

Respectful relationships: the missing piece in PNG's education curriculum

by Michael Suau

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Students at June Valley Primary School and a facilitator during an Equal Playing Field For Schools (EPF4S) shed talk session

Photo Credit: Jacob Sauni/EPF

My first ever volunteer opportunity was with an organisation teaching primary school students how to engage in respectful relationships. I believe Papua New Guinea needs more of this type of education to address the country's current social problems.

I joined [Equal Playing Field](#) (EPF) in 2019 when they came to the University of PNG to recruit volunteers for their Academy program, which trains young men and women under the age of 35 as facilitators and advocates. Once trained, I was assigned to their flagship program, the Equal Playing Field 4 Schools Program (EPF4S). The eight-week education program aims to prevent violence against women by promoting gender equality and changing the attitudes and behaviours that enable violence against women to occur.

Now there are many organisations in PNG who also advocate against violence and even against gender-based violence. But, with EPF, I was amazed at how they tailored the program to their target age group. We worked with boys and girls aged 12 to 16 years attending grades 6 and 7 at a particular school. They take part in a mixed-gender sports competition that combines with respectful relationship education with skills development and games. (EPF was started in 2012 under the name Rugby League Against Violence. The name was changed to Equal Playing Field in 2015 to better reflect the overall goal of the organisation.)

Each week the one-hour session would be divided between 30 minutes for a Rugby Tag game and 30 minutes for an educational session. The weekly modules included topics such as understanding different types of violence and abuse, developing support networks, teamwork, empathy, personal boundaries, consent and where to seek help. The EPF4S program is aligned with both the Australian and PNG personal development and physical education curriculum for years 7 to 10.

In EPF programs, we tried to avoid the teacher-student scenario where the teacher

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lectures students (though that can work for certain topics or circumstances). We took the approach of discussion and engagement with the whole class divided into smaller groups. Each group had both male and female participants and a staff member and volunteer allocated to each group. In that way, there are discussions and feedback from everyone, making sure no-one is left behind. Students are allowed to take notes of topics covered, and parents are welcome to attend events outside of school hours.

After more than a year volunteering, I joined EPF as a project officer to run EPF4S in various schools. We asked the students to fill in activity reports after every session and asked the school to observe changes in student behaviour during and following the program. The team was motivated when **schools reported** increased positive play between male and female students, increases in the happiness of the general student population, decreases in reported incidents of bullying and a reduction in incidents of sexual assault such as inappropriate touching.

As a project officer, I was also in charge of mentoring the UPNG University Action Group run by EPF which is made up of tertiary students whose focus is on addressing issues surrounding youth and social issues commonly found in universities such as peer pressure, alcohol abuse, sexual and reproductive health issues and spending habits. We collaborated with Student Services but the challenge we faced was a clash of schedules within the school calendar and our own members' commitments. My observation was that it was difficult to engage tertiary students in sessions such as those on gender-based violence, especially the male students. We tried different approaches and the initiative ran for four years at UPNG.

From my experience of volunteering and working with EPF, I observed that it was most rewarding to work with young children when they are at a stage where they start to develop opinions and make choices. Consent, setting personal boundaries and developing empathy were important concepts to learn at that age. They were more receptive than young adults who have already started making their own decisions.

Reflecting on the current state of PNG society, people don't respect each other and demonstrate understanding of one another's views. This has brought up issues in our communities. Abuse and family violence start at home, and they escalate to the level of the community and the society. Violence can lead to other issues such as physical and psychological harm, impacts on children, social isolation and crime. It's important to note that **the current statistics** on domestic and sexual violence in PNG are limited. Cultural stigmas lead to underreporting, and a lack of systematic data collection contributes further to this gap. Despite this, the recent **media reporting**

and public outrage over certain incidents means that security is front of mind in Port Moresby.

But it's not just in our nation's capital where violence is an issue. You might think your own home town is safe, but it is not. I grew up in the village of Tiauru, located in the Bialla local-level government area in West New Britain. We lived without fear of being held up, robbed or attacked. Even our sisters and mothers were free to move around. After some years away from home, I went back to visit my father's family during Christmas 2023 and I was surprised — a lot has changed. Youth involvement in crime has increased with hold-ups, murders and petty thefts becoming common. The primary school I attended has been shut for some time now due to vandalism and parents send their children to schools much further away. There is a lack of law and order; the justice system is weak. It's like everyone is on alert when moving around, because anything can happen at any time. The day after I left for university, my big brother was murdered by drunken youths. My family was devastated. These issues have a real impact on people's lives.

I believe that if an individual can change their attitude then they can think positively and make important decisions and choices for personal benefit and everyone's benefit. And, importantly, we can teach others to do this too. We urgently need respectful-relationships education implemented in all primary schools across the country, not just in the National Capital District. The EFP4S program is already tried and tested. The leaders of our country now need to work with the Education Department to roll it out to every child.

This blog was written as part of the annual Summer School funded by [the ANU-UPNG Partnership](#). The Summer School allows the top ten students from the University of Papua New Guinea in the Economics and Public Policy Management streams to undertake a month-long program at ANU to further their academic and analytical skills.

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Link:

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