

Key areas of disparity in the provision of education in Solomon Islands

Stanley Houma

Solomon Islands is an archipelago of 922 islands located in the South West Pacific about 1,860km northeast of Australia. The group consists of six large islands and hundreds of small islands and islets. In 1978 Solomon Islands gained political independence from the British after 85 years of colonial rule. The estimated population is 517,455 (2008 estimate), and approximately 80 per cent reside in rural areas, where they live a community-based subsistence lifestyle. Many Solomon Islanders are self-reliant and live off the resources from the land and sea. The degree of economic activity taking place depends on the distance from the commercial centres, such as Honiara, Auki or Gizo.

For the purpose of governance and economic development, the country is demarcated into nine provinces. The provinces have some degree of autonomy, where they exercise authority devolved

to them under the Provincial Government Act 1981. This includes the responsibility over the management of early childhood centres, primary schools, provincial secondary schools and community high schools.

This article focuses on three key areas of disparity in the provision of education in Solomon Islands. These include gender, spatial isolation and disability. The article highlights situations and provides empirical data where these disparities exist in the provision of educational services in Solomon Islands.

Gender-based disparity

The first area of disparity in the provision of education in Solomon Islands is gender. Here, gender is perceived as 'the state of being



MASINDE MULIRO UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

University of choice

Vision: To be a centre of excellence in Science and Technology, responsive to the development needs of society.

Mission: To generate, preserve and disseminate knowledge through research, teaching and innovation.

History: Founded in 2002 as a constituent college of Moi University, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST) gained university status in December 2006 to become the 7th public university in Kenya. It is located at 0.29°N and 34.73°E, in Kakamega Town, bordering Kakamega Equatorial Forest.

Programmes: MMUST offers certificate, diploma and degree programmes in pure and applied sciences, engineering, health sciences, education and social sciences, open learning and continuing education and disaster management and humanitarian assistance.

Achievements: Novelty programmes and its ever-growing capacity to do research and share knowledge globally have enabled MMUST to excel on many fronts, including taking second position in the East African Universities Exhibition in June 2008.

Contact

Vice-Chancellor's office:

Tel: +254 56 31375

Fax: +254 56 30153

Email: vc@mmust.ac.ke

www.mmust.ac.ke



*Professor B.C.C. Wangila,
Vice-Chancellor*

female or male with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological' (Oxford Learners Dictionary of English, 2003). Although females make up about 49 per cent of the total population, the status and participation of women in Solomon Islands continues to be an area of debate and concern. In many spheres, women are still perceived in terms of their traditional roles of 'child educators, food producers and resource managers' (UNICEF, 1993:53). 'In the traditional arena women lack formal positions of authority, although they may often wield considerable personal influence behind the scenes' (Pollard, 2000:5). In some local cultures, there are matrilineal practices that give authority for women over land and exercise some degree of influence within the clan group. Yet even in such cases, influence is exerted through a male member of the clan.

Gender disparity in education is evident in school enrolments at all levels of formal education, from early childhood through to tertiary education. According to the Ministry of Education's summary of education statistics (2005), the total primary enrolment by gender is 43,365 for females and 48,726 for males. This represents 52.9 per cent for males and 47.1 per cent for females. The picture worsens when looking at the data for secondary school enrolments, where the figure for females is 43.5 per cent, while for males it is 56.5 per cent. Tertiary enrolments demonstrate an even wider gender gap. The 2005 figures show that enrolments for females stood at 35 per cent compared to 65 per cent for males.

The gender figures for teachers in early childhood education (ECE) lean very much towards females. The data for 2005 revealed that out of 739 teachers, 88.2 per cent were female, while a mere 11.9 per cent were male. The trend towards male dominance begins at primary level. According to the Ministry of Education 2005 statistics, females only make up 40.2 per cent of the teachers at the primary school level. This gender disparity scenario is worse when looking at the composition of secondary school teachers. The 2005 data showed that only 25.6 per cent of secondary school teachers were female.

The status of women in school leadership tells a similar story. In 2006, out of the 721 school leaders at all levels from primary to national secondary schools, only 78 per cent were women (56 out of 721). At the primary school level, which has the highest, 9 per cent (47 out of 522) of school leaders (head teachers and principals) were women. At community high school (CHS) level, 4.7 per cent (8 out of 172) of school leaders were women. There is no woman leader at the provincial secondary level; while at the national secondary schools, only one woman is among the twelve school leaders.

Given the above situation, the government has a huge task ahead to fulfil the gender balance targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) before 2015. With the introduction of a subsidised school fees policy for basic education in 2008, one factor hindering female enrolment has been removed. The next step could be to work towards prescribed quotas for female enrolment in schools where there is imbalance in gender enrolment. The same could be applied to recruitment of teachers and school leaders that is not only based on academic merit and teacher qualifications but also on equitable gender representation.



Disparity based on spatial isolation

Spatial isolation is another key factor of disparity in the provision of education in Solomon Islands. In this article, isolation is defined in terms of geographical remoteness. This spatial isolation relates to the distance between remote rural villages or island communities and centres of development or government administration such as the provincial capitals and Honiara, the national capital.

The experiences of spatial isolation among rural isolated communities include irregular shipping services and limited access to good quality communication networks. There is generally a lack of access to quality provision of health and medical services, air services, water supply and education services. Spatial isolation also creates difficulty of access to educational services, as well as markets, finance and trade information.

The implications of spatial isolation to education are many. First, it creates limited and sometimes poor communication networks and links between education providers who are normally located at provincial capitals or in Honiara and rural isolated communities. This means the flow of important information regarding the operation and management of education, particularly in rural schools, is slow and irregular. Many schools therefore receive information late. This affects attendance of teachers at curriculum workshops, response to requests for information from education headquarters in provincial capitals and Honiara, and hinders effective in-servicing of rural teachers.

Spatial isolation has also meant delays in the movement of school and educational supplies and curriculum materials. In some isolated schools, orders for supplies and curriculum materials are late or go missing. As a result, students are normally forced to share curriculum materials and textbooks; in many cases, one book is shared among three or in some cases as many as eight students.

The absence of facilities and services such as clinics, banking services and airports to support development in isolated rural communities has in many cases affected the posting of qualified teachers and school leaders to rural schools. This has meant that many of these schools are either understaffed or recruit many untrained teachers. Consequently, many qualified rural teachers as well as students migrate to the provincial capitals, especially to Honiara, in search of quality schools and educational services. This creates accommodation and financial burdens on relatives and family members who work and live in urban centres. Teachers who are left in isolated schools have to cope with multi-grade teaching and multi-discipline duties. Head teachers and principals are forced to fulfil multiple roles, including that of school administrator.

Disparity based on disability

Disabled people, especially youth and children, have either been forgotten or have been provided with dismal services in Solomon Islands. This section discusses the disadvantages of disability in terms of education service provision and access. According to Baker, 'there is a wide range of disabilities experienced by people in Solomon Islands. This includes: physical disabilities, learning disabilities, hearing and vision impairment, and mental health and psychiatric illness' (2005: p.5). A 1992 study by the Rehabilitation Division of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services found that

approximately 3.2 per cent of the Solomon Islands' population experience some form of disability, of which 80 per cent live in rural areas with limited access to educational services.

Currently, access for youth with disabilities to educational opportunities is limited. Baker highlights that few teachers are trained in special needs and many may not have the knowledge of how to teach a child with special needs. The cost of secondary education can be prohibitive, and families who do not see that educating disabled children will open opportunities, may choose not to pay the fees that would allow their children to attend school. This is particularly true for families who are financially disadvantaged. For children with mobility needs or visual impairments, physically accessing classrooms on upper floors or that are difficult to enter with a mobility aid is another barrier to accessing education.

Prevailing attitudes also present an obstacle to the inclusion of children with disabilities into classrooms. Parents, teachers and community workers do not see the value in educating children with disabilities and will not seek to make the alterations that will allow these children to attend school.

According to Baker, services to meet the needs of the disabled in Solomon Islands have been struggling to grow for over a decade. In the provision of education, the Solomon Islands Red Cross Society has been running a school for disabled children in Honiara. In addition, for a number of years, the Styvenburg Vocational Training Centre in the Makira Province has been providing admission to disabled students to undertake technical skills training in areas such as agriculture, carpentry and small engine mechanics.

As reflected in Table 1, a small number of disabled students do have access to the mainstream school system at different levels. This is a very small start of a huge task that needs greater attention by educational authorities at all levels in the country.

Baker states that at policy level, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has compiled a national policy on disability that would, among other services, prescribe a variety of educational service options for disabled people of different age groups.

Summary

In this article, I have attempted to highlight three key areas of disparity in the provision of educational services in Solomon Islands. Disparity is discussed here in terms of the difference in the level of access to education based on gender, spatial isolation and disability.

Table 1

Percentage of disabled pupils by school type, 2005

<i>School Type</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Early Childhood Education (ECE)	0
Primary School	2.16
Community High School	2.04
Provincial Secondary School	0.31
National Secondary School	0.35
Total	4.86



Trans Africa

COLLEGE

Trans Africa College (TAC) was incorporated under the Ghanaian Company Act of 1963 (Act 179) in November 2003. The College is fully recognized by the Ministry of Education and accredited by the National Accreditation Board (NAB) of Ghana to run Higher National Diploma (HND) and Associate Degree programmes. Subsequently, it was granted recognition by NAB for the Professional and Technical Examination Board (NABPTEx) to run Higher National Diploma programmes; and the Institute of Commercial Management in the United Kingdom to run Management and Information Technology courses.



Prof. K.M. Bosompem,
Academic Council
Chairman



Mr Samuel Segbefia,
Director

The College was founded on the dreams and aspirations of Samuel Segbefia, who with the support of Ghana Evangelism cherishes education with the sole objective of developing a new generation of respectable academics and professionals with business and management background, charged to contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of Ghana.

Currently, there are three major departments in TAC, namely

- Business and Management Studies
- Journalism and Communication Studies
- Applied Sciences and Information Technology.

Firstly, there are differences in access to formal educational at all levels in Solomon Islands. There is a tendency for females to have a limited access to formal education compared to males regardless of them comprising approximately 49 per cent of the total population. The trend indicates greater access to the lower levels of formal education and a substantial reduction at the senior secondary and tertiary levels.

Secondly, there are differences in access to formal educational based on spatial isolation. People who live in island communities located in the remote regions of Solomon Islands are disadvantaged in their access to schools with quality teachers, facilities and curriculum resources.

Thirdly, people, especially youth and children, with disabilities have no or limited access to mainstream formal education. Due to negative attitudes at various levels, there is little attention given to providing educational services to disabled people, and particularly children.

In order to provide equitable educational services to all sections of the population, greater and meaningful attention is called for to address the disparity in access to educational services in Solomon Islands based on gender, spatial isolation and disability.

References

- Baker, B. (2005). *Solomon Islands Pilot Disability Survey Project Report: Findings and Recommendations*, MHMS, Solomon Islands Government, Honiara.
- Brock, C. (1997). *The Educational Context. In The Challenge of Scale – Educational Development in the Small States of the Commonwealth*. Commonwealth Secretariat. London. UK.
- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development. (2005). *Digest of Education Statistics*. MEHRD. Honiara.
- Pollard, A. A. (2000). *Givers of Wisdom, Labourers Without Gain: Essays on Women in Solomon Islands*. IPS. USP. Suva. Fiji.
- UNICEF (1993). *Situation Analysis of Women and Children in the Solomon Islands*. UNICEF.

STANLEY HOUMA comes from South Malaita, Solomon Islands. He studied at the University of the South Pacific (USP), Fiji, where he obtained a BAGCed. Later, he went on to do postgraduate studies at Waikato University, New Zealand, where he obtained an MA in Educational Leadership (First class honours). Stanley joined the USP in 2002, and in January 2006, was appointed lecturer in Educational Leadership and Change. His areas of academic interest are leadership in education, educational development issues and social justice in the Pacific, as well as teacher education.

Trans Africa College, P.O. Box 11366,
Accra – North, Ghana

Tel/Fax: +233 302 24 2079 / 20 818 1970 / 20 820 3754

Email: tac_college@yahoo.com

www.transafricacollege.com