

Redefining roles and boundaries

Schooling in rural Solomon Islands



Introduction

Schooling has had a tremendous impact on the lives of Solomon Islanders at all levels of society. For some, this has been a satisfying journey; for others, especially those in rural communities, it has been a painful experience. This paper focuses on schooling in rural areas and the need to redefine its current roles and boundaries as a possible strategy towards improving the education and general welfare of those in rural Solomon Islands communities.

This paper sets out firstly to paint a picture of schooling in Solomon Islands as seen through the eyes of the rural people. It highlights the current positive and negative scenarios relating to schooling since independence. It argues that although the school system has contributed so much to the life of Solomon Islanders as individuals, communities and country as a whole, it has also developed as a closed system and has remained remote from community life. As a result, there is widespread dissatisfaction with schooling in its current form and with its current services, especially among rural people.

Secondly, the paper presents the view that the school system and schooling process are in Solomon Islands to stay. Yet, if it fails to fully serve people's needs, it should be redesigned and its roles and boundaries redefined to suit the needs of rural communities. With this in mind, the paper argues that Solomon Islands' schools and especially those in rural areas should become more accessible and accommodating to the educational needs of rural people. It proposes the idea of using schools as community learning centres (CLCs), combining formal and non-formal strategies to create a rich cultural environment of learning that integrates elements of both local and introduced cultures. The concept of CLCs should be introduced with the support of village learning groups in order to enhance community-wide basic education in rural Solomon Islands.

Images of schooling

In Solomon Islands, people from rural communities have described the outcomes of schooling in two contrasting ways. One is a grateful, satisfied and positive picture; the other is a dissatisfied and negative one.

In the positive image are those who once upon a time were students in high schools and tertiary institutions now working as managers, bankers, doctors, technocrats, advisors or consultants, and lecturers making a good living for themselves and their families. Included in this bright picture are the 1,000 plus students

who are studying at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE) and the 600 plus students currently at the University of the South Pacific (USP), as well as others at the Fiji School of Medicine (FSM), Fiji Institute of Technology (FIT), University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), PNG University of Technology and many more institutions of higher learning overseas. This positive picture is one that depicts a small proportion of our people who have been the grateful, satisfied and happy products of schooling in our society. The vast majority of these work in urban areas and live happy, urban lifestyles.

The negative picture includes the 33 per cent of primary-school age children not attending school in Solomon Islands (Solomon Islands Population and Housing Census Report, 1999, p.23). As well as the 31 per cent (mostly rural) enrolled in Years 1–3 who are not enrolled in Years 4–6 (Solomon Islands Human Development Report, 2002, p.50). Additionally, the negative picture includes approximately 30 per cent of Year 6 children not progressing into secondary education each year throughout the Solomon Islands (Solomon Islands Digest of Education Statistics, 2005, pp.6 and 8). Again, most of these are rural children. Furthermore, this includes young adults (especially women) who are masters of their own village environments and cultural world but who cannot relate much to what is happening outside because schools are too remote and inaccessible to them.

In my view, part of the reason for this negative image is the lack of flexibility and the unaccommodating nature of the current school system. This is because since the colonial period, the school system has only benefited those who have access to schools and/or are selected for entry into the system.

Schools as a closed system

Many of the disadvantages to people in rural Solomon Islands communities point to an inflexible, unaccommodating and closed school system.

While schools cannot be seen as the sole agency for educating and solving problems in society, the development of schools once had a specific agenda. In Solomon Islands, schools were specifically designed to meet the evangelisation agenda and workforce needs of the early missions and colonial government and later the human resource needs of the postcolonial state. This meant that the school system became very selective and focused its resources on a small, targeted elite identified to be in the government, Church and private enterprise workforce.

Schools as a closed system with well-defined roles and boundaries exhibit a number of common features. The first of these is that they are focused on a small, prescribed target group. The Solomon Islands Education Act 1978 stipulates that children should be of a certain age in order to be qualified to go to school. So schools are open only to children of a certain age group. To progress to senior secondary education (Forms 4–5), children have to score passes in three subjects. In 1999, compared to the 76.5 per cent gross enrolment rate in primary schools, there were only 29.3 per cent in secondary and 4.1 per cent in tertiary education (Solomon Islands Human Development Report, 2002). In 2004, only 76.3 per cent of the children who sat their secondary exams made it into Form 1 at secondary school (Solomon Islands Digest of Education Statistics, 2005, pp.6-7). Although the government has now undertaken compulsory progression from primary to Form 3 in junior secondary level, the figures for progress into senior secondary level are still very low compared to other Pacific Island countries. They stood at 76.3 per cent in 2005 (Solomon Islands Digest of Education Statistics, 2005, p.8). This means there is still a dropout rate of 23.7 per cent from junior secondary (F3) to senior secondary level (F4-5).

Secondly, what is taught and learned in schools is found within a prescribed curriculum and knowledge system. English, Science, Mathematics and Social Studies are given high status and value in schools, followed by Industrial Arts, Business Studies, Health, Home Economics, Art and Music and Physical Education. Any other body of knowledge that does not fit into this Western capital knowledge system is put aside as extracurricular or thrown back into the community as part of informal learning. Much of the subject content is foreign and is taught using foreign learning strategies. The teaching and learning process predominantly utilises prescribed learning resources that suit the prescribed curriculum.

A third feature is the prescription for teachers and trainers who are trained and certified. Under the Solomon Islands Education Act 1978 (section 29:1), teachers must be registered and certified before imparting knowledge in schools. There is no doubt this has a lot of value and Solomon Island rural communities have benefited from certified teachers in schools for many generations. However, this exercise developed a mentality of knowledge control among teachers – many teachers began to see themselves as the sole source of knowledge in schools. For others, however, this closed the door to utilising many other valuable sources of knowledge, both within the school and in the wider community.

Schools as community learning centres (CLCs)

Solomon Islands as a country must devise a quality education system that is more accessible to meet the needs of all its people, especially the rural communities who make up 84 per cent of the total population (Maebuta, 2006, p.67). It is vital for the national government and other education stakeholders to examine how the roles and boundaries of the current school system can be redefined to make it more accommodating.

One suggestion is to adapt the concept of CLCs in rural Solomon Islands schools with redefined roles and expanded boundaries. The CLCs concept is used widely in the United States where they

‘provide academic enrichment opportunities outside of school hours especially to students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools’ (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/21stccle/index.html>). It sits well within the non-formal education circle.

Rural Solomon Islands schools functioning as CLCs would provide wider access to basic education for a wider range of age groups in rural communities. This would develop a literate population through an open door approach, which in turn, would broaden rural people’s horizons, enrich their world view and expand their human capabilities and allegiance towards a national identity. Additionally, it would broaden rural people’s capacities and choices for improving the level of their wellbeing and productivity. (Solomon Islands Human Development Report, 2002, p.46).

Adapting CLCs to a rural Solomon Islands context would be based on the philosophy of ‘Education for All’ (EFA) promoted by UNESCO. CLCs would open doors to varying rural target groups, giving them greater access to basic education and information – both of which are vital in helping them make important life choices for their family and community development.

CLCs would further assist in narrowing what Thaman (2003) refers to as the gap between the expectation of school curriculum and that of many rural learners’ cultures, which creates a cultural gap in their learning experiences. CLCs would combine both imported and indigenous knowledge systems with cultural learning experiences, which would lead to improved academic performance for many rural children. This is in line with what Sanga (2002) identifies as the need to balance the ‘In-School’ with the ‘Out-of-School’ cultures (p.55) to enhance a more successful school experience for Pacific children.

Creating beneficial outcomes

Redefining the roles and boundaries of schooling as community learning centres (CLCs) would mean redesigning the current organisation of the school system and the schooling process. The changes this would bring are outlined below.

- Schools would be opened up to those beyond the enrolled population in order to meet the needs of school drop-outs, unenrolled children, interested adult learners and parents. In its current form, schools have restricted their services to the school-age population and in particular to the enrolled population. With the current financial difficulties facing the country, expanding the roles and boundaries of schooling will enable access to formal learning to other sections of rural communities, utilising facilities and resources already available in established schools.
- Schooling would cater for needs and services beyond the normal classroom processes. Schools could be used for exposure to and learning of new forms of literacy, land use, healthy living, cultural knowledge, local languages and many other areas of interest to the rural communities.
- Schooling would offer a variety of educational services beyond the current normal services. It would offer community library services, distant learning centres for college and university courses, NGO programmes providing information and awareness programmes for rural people.

- Schools as CLCs would use a variety of resources beyond the notion of teacher as expert. Trades people, church workers, village experts, mothers, traditional leaders, youth and people with expertise both in the local community and outside would add to the enriched culture of learning.

As a result of the above, there would be expanded usage of school facilities and resources beyond the normal school-enrolled population. The library, clinic, workshops, classrooms would be used for the learning purposes of a wider community of learners. Furthermore, it would take organised learning into villages through the set-up of village learning groups. Under this extension, there would be use of local communities, including Forms 3 and 5 leavers and parents who can help supervise children in learning groups in their village learning venues. These could be used as organised clusters for extended study sessions for doing homework, reading, discussion, sharing and discovery. Village learning groups could also be an extension of non-formal education with learning sessions for non-enrolled individuals and groups in rural communities who have acquired some basic knowledge and skills at school through the CLCs establishment.

Conclusion

This paper has painted the images of schooling and what it means to people in rural Solomon Islands. It has explored the concept of schooling as a closed learning system with its rigidly defined boundaries that make it less accessible and accommodating to the needs of rural Solomon Islanders.

I have suggested that the boundaries of schooling be redefined to encompass the various groups in the community and their diverse needs for education. I have proposed the concept of CLCs with newly defined roles and boundaries to offer greater space and a wider range of learning opportunities to the rural communities. This would be supported by the establishment of village learning groups, which would help to enhance meaningful community-wide education in rural Solomon Islands.

Solomon Islands as a country must redefine the roles and boundaries of schooling not only to continue to prepare much needed human resources for its future rural development, but also to educate the mass populace in rural areas who have a right to quality education. To do this, I have suggested how the roles and boundaries could be redefined so that schools as CLCs, supported by village learning groups, can become more accessible and accommodating to the needs of rural Solomon Islands communities.

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