School changes and the Solomon Islands secondary principal

Kabini Sanga and Joash Maneipuri

This article examines the changed nature of Solomon Islands secondary schools. It discusses how, since the mid 1990s, the secondary school has changed in terms of its type (national, provincial and community), student numbers and composition, staffing, class levels and location. It asserts that the secondary school has changed, and, with it, the role of the principal. The paper argues that the principal who understands the changed nature of the secondary school of today is more likely to provide effective leadership for the school.

Introduction

In 1994, only two community high schools (CHSs) were operating in Solomon Islands. Within four years, the number had risen to sixty-five. This extraordinary expansion was stopped only by the socio-political national crisis (referred to here as the crisis), which erupted in 1999. What did this expansion of CHSs mean for secondary education in the country? How did this growth impact the secondary principalship? These and many more questions were asked in conversations we, the authors, had during the period, 1998-2000. Unfortunately in 2000, the country dived deeper into crisis and we were unable to monitor the developments in the country’s secondary school system.

With the addition of the 63 CHSs, the nature of Solomon Islands secondary schooling changed. From what we were observing informally during the pre-crisis period, changes at the school level seemed considerable. Yet, at a macro-level, it appeared to us that the Ministry of Education (MOE), the education authorities, the school boards and the principals were behaving as if little had changed. No new school policies were instituted. Practices of school governance remained unchanged. The MOE or education authorities did not clarify guidelines relating to the roles and requirements of principals.
We felt that to ignore the changes in the secondary education sector was unwise. We feared that principals were likely to bear the brunt of unclear role expectations, unreasonable resource support, outdated policies and more. We saw the danger of school expansion without the necessary skills and knowledge acquisition by principals. Given that we were familiar with many principals and their schools, we were mindful of the considerable challenges they faced and that many principals were uninformed about the extent of their roles.

Our intent was to show that the Solomon Islands secondary school has changed, and, with this, the role of the principal has also changed. In this paper, we discuss these changes; examining the administrative, legal and educational environments for school leadership. We argue that if the principal is to provide effective leadership for his/her school, he/she must understand the complex nature of the changed school and the challenges facing it.

We premise our argument on the assumption that as organisations, schools are complex and changing (Portin & Shen, 1998). The Solomon Islands secondary school of today is not what it was in 1994 and is unlikely to be the same twenty years from now. We describe the secondary school on the basis of selected features deemed to have changed. We approach the discussion from a macro-level perspective and focus particularly on the challenges for the principal who wants to be the leader of an effective school.

This paper is part of a wider and ongoing research project. As such, our discussion and observations are to be taken as work-in-progress. In the wider project, we hope to document a more comprehensive description of the Solomon Islands school principal. We began collecting data just prior to the crisis, using a questionnaire and two seminars. Of all principals in the country, 48% responded to our questionnaire. The responses were compiled and discussed with 25 principals during two seminars, led by us and lasting 5-6 hours each time. One seminar was attended by urban principals and the other by rural principals. Principals from all types of secondary school attended.
Theoretical overview of school changes

Writing in 1993, Hopkins and Ainscow observed, “we now live in a change-rich environment where multiple policy initiatives and innovation overload are the norm” (p.303). This “change-rich environment”, we believe, is a feature of what is generally referred to as the new economy. From our general knowledge, we say that the new economy is marked by:

- the economics of knowledge commodification, commercialisation and choice;
- a consciousness of internationalisation, equalisation, codependence, creativity and diversity; and
- a technology of electronic communication.

The extent of influence of the new economy on Solomon Islands schools is, as yet, not considerable. However, its impact is certain. In the global literature, an effect of this environment, as noted by Spring (1998), has been a progression of legislation, regulation and general political attention to school improvement. Moreover, Portin and Shen (1998) observed that the social context of the school has changed, resulting in an environment of complexity, diversity and greater need.

The changed school, according to Ramsey (1992), is marked by the changing nature of the student, a changed role for the principal and a changed focus from management to leadership of schools. Consequently, Ramsey argued, changed schools require new roles and skills for survival and success.

Change, generally, is a dynamic phenomenon. Its impact on schools is not uniform. Often, as noted by Grace (1995), change is accompanied by role ambiguities at the school level. William and Portin (1997) have also observed that change at the school level has resulted in declining morale and enthusiasm of principals. According to these authors, while principals welcomed change, they were often overloaded with additional management duties at the cost of providing leadership for their schools. In other words, Portin and Shen (1998:101) concluded, “the principalship has simply become more challenging”.

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Teachers play an important role in changed schools. According to Marks and Louis (1997), changed schools in the 1980s and 1990s have seen teachers empowered as professional educators, allowing them to exercise substantial influence on matters of curriculum, instruction and assessment. Principals create the climate and culture that allow teachers to perform these roles.

The literature on effective schools suggests that the notion of effective schools is a cultural concept and is, therefore, dependent on a conceptualisation of the school. Bollen (1996), for example, argued that effective schools are marked by principals who understand the school as a complex entity and therefore have put in place strategies allowing multiple levels and internal dynamics to cooperate with each other.

The need to influence the culture of a school requires individual attention to each school. In support of this proposition, Stoll, Reynolds, Creemers and Hopkins (1996) argued for the need to develop more ‘contextually specific’ school improvement strategies. According to these authors, this will require tailoring the precise nature of the programmes offered to the ‘presenting culture’ and context of individual schools. This ‘presenting culture’ includes the school’s students, staff, resources, policies and the wider environmental situation. Hopkins and Lagerweij (1996) explained that, without a clear focus on the internal conditions of the school, efforts for improvement become marginalised. These authors further argued that educational change should be based principally on the school: hence the need for a clear understanding of the school and its changed nature.

The literature on school culture in Pacific countries is critical about the mismatch between school culture and national macro cultures. Echoing this stance, Thaman (1992) has noted that in Pacific countries, school curriculum and practices are negligent of the wider cultural contexts of the Islands. For Solomon Islands, this incongruence between the culture of the school and the wider Solomon Islands, is the norm rather than the exception.
Historical overview

There was a time in Solomon Islands, when everyone knew what ‘secondary’ or ‘high school’ meant because there was only one type of school and just a few of them. Later, prior to independence in 1978, secondary schools were categorised as either national secondary schools (NSSs) or provincial secondary schools (PSSs). Traditionally, the NSSs (such as King George VI, Selwyn College, Su’u, Goldie) had Forms 1 to 5, with some offering Forms 6 and 7 as well. In contrast, the PSSs (such as Aligegeo, Pawa, Ruavatu, Honiara, Kamaosi) had only Forms 1 to 3 but all have since introduced Forms 4 and 5 and a few have added Form 6 as well.

In general terms, the distinctions between the NSS and the PSS have largely been historical. The NSSs were created as secondary schools for the country as a whole. In relative terms, they were well resourced, had qualified teachers in adequate numbers, were designed to offer a strong academic programme and had the choice of admitting academically strong students from all over the country. Student selection to NSSs was nationally administered and education authorities (mainly churches) were to run the schools for the country as a whole and not just for their own jurisdictions.

The PSSs on the other hand, were created as vocational schools to serve provincial government jurisdictions. The PSSs initially followed separate curricula and examination systems but later adopted, with the NSSs, a unified curriculum and examination system. The demand for a ‘more academic’ education came from parents, premised on a wide dissatisfaction with the PSS vocational programme. While vocational education was deemed appropriate, neither the MOE nor the education authorities gave the PSSs the resources and commitment to make them successful. The PSSs are no longer vocational schools, although they still carry this stigma, and remain the poor cousins of the NSSs. The resource support, the number of teachers and their qualifications and the academic standing of students at their point of entry were lower than those for the NSS. Provincial governments have historically administered the PSSs.
In the early 1990s, a new type of secondary school emerged in Solomon Islands, as it did in Papua New Guinea and other Pacific Islands countries. The CHSs grew out of the frustrations of village and urban parent communities who wanted their children to have a secondary education. At that time, only about 30% of Grade 6 primary school students were able to go on to Form 1, the beginning of secondary education. In some provinces, such as Western and Malaita, the proportion of Grade 6 primary students who were able to begin secondary education was around 20%.

The approach used to develop the community high schools was simple. Using existing primary schools, communities of parents built additional classrooms, bought some curriculum materials and demanded, often through their Members of Parliament, that the MOE approve secondary status for their expanded schools. In this way, one Form 1 class was started, then a Form 2 in the following year, and so on. By 1998 some CHSs were offering a full secondary education, to Form 6. In most cases, primary school teachers were expected to teach the secondary classes. This was done by the annual class allocations for teachers by school committees. An AusAID-funded teacher-upgrading project was introduced, under which some primary teachers were assisted to teach secondary classes.

Unlike the NSSs and PSSs, the CHSs were created for and by local (geographical and church-based) communities. Once established, these schools followed the same academic programme as the other types of school. While the MOE was expected to assist with an establishment grant to the new schools, it was the local community that assumed funding for curriculum and other resources. The teachers were trained by the MOE and their salaries paid for by the education authority running the school. Students entered a CHS from its feeder primary school. Generally, funding and other support services to CHSs from the central government were much less than the support to the PSSs.

Table 1 shows the number and types of secondary schools during the period 1994-1998. The total number of secondary schools grew from 27 in 1994 to 90 in 1998, with the growth area being entirely in the CHS system.
Table 1: Number and type of secondary schools over 5 years

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSS</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The growth of the CHS as seen above represents considerable activity at the school level and within the education sector. How well do educators understand these movements? In particular, how well do principals understand the complexities of the changing secondary school and the implications for their roles as school leaders?

In the rest of the paper, we explore these questions, using the selected features of school type, student factors, staffing, class levels and geographical location. We describe the changed situation and then examine the leadership challenges for the principal.

School type

Just prior to the 1999 national crisis, 10% of Solomon Islands secondary schools were NSSs, 18% were PSSs and 72% were CHSs. As well, 62% were day schools, 21% were boarding and the rest (18%) were both boarding and day schools. A decade previously, the secondary school was either a NSS or a PSS and most were boarding schools.

Schools as organisations

Schools are complex organisations. The key stakeholders of NSSs are national in nature, representing government departments, provincial authorities, non-government organisations, industry, churches and parents throughout the country. These schools were established to meet the higher-level manpower needs of the country. The NSS is organised along academic lines, where senior subject specialist teachers exercise considerable influence within the school and, nationally, over
examinations and curriculum. The NSS operates subject teams, with English, maths, social science and science being the main ones. A board of governors externally governs the NSS. Besides being educational institutions, NSSs are also flagship institutions for their education authorities, which are mostly churches.

As vocational schools, PSSs have traditionally been under-resourced and have not had strong academic departments. Their organisational structures have been less complex, allowing for a more limited collegial system of operation. While the same subjects taught in the NSSs are now taught in the PSSs, the organisational structures are not as well developed. The schools are run by boards of management, appointed by the Provincial government authorities.

The third type of school is the CHS, belonging to local communities. They enroll students locally to meet local community needs for secondary education. The CHSs are organised along the lines of their primary sections. The larger CHSs tend to have two deputy principals, one for primary and one for secondary. The secondary component of CHSs do not have well-developed academic departments, which means that the staff are generally less autonomous as professionals. School committees and local education authorities govern the CHSs.

The principal is faced with the challenge of understanding the complex nature of the changed secondary school. Given the differences of history, organisational structure and institutional culture, the organisational behaviours of institutional stakeholders are likely to differ with each school type. The principal must not only understand these differences but also be able to deal appropriately with them. He or she has to also understand the different organisational structures and the roles involved in managing these different kinds of schools.

In addition, the principal must understand the organisational demands of boarding and day schools and the particular constraints of these types of schools. The functions and roles of boards of governors of the NSS, though similar, are different from those of boards of management or school committees. The principal is faced with the challenge of having to be familiar with the differences as well as the particular nature of the external governing board.
Schools as social systems

Schools were considered as complex organisations above. In this section, schools are viewed as social systems. As social systems, schools are multi-functional. The NSSs are considered flagship institutions for the churches that operate seven of the nine schools. People generally expect NSSs to produce leaders in all aspects of national life. While most students are academically capable, not all are able to proceed to tertiary education due to limited opportunities of access or a lack of resources. The power patterns, competitions and alliances within NSSs involve interacting with staff who are specialists in their particular subject areas, church authorities and the MOE.

As systems, the PSSs are linked to provincial government authorities. Their efficiency is linked to the efficiency of the provincial government authorities that control the schools. Often the schools are inefficiently run. Policies are not written down. Organisational processes are usually not followed and role descriptions are often not clear. Local politicians and senior provincial civil servants tend to have considerable influence in the operation of the school. Where a provincial authority is weak, a PSS principal generally exercises considerable autonomy as a manager.

At a formal level, different CHSs are likely to show varying degrees of clarity of school goals and policies. There are some promising CHSs, and those in Honiara seem to have the potential to become very effective schools. At the informal level, some local school communities are active, allowing parents to use their skills in assisting their schools. The principals of such CHSs are rarely faced with tensions amongst staff on the basis of their subject-disciplines. The teachers at both the primary and secondary levels are very active and tend to work together.

The principal (of all types of school) is faced with understanding the particular nature of the school as a social system. First, he or she is expected to deal satisfactorily with the multiple and dynamic nature of the needs, goals and aspirations of all school stakeholders. The stakeholder agendas, however, are not necessarily congruent with each other and the principal must be able to maintain some degree of harmony.
among the agendas. Second, the principal must ensure that the school remains on course towards its goals, being aware of the visible and non-visible stakeholder tensions and the various expectations, and utilising these towards the achievement of school goals. This is the arena of politics and the principal must develop the skills necessary to negotiate and arrive at consensus.

Schools as legal entities

In earlier sections, schools were seen as complex organisations and social systems. In the following paragraphs, schools are perceived as legal entities. As legal entities, schools operate within a variety of legal frameworks, which are enshrined in Acts of Parliament, MOE regulations, provincial bye-laws, church constitutions and policy statements. The NSSs operate largely within the Education Act, MOE regulations and church policy statements. The PSSs and CHSs within provincial jurisdictions are also subject to the Provincial Government Act and the specific bye-laws and policies of provincial governments. In the case of CHSs that are operated by the churches, in addition to the Education Act and MOE regulations, these schools are also subject to particular church regulations. Where a CHS is village-based, irrespective of which education authority administers it, the school is also likely to be influenced by the *kastoms* of local cultures and communities.

An area of growing importance and one which is likely to impact schools more and more, is that of international conventions and agreements that have been agreed to by the Government of Solomon Islands. One such example is the convention on the rights of children. The national youth policy of the Ministry of Youth also has relevance for schools. Court decisions, relating, for example, to students’ rights or the use and abuse of student labour in boarding schools are not, as yet, common. However, they are likely to influence schools considerably in the future. The CHSs, especially those in urban areas, will face liability challenges relating to safety and pupil conduct. Boarding schools, in particular, will deal with issues arising from teachers being *in loco parentis* as these relate to students’ rights, school rules, discipline and pupil conduct.
For the principal, a key challenge relates to the need for a good working knowledge of the legal frameworks within which the school operates and of developments and changes to these frameworks. In addition, the principal must be familiar with the legal principles that undergird the operations of the different types of schools. This is not to suggest that the principal studies for a law degree. It is only to say that the changed school demands knowledge relating to legal issues affecting the school, and the principal must acquire such knowledge.

**Student factors**

Two aspects relating to students are covered in this discussion. The first is a numerical issue and the second relates to the nature of students. In numerical terms, secondary schools ranged from schools with less than one hundred students to those with more than one thousand. The sizes of schools, on the basis of student numbers, are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Student population and percentage of schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student population</th>
<th>% of schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 100</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-149</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150-249</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250-349</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>350-449</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>450-549</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>550-649</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>650-749</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>750-849</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>850-1049</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the total number of students from the schools in this study, 71% were from CHSs, 15% from PSSs and 14% from the NSSs. The NSSs students ranged, in terms of student number, between 401 and 650. The PSSs had a range of 186-378 students. The CHSs had the greatest range in terms of the number of students, between 40 and 1012. Of course the growth area is the CHSs.

The numerical growth of the CHS has a number of implications. What roles and skills are needed for the principal with a school of more than one thousand students compared to those needed in a small school of 40? What priority should developmental agendas at the new CHSs receive? How are resources to be allocated within the larger CHSs? What are the implications for staffing the CHSs? Where resources and staffing cannot meet requirements according to the rate of growth, what are the ethical implications? What are the ethical implications for resource allocations between the growth areas (CHSs) and the non-growth areas (NSSs and PSSs)? These questions are for the MOE and education authorities that control the schools. However, in reality, it is the principal who deals with these questions on a daily basis. While he or she is advised to raise the questions regularly with the MOE and the education authority controlling the school, the principal cannot wait for the answers to come from outside the school. The principle is advised to engage the school committee to deal with these questions.

The principal must, therefore, learn to balance developmental goals with maintenance ones. He or she is required to acquire and exercise skills in strategic planning. As well, the principal is expected to develop and show ethical competence in dealing with students and student matters.

Data from the two seminars referred to earlier indicate that the secondary students of today are different from those of a decade earlier. Here are some key characteristics of today’s students:

- They are unlikely to be employed after leaving school, hence are not highly motivated at school. In Solomon Islands schools, employment is the overriding motivation for going to school.
• The more than 80% of students who do not attend NSSs have had limited experience in the national ethos of the country and are likely to have weaker allegiance to a national identity than do those from the NSSs. For a new country of diverse cultural and ethnic peoples who are isolated and scattered in a vast ocean, developing a strong positive national identity is necessary for living peacefully together.

• They have a growing dissatisfaction with their own academic experience at secondary school, due largely to the poor quality of their school experience.

• The majority of the students may not have the cultural awareness and understanding of their own village and ethnic communities. Their sense of identity and association with their cultures are likely to be weak.

• The urban students, in particular, have been exposed to ethnic strife, militancy, and some degree of substance abuse.

The principal is faced with a changed nature of students. The issues of concern for these students are likely to include: unemployment, ethnic tensions, self-esteem, personal security, violence and lawlessness. Consequently, the role of the principal is likely to change. He or she needs to establish a complex network of societal people and institutions to work with. Depending on parents alone is not enough. Newer, more expanded networks of people are essential and these may include people in industry, the churches, social workers, the police and community elders. The principal is advised to be collaborative in his/her approach to work.

**Staffing**

The numerical data on staffing vary considerably, between schools. Table 3 shows the distribution of teaching staff and support staff numbers in the schools surveyed.
Table 3. Staff numbers and distribution in the survey schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of teaching staff</th>
<th>% of schools</th>
<th>Number of support staff</th>
<th>% of schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21 plus</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Information from the two seminars conducted as part of the study indicated that CHSs were generally poorly staffed. While CHS secondary classes followed the same curriculum as other school types, the CHSs often did not have qualified specialist teachers or teachers with adequate experience. CHSs that were in their first year of operation were experiencing a particular difficulty. They did not have the teachers they needed in order to offer all the secondary school subjects that are legally required by the MOE curriculum. It was not uncommon to see the only subjects taught were English and Social Science as these subjects had teachers who could teach them. The seminar discussions noted that the NSSs were generally fully staffed with qualified teachers. NSSs also had considerable numbers of support staff, including groundsmen, cooks and gardeners. The majority of NSS teachers received their training overseas, and had at least a bachelors degree, in addition to a teaching qualification.

In the case of two NSSs, King George VI and Waimapuru, all support staff workers were employees of the Solomon Islands Government, just like the teachers. In all other NSSs, the support staff were employees of the school boards. The teachers of church-controlled NSSs, however, were employees of the church education authorities. In the PSSs, the provincial government employed all teachers and support staff. In the case of the CHSs, the teachers were either employees of a church education authority or a provincial government. Where a CHS had support staff, the school committee often employed these.
Information from the two seminars indicates that teachers of PSSs were generally trained locally, which meant that most would have graduated with a diploma from SICHE. The principals of PSSs, however, have received some of their training from either USP or a PNG institution. The seminar also revealed that most CHS teachers were trained locally. A particular feature of CHSs was that primary teachers were also a part of the school, presenting a situation where there are two distinct groups of teachers—primary and secondary. Both groups have their own distinct professional and social cultures within the same school. During the seminars, principals spoke of complex conflicts within the CHSs. For instance, primary staff tended to use a separate room, away from their secondary counterparts, to socialise or for meetings.

For the principal, the challenges relating to these matters are wide-ranging. The demands of supervising five teachers are potentially more challenging than are those of supervising 20 teachers. The principal also has to be knowledgeable about managing various staff contracts of employment, sometimes within the same type of school. At the NSSs, principals will need to manage staff professional autonomy more than their counterparts in the PSSs and CHSs. The CHS principal is likely to face considerable administrative challenge. In one sense, the CHS is more complex, with having primary and secondary classes and teachers together under the one roof. The CHS principal has to deal with complex organisational behaviours, including numerous underlying differences amongst teachers and students.

The CHS principal is also likely to find it more challenging to set academic standards. The negative constraints of limited resources, the lack of specialist trained teachers and the lack of clear role guidelines are likely to test the principal’s competence in providing leadership. The principal, therefore, has to ensure his/her own professional development so as to meet the skill requirements of the changed staffing situation.
Class levels

Table 3: Percentage or number of schools that responded to the questionnaire (48% of all schools) and class levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent.</th>
<th>Highest level</th>
<th>NSSs Highest level</th>
<th>PSSs Highest level</th>
<th>CHSs</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All types</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Form 1</td>
<td>one Form 7</td>
<td>one Form 6</td>
<td>most</td>
<td>kindie to F3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Form 2</td>
<td>the rest Form 6</td>
<td>the rest Form 5</td>
<td>two</td>
<td>kindie to F5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Form 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Form 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Form 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8%</td>
<td>Form 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>Form 7</td>
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</table>

The seminar discussions revealed that extensions of grade levels were occurring throughout the secondary school system. The NSSs seemed to have the minimal growth and such growth as there was focused on the upper levels of secondary education. Consequently, principals of NSSs had to deal with the need for resources, for qualified specialist teachers and for equipment for upper level classes only. For the Form 6 examinations, NSS principals had to deal with external Pacific regional bodies, in addition to in-country agencies.

The PSSs experienced some growth at the Forms 4-5 levels. Higher classes demanded specialist teachers and better resources. As Form 5 is a School Certificate Examination class, there are associated costs, additional management responsibilities and external impacts to negotiate. Without the support of the education authority and its board of management, the principal is unlikely to deal satisfactorily with these challenges.

As new schools, the CHSs required new staff and specialist resources. Principals also had to deal with issues of academic standards,
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adequacy and availability of finances and challenging aspects of present
day student life. They had to deal with their need for adequate and
appropriate physical infrastructure. Like the PSS principal, the CHS
principal could not address these issues without a supportive school
committee.

As class levels move up, organisational challenges become more
complex. For the principal, the meaning of academic quality needs to be
clearly defined. Standards of excellence need to be set. Principals are
expected to have and show a wide breadth of knowledge regarding
technology, multiple subject areas, diverse students and complex
organisations. For principals of NSSs, an additional challenge relates to
the need to demonstrate know-how about working with external and
international agencies on matters relating to Form 6 and 7 examinations.

Location

In 1998, 64% of those principals who responded to the
questionnaire classified their schools as rural and 36% considered theirs
to be urban. The NSSs were thought of predominantly as urban or semi-
urban while PSSs was generally rural. Of the CHSs, 21% were urban
and 79% were rural.

The location of a school is important because it affects the
complexity and diversity of the institution. Location determines the nature
and type of relationships a school has with its immediate communities.
The NSSs, being urban or semi-urban, often deal with other national
institutions, government departments and pressure groups that are national
in nature, while PSSs deal primarily with provincial politicians and
departments, and province-based stakeholders. Principals of PSSs often
have to deal with land issues, irregular transportation and remoteness
from hospitals, professional education institutions and the MOE.

The CHSs are located in both urban and rural settings. For the
majority of rural CHSs, their constituents are mainly villagers. Principals
are unlikely to have contact with government departments or national
institutions. Principals are more likely than their NSS or PSS counterparts
to be involved in village politics and community life. For the few CHSs
that are urban, parent groups are likely to be active and demanding. Students are likely to have behavioural and social problems associated with urban living. For all CHSs, local parental and church or provincial communities are likely to actively engage with the school.

Location imposes certain administrative and leadership challenges, some of which are described below. Firstly, the principal must learn to be sensitive to the demands of the stakeholder communities. While the nature of the communities may vary, the skills needed for the principal to ascertain community needs and be responsive to them are more or less the same. Secondly, the principal is required to be knowledgeable about issues of diversity of cultures, including languages. This is particularly so for urban schools and NSSs. Thirdly, the principal needs to be knowledgeable about local kastom and for PSSs and rural CHSs, this includes a high degree of familiarity with local land tenure systems. In particular, local kastom relating to boy-girl behaviour and male-female relationships requires understanding and observance. Schools are located on communally owned land and disputes relating to land often arise. There is, therefore, a need for adequate knowledge about the land-holding clans and their tenure systems. Fourthly, the principal needs to learn to network with local, provincial and national stakeholders. The nature of the problems faced by secondary schools is increasing beyond school resources and capacities; hence the need for the principal to forge effective networks with other stakeholders.

Concluding remarks

As argued by Hughes and Ubben (1989), good schools, i.e. those that are effective, are run by good principals. Good principals, according to these authors, are good leaders. Yet Portin and Shen (1998) warn that the changed school has a negative impact on the work of the principal. These authors argue that the changed school brings with it changed roles, making the principal work more, so that he or she becomes frustrated, feels less enthusiasm for the job and finds fewer opportunities for crucial leadership of the school. In other words, changed schools have disabling effects (as opposed to enabling ones) on those who are tasked to lead the institutions.
In this paper we suggest that the Solomon Islands principal who aspires to be a better leader must understand the nature of his/her school. We propose that the Solomon Islands secondary school has changed: in type, students, staffing, class levels and geographical location. We discuss the implications of the changed school and note the challenges these have for the principal. We suggest that understanding the changed school is the foundation of providing good leadership for the school.

In conclusion, we propose that good school leadership takes into account organisational complexities; is able to maintain congruent and balanced relationships; is knowledgeable about the legal frameworks within which schools operate; is strategic and ethically competent to deal with students; is able to negotiate conflicts; can manage diversity; and is able to collaborate with stakeholders and networks of people and organisations.

References


