Self-discovery through education

by Kerobin Huanjo

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I grew up on Nubia plantation in the heart of Hansa Bay, Madang province, Papua New Guinea. Both my parents are from Sepik – my father is from Nungori village in Kubalia district and my mother is from Kinjikin village in Angoram district. My father attended school till Grade Three but my mother has never been to school.

Growing up, I did not see education playing a large role in my future because I thought there was no need to pursue education in order to live a peaceful and happy life. There was no-one to tell me that education is the way to break the poverty cycle and set a new standard for my family as my parents did not have that experience themselves. They were focused on providing for our family and making sure we had something to eat every day. As a child, I accompanied my father as he tended the garden and fished in the swamp or at the beach.

I did not know at that time that God had a plan for me and that to achieve that I must embark on a journey of education.

My first day at school was not easy for me. I started in Grade One at Awar Community School in 2007. I was initially excited because I got to attend school with my friends but I quickly realised I was behind my classmates. I did not know how to spell my own name until Grade Two. I was at the bottom of my class. My teacher told me to withdraw from school and stay home but my father still believed I could do better and he convinced my class teacher that I should finish the school year.

For my second year of schooling, I left home and went to live with my mother's family in Kinjikin. The village was in the remotest part of Sepik province where most people had never visited towns and cities. They had never even seen a car. They often heard the sound of the planes flying overhead but they had never seen one.

There was only one school in this remote area, Jieta Community School. It was too far to travel from Kinjikin each day so I had to reside with relatives in a neighbouring village, Pokran. We got up at 3:00 AM every day to cook our breakfast and lunch. We set off on our three-hour barefoot walk to school at 5:00 AM. During the wet season, we used canoes to travel to school as the paths were washed away by the

monsoon rain. We loved the wet season as travelling was reduced to a one-hour canoe trip and only a 45 minute walk to school.

Life was hard for me at this time because I was living with someone other than my close family. It was exceedingly difficult for me as I was unable to share my personal feelings with anyone — I accepted what my family told me to do, and most days went to bed without food.

The classes at school were often cancelled due to staffing shortages because teachers were not interested in working in such a remote place. The school shut down completely in the middle of the year and I went back to the village to stay with my grandparents. I felt that my two years of schooling was just a waste and I thought that was the end of my education journey. My grandparents treated me like their own son so I soon forgot all about school and I was enjoying life as a village boy, going hunting with the other boys my age.

My friends in the village did not think about leaving the village because they didn't know much about the outside world and the thought of living in a city was scary. The education they received from their fathers consisted of how to construct a house before the wet season and how to pick the perfect time to hunt. If you were the eldest boy in a family who led the tribe or the clan, there were additional responsibilities such as learning the boundaries of the land held by the tribe or clan, how to take care of the land and the ancestors' stories.

For my third year of schooling, my dad wanted me to move to Kubalia, East Sepik, and this time live with his family to further my studies. I was thinking, "there are new challenges each time I move into a new environment". Based on my recent experiences I seriously thought of rejecting his offer but, in the end, I respected his decision.

Attending Handra Primary School from Grade Three to Grade Eight was difficult. However my uncle was a good man and encouraged me. He became my adopted father. He was a Christian and told me to put my trust in God when facing obstacles.

High school life at Kubalia Secondary School came with a new set of challenges. The school and dormitory living arrangements were basic – we didn't have an indoor dining hall so breakfast and dinner were served while we sat on the ground outside. The teaching quality was also variable so learning anything was hard.

The security situation was an another major issue. The boys at school often engaged in crimes such as break and enter, robbery and stealing. I needed to be firm in resisting invitations to join them.

Just a few weeks before I sat my Grade Ten national examination in 2018, a student dormitory burnt down. Along with 30 other students, I was questioned by police as a suspect and during that process I was beaten. I was psychologically affected by the experience and could not focus while studying. I thought I would fail my final exam.

Fortunately, God had a different plan for me. I scored high marks and was selected to attend Passam National High School in East Sepik, one of six government-run national "schools of excellence" established around PNG for Grade 11 and 12 students. I felt a bit afraid when I first entered the gates because I was comparing myself with the country's top students. The transition was tough. Coming from a rural background it was hard for me to communicate fluently in English. I always sat quietly at the back of the classroom.

I soon realised that no-one would help me if I kept my problems to myself so I started to open up to some of my friends. I decided the best thing I could do is to face my fear and improve my social skills. The first group I joined was Tertiary School Christian Fellowship and after developing my leadership skills I later become the assistant fundraising coordinator. I was also appointed class captain in the middle of my first year and continued to hold that position in the second year while preparing for the final Year 12 exams and applying to university.

I feel it was a privilege for a person like me to be accepted into one of the best universities in the country, the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). I am the first person in my family and tribe, on both my father's and mother's side, to enter university.

I chose to follow the Public Policy Management stream at UPNG as I see it as the path to my dream of seeing PNG from a different perspective by comparing, adopting and, most importantly, applying a rationalist thinking approach to government administration.

If you face lots of challenges in your own life, be guided by the thought that you are heading in the right direction to achieve your dreams. Another lesson is not to compare yourself with others, because your destiny is different from your friends'.

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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