Joan Kale and Jaking Marimyas presented at the November 2003 Language Development Conference. http://www.sil.org/asia/ldc/index.html

[2] All this training is done on site which is most cost-effective. One exception of training received elsewhere needs to be mentioned: Two of the five literacy supervisors finished a 2 year training program in the principles of literacy, teacher training, curriculum development, school organization, etc. This training was run by SIL and consisted of five modules of five weeks each followed by home assignments. It was organized at a central location, giving training to literacy supervisors from quite a number of different language groups.

[3] No new Elementary Schools were started in the Abau area after 1999, but it looks like that four new Elementary Schools will be started in as many Abau speaking villages in 2009.

[4] Besides the three-year curriculum for the prepschool (consisting of 24 books), the Abau Project has produced books with ancestor stories, books on health and mathematics, several books on animals and nature, a wide variety of books with general interest stories, bilingual books (Abau-English) and an Abau-English dictionary; also a number of technical papers on the Abau grammar, phonology and orthography. A Phonology and an Orthography write-up were completed in 1990. A 400-page overview of the Abau Grammar was printed in 2002. The Abau Phonology Write-up (Lock 2007) was placed on the internet: http://www.pnglanguages.org.

[5] This Spelling Conference was organized in January 1989 and lasted 6 full working days. The conference was attended by a group of about 14 leaders, teachers and educated people. They were given long lists of words that illustrated phonemic differences. Spelling rules were decided on to accommodate the consensus that certain letter distinctions in English needed to be reflected in the Abau spelling. As a result the Abau language has the phoneme /h/ represented by h and f, and the phoneme /r/ represented by r, l and d. The decisions made during this 1987 conference on the Abau spelling have never been challenged but were widely accepted. The fact that the members of this group were respected by the community played an important role in this.

[6] Stringer, Mary D. and Faraclas, Nicholas. 1987. *Working together for literacy: a guidebook for local language literacy programs.* Wewak (PNG): Christian Books Melanesia Inc.

Stringer, Mary D. 2006. *Literacy acquisition and diffusion among preliterate adults: effects of two methods of instruction in non-industrialized communities in Papua New Guinea.* SIL e-Books, 2. [Dallas]: SIL International, 289 p. http://www.sil.org/silepubs/abstract.asp?id=47752

[7] During the beginning years of the MLE program, the "looked-well-after" money was the only reward the teachers received. During those years their training, food and accommodation was provided to them free of charge. Presently, teachers pay a small amount for their food and accommodation at each training session, but they do receive a term allowance plus a "looked-well-after" bonus in regard to the handling of the Abau school books. The total result is still a very low amount compared to what teachers are paid in the formal school system.

[8] There are anthropological studies that seem to indicate that within PNG culture there is an unwillingness to share any form of special knowledge since secret knowledge is regarded as the key to power. Therefore, it was assumed that the tutors would be more reluctant to share their expertise if they would believe it would threaten their position as tutor. This has not been SIL's experience among the Abaus.

[9] Karkar-Yuri language, linguistically not related to Abau. The Abau MLE program has given assistance with teacher training, production of books, setting up the curriculum. One supervisor has made a number of visits to the Karkar-Yuri area assisting with re-establishing vernacular schools for children.

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