Solomon Islands principalship: Roles perceived, performed, preferred and expected

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This article provides a profile of the Solomon Islands secondary school principals. The article argues that the principal, as profiled, cannot be fairly expected to perform effectively as a school leader, as proposed in the academic literature. The article ends by lauding Solomon Islands principals for providing school leadership in spite of overwhelming odds.

Introduction

Little is documented about the Solomon Islands secondary school principal. For the authors, as Solomon Islands educators, the lack of empirical research about the one group of people who are fundamentally important for creating effective schools is of concern. As educators, we asked ourselves these questions: Do we know enough about the realities of the Solomon Islands principal? Are our anecdotal understandings accurate of who they are as educators and individuals? Do we know what their roles are and, further, how they themselves see their own roles? Are our expectations of them as school leaders realistic? Is it fair to expect them to produce good schools? Is it reasonable to think that they will be good educational leaders of their institutions?

These questions motivated us to undertake a national descriptive study of the Solomon Islands principal during the 1998-2000 period. This article is part of that wider study, first reported on by Sanga and Maneipuri (2002) in this journal. In their report, Sanga and Maneipuri discussed the changed nature of the Solomon Islands secondary school and the implications this has had for the principal. In this article, we continue that discussion with a focus on the role of the principal as perceived by principals themselves. We sought to understand the principal’s role and to ascertain the extent to which the principal could be expected to perform as an effective school leader.
As Sanga and Maneipuri reported, the wider study involved 48% of all principals in the country. There were two sources of data: a questionnaire, to which 38 principals responded, and two seminars, attended by 25 principals. The questionnaire obtained descriptive data about the secondary school, its management and the principalship. The seminars collected insights and explanations by principals with respect to their roles, relationships and realities.

**Theoretical literature**

The theoretical literature has reaffirmed the critical role of the principal in ensuring success for schools (Austin & Reynolds, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1991). Three broad categories of roles are commonly stated, and these include: principals as managers (Goldring, 1990); as instructional leaders (Fullan, 1991); and as change agents (Leithwood, 1994).

First, as managers, principals hire and fire personnel, solve day-to-day problems, manage resources, respond to parental enquiry and supervise staff, students and time. The managerial role is, according to Portin and Shen (1998); vested in law, code policy and duty statements. Second, as instructional leaders, principals perform functions, including managerial behaviours that contribute to student learning (Donmoyer & Wagstaff, 1990). This role is further clarified by Murphy (1990), who breaks it down into sets of roles, including: (a) developing the school mission and goals; (b) coordinating, monitoring and evaluating curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (c) promoting the climate for learning; and (d) creating a supportive work environment.

The perspective of principals as instructional leaders, however, is rejected for its paternalistic stance (Sheppard 1996). Instead, it is suggested that principals facilitate the exercise of initiative and responsibility by teachers, with regard to instructional matters (Glanz & Neville, 1997).

The extension of the concept of instructional leadership is the notion of shared instructional leadership. According to Marks and Printy (2003:371), shared instructional leadership “involves the active collaboration of principal and
teachers on curriculum, instruction and assessment. Within this model, the principal seeks out the ideas, insights, and expertise of leaders in these areas and works with teachers for school improvement”. Shared instructional leadership happens in a number of ways. It is however premised on the principal and teachers forging effective, reciprocal roles.

Third, as change agents, principals play a key role in precipitating change. Marks and Printy (2003) refer to this role as transformational leadership. According to these authors, transformational leaders “motivate followers by raising their consciousness about the importance of organizational goals and by inspiring them to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organization (p.375).” Within school systems, a number of authors (Leithwood 1994; Leithwood, Jantzi & Fernandez 1994) have identified a number of functions of transformational leadership. These are as follows:

1. mission-centered (developing a widely shared vision for the school, building consensus about school goals and priorities),
2. performance-centered (holding high performance expectations, providing individualised support, supplying intellectual stipulation),
3. culture-centered (modeling organisational values, strengthening productive school culture, building collaborative cultures, and creating structures for participation).

The literature on the role of principals in Pacific Island countries is few and far between. Two examples of recent studies are cited. From Fiji, Puamau (1998) reported that secondary school principals performed predominantly administrative roles, including: the day to day running of the school; liaising with the school committee, parents, the media and central office; filling in forms for the ministry of education; planning the school programme; fundraising; and organisation of sports. Puamau noted that the majority of principals undertook these roles, often without prior preparation in educational administration or leadership.

From Papua New Guinea, Kapa (2003) undertook a study of primary and secondary principals, focusing on the leadership differences of males and females. Kapa, was therefore interested in the extent to which school leaders
in Papua New Guinea were playing their roles as leaders on the basis of their gender. In a general sense, Kapa noted that Papua New Guinea principals are transformational in the performance of their roles as instructional, institutional and community leaders. Kapa did not look at the differences between secondary and primary principals.

In the following sections, the findings of our study are presented. In each section, descriptive data is presented, together with brief analyses.

Principal’s profile

What did the Solomon Islands principal “look like” in 2000? A number of considerations are used to paint a profile of the principal. First, on the factor of gender, our study showed that 97% of respondent principals were males while 3% were females. Such an overrepresentation of males reflects the secondary school context where the majority of teachers are males. The study did not delve into the particular stories and challenges facing the few female principals or women who may aspire for the principalship.

Second, on the factor of age, the principals were spread from 26 years old to a few who were beyond 50 years of age. The findings showed that 22% were between 26 and 30 years old; 12% were between 31 and 35 years old; 32% were in the range 36-40 years old; 17% were between 41 and 45; 17% were between 46 and 50 and 5% were above the retiring age of 50 years. Given the volatile nature of the principalship and the wider school context, little can be said now about the factor of age on its own. In time, when detailed and accurate information is available about staff development plans for principals, their transfer practices, their exit or retirement patterns, more meaningful analyses of the age statistics can be made.

Third, the findings demonstrated a wide cross-section in the qualification backgrounds of principals. Eight per cent had a master degree. Forty one per cent had a bachelor degree as their highest qualification. Ten per cent had an advanced diploma, while 33% had a diploma and 8% were holders of a certificate. The master degree holders were not necessarily in national secondary schools. While there were some in national secondary schools,
many were in urban community high schools, suggesting that higher qualifications were linked with postings in urban settings. The certificated principals were older, more experienced, and were teachers who had been associated with the provincial secondary schools.

A component of formal educational qualification is any administrative training that principals may have received. On this factor, the data showed two distinct groups.

More than a half (56%) of respondent principals reported that they did not have any administrative training before or since taking up their positions. Of the 44% who said they did, their training ranged from obtaining formal qualifications in educational administration to participation in short courses on management. For those who took part in short courses, their training was not part of a systematic programme for principals. Rather, these programmes were often organised as project activities under international funding.

Fourth, on the factor of formal appointment to the post of principal, the findings showed a disturbing picture. Less than one half (45%) of respondent principals were substantive holders of their positions. This means that for one reason or another, 55% were merely in acting capacities. They were senior teachers, deputy principals and those who were still awaiting their appointments to be formalised. The explanations for such a high number of principals in acting positions were varied. They included inefficiencies at the education authority office, administrative bottlenecks at the ministry of education, and the constrained capacity of the teaching service commission as it struggled to keep up with the workload of promotions and appointments. In addition, the situation reflected the real shortage of qualified candidates for principalship positions.

The fifth factor related to the years of experience that principals had in administrative roles. On this count, the findings demonstrated a wide cross-section of experiences. On one hand, there was a relatively large group of new principals (37%) who were in their first or second year. On the other hand, there was a small cohort of 3% who had been principals for 12 years or more. In between these groups, 17% were in their third or fourth year, 20%
were in fifth or sixth year, 14% were in their seventh or eight year, 6% in their ninth or tenth year and 3% in their eleventh year. Linked to administrative experience is the school location of the experience. On this count, about a third (31%) of respondent principals were in their first year in a new school. Only 8% had been principals at their school for five years or more.

Sixth, the study examined the factor of subject discipline areas of interest of principals. On this count, there were variations but the majority seemed to have come from a social science background. In response to a question asking principals to state their area of subject specialisation, 44% indicated social sciences, 21% stated agriculture, 10% mentioned mathematics and 8% gave science. The remaining 18% indicated a combination of industrial art, business studies and physical education.

It seems that the dominance of social science people reflected the secondary teacher population in the country, where the majority of trained teachers are in the social sciences. Moreover, the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education teacher education social science programmes have tended to have larger intakes than the science ones. The 14% with an agriculture background are associated with the provincial secondary schools.

The seventh and final factor related to teaching responsibilities. In general terms, the Solomon Islands principal of 2000 was not a full-time administrator. An overwhelming majority (92%) of respondent principals had teaching duties on a daily basis. The size and levels of teaching loads varied. Only 8% were full-time administrators, without classroom responsibilities.

The policies on teaching duties for principals were unclear at the time of the study. It was observed, however, that where a school has a complete supply of allocated qualified teachers, the principal tended to focus on administrative roles. In addition, particularly in community high schools with vigourous building and establishment programmes, principals tended to spend their time overseeing these activities while according little time supervising instructional activities.
On the basis of the above discussion, a summary profile of the Solomon Islands principal can be painted. Generally speaking, the principal is a male, below the age of 40 years, with a diploma as his highest formal qualification. Typically, the principal is not formally trained in school administration and is also teaching, with classroom duties, most likely in the social sciences. He is relatively new, both to the post as well as the school. Moreover, the Solomon Islands principal is only acting as a principal, on a temporary basis, without a confirmed appointment to the position.

**Role definitions**

The study sought to find out how the roles of the Solomon Islands principal were defined. Respondent principals claimed that a number of publications were important for articulating their roles. These included statements of job description, the Teaching Service Handbook, the Education Act and the school rules of individual institutions. Ninety five per cent of principals claimed that they had access to a copy of their job descriptions while 5% did not. Ninety two per cent had access to a copy of their own school rules. The job description and school rules are school level policies, which means they can be more easily accessed. In instances where principals did not have access to these documents, it appeared that these were for newly established community high schools where the documents, as policy guidelines, were still unwritten.

The findings relating to the external policy documents seemed more serious, as compared to the school-based ones. Eighty two per cent of principals had access to a copy of the Education Act. Sixty one per cent had a copy of the Teaching Service Handbook while 39% did not. These two documents are deemed essential for the work of the principal. While not surprising, it is of particular concern that 39% did not have access to the Teaching Service Handbook. The handbook is a key policy and regulatory document, useful for the efficient day-to-day management of schools. However, the Solomon Islands education and societal contexts are so dynamic and complex that any number of legitimate factors can be responsible for the non-availability of external policy documents at the school level.
Role clarity

The study examined the extent to which key stakeholders were clear about the roles of the principal, as principals themselves perceived this to be. The responses are summarised as follows:

1. Eighty seven per cent of principals stated that they were clear on their own roles, while 13% said they were not clear.
2. Eighty two per cent believed that their staff members were clear on the roles of the principal, while 18% thought their staff members were not clear.
3. Sixty eight per cent claimed their school boards were clear on the roles of the principal while 32% said their school boards were not clear.
4. Fifty three per cent thought that school parents were clear on the principal’s roles, while 47% said parents were not clear.
5. Seventy eight per cent felt their students were clear while 22% felt their students were not clear on the principal’s roles.

Without going into too much detail, a few observations can be made regarding the findings above. It seems that principals rated their perceptions of those at the school level (themselves, their staff and their students) more positively than the external stakeholders (board members and parents). It is also noted that there is no unanimity in how principals perceived the clarity of their roles by all stakeholder groups, including themselves. In other words, for every stakeholder group, there were always certain members who were perceived to be unclear about the principal’s role.

While clarity on the roles by key stakeholder groups is important, there are valid explanations when this goal is not achieved. As stated, thirteen per cent of principals were not clear about their own roles. This is not surprising, given that some key policy documents were not accessible or that principals were new to their positions or to their schools. As also stated, 32% of board members were perceived as not clear about the principal’s roles. Again, given the context of school administration in Solomon Islands, where most community high schools are in villages, the board members were likely to
have been villagers. Many of them would not have had the necessary skills and knowledge to govern schools. In the same way, the 47% of parents who were perceived to have been unclear about the principal’s roles can be similarly explained. For all provincial and national secondary schools, the parents do not live nearby. Hence they do not have much interaction with the schools on a regular basis. Consequently, parents could not have been justly expected to be clear about the roles of the principal.

As a process of transformation, however, clarity of roles is important and must be deliberately sought. Towards this end, the principal must attend to the 18% perception of staff members who were not clear about the principal’s roles. The principal must also mobilise broader attention to the perceived 32% of board members and the 47% of parents who were not clear about the principal’s roles. These two external groups are essential if the principal is to run a school effectively. This is particularly the case for the newer community high schools where considerable establishment work still needs to happen. With deliberate attention, it is possible for key stakeholder groups to become clearer about the roles of the principal. As they achieve this status, their clarified knowledge can transform their actions towards assisting the principal in providing effective school leadership.

**Roles performed**

The study sought to find the actual roles that principals were performing during their work day. Principals were asked to list any five main roles that they played daily. In order of popularity, their responses (and percentages) are as follows:

- “performing administrative duties” (95%)
- “teaching in a class” (64%)
- “talking with staff” (36%)
- “preparing lessons” (26%)
- “consultations with education authority” (18%)

While not in the top five, these additional roles were also listed: student supervision (15%), counseling (13%); community work (10%), seeking project funding (5%) and school development and carpentry work (5%).
Closer scrutiny of the five main daily roles of principals shows a number of interesting situations. For the large majority of principals, their number one daily role was “administrative duties”. When incorporated with the fifth ranked role, “consultation with education authority” administrative leadership took up much of the principals’ daily work. Again, the fact that many of the principals were new to their jobs and schools explains the overwhelming agreement on administrative duties.

The findings indicate that roles relating to instruction were ranked second and fourth. Again, the fact that 95% of principals were also teaching classes of their own, explains why teaching and preparing lessons took up considerable time in a principal’s work day. The instructional roles of principals, however, were limited to their own classroom instruction, and had little to do with being instructional leaders for their staff. This latter role appeared to have been expected of the deputy principal. The role of “talking with staff” can be interpreted to mean anything and everything. Typically, in a Solomon Islands setting, the subject matter of any “tok stori” with staff includes personal, professional and community issues. Whatever the subject matter, an underlying goal of “talking with staff” is empathy with them. With this meaning, “talking with staff” can be interpreted as principals playing their roles as change agents.

From the above discussion, it appears that the Solomon Islands principal is a busy generalist. On one hand, he is offering counseling to staff and students, while, on the other hand, he is also doing community work and school carpentry work as well. The extent to which the principal has the training or experience to prioritise or delegate roles, on a daily basis, is uncertain. The study did not delve into these areas.

**Preferred roles**

Principals were asked to list any top five roles they preferred to do on an average day. In order of popularity, their responses (and percentages) were as follows:

- “consultation with people, including staff” (62%).
- “full time administration” (51%).
- “doing school project work” (21%).
“being involved in sports” (21%).
“encouraging and motivating students” (18%).

In addition, the following were also listed as preferred roles: personal reading (15%), seeking aid funds (13%), doing advanced courses (10%), spending time with family (10%) and meeting parents (5%).

The data on the preferred roles of principals is revealing. Without a doubt, preferred roles were different from actually performed ones. At the top of the preferred roles list is “consultation with people, including staff.” When seen together with the fifth ranked “encouraging and motivating students”, it would appear that the preference of principals was for their roles as change agents. When the second ranked “full time administration” and third ranked “doing school project work” are combined, the second most preferred role category is administrative leadership. Being “involved in sports” can be an administrative as well as a change agent role. The obvious absence, in the preferred roles, is for instructional leadership. Again, in Solomon Islands schools, this is an area which is generally for the deputy principal. Moreover, for about one half of the principals, their own diploma qualifications would not have given them the desire or confidence to be instructional leaders where there are qualified graduate teachers on the staff.

The minor preferred roles are worth noting. Three of these, “personal reading”, “doing advance courses” and “spending time with family” related to the principal as a person. It appears that principals saw their own professional development as an area for which they were personally responsible. Principals also saw their family and personal affairs as areas for which they were personally responsible. Consequently, it seemed that principals conceived their roles as inclusive of caring for their own professional as well as personal needs. Future studies can explore these issues in greater detail.

Concluding comments

We began this article by raising a number of questions. In particular, we wanted to understand Solomon Islands principals and their roles. We wanted to ascertain the extent to which the principal could be expected to perform as an effective school leader.
On the basis of our discussion above, we make the following final observations. It would appear unrealistic to expect the Solomon Islands principal to provide the leadership needed for the Solomon Islands school. From the theoretical literature, the principal is expected to perform the three-pronged role of being the administrative leader, the instructional leader and the change agent. We propose that such a role expectation would pose overwhelming demands that are beyond the training, experience and professional background of the Solomon Islands principal. We further note that placing such a demand on the principal is unfair.

We affirm that role conception, clarity and identification are important pre-conditions for transformative role performance. We note, with concern, that in the study, not all Solomon Islands principals were clear about their own roles. Moreover, not all staff and board members were perceived to be clear about the principal’s roles. Such lack of clarity by key stakeholders can easily impose considerable role conflicts for the Solomon Islands principal. Needless to say, the typically busy, under-trained and inexperienced Solomon Islands principal cannot be justly expected to demonstrate transformative role performance under such adverse circumstances as described.

We note that while we have begun to understand Solomon Islands principals and their roles, we have yet to understand many other important aspects about the principalship. We recognise our need to understand accurately the leadership needs, skills, and competencies of the principal. We affirm our need to know about individual principal’s competencies to organise teams, inspire vision, manage resources and cultivate collective change cultures. In essence, we have much more to learn about Solomon Islands principals. Given these gaps of information, including what we already know from this study, we conclude that the inadequate training and limited managerial experiences of the majority of principals, together with their professional isolation and lack of support, would limit and constrain their effectiveness as school leaders.

We note, however, that despite our views above, Solomon Islands schools have continued to function, students have been learning and the educational standard of the country has been improving. At the school level, such positive achievements have been obtained under the leadership of the Solomon Islands
principal, as described in this study. How could this have been? We note, with a sense of satisfaction, that there are individual principals who have and will continue to demonstrate leadership for their schools, in spite of the odds as described earlier. Their effectiveness, however, is due largely to their own individual giftedness and those of the people ‘with whom they work. Their success has little to do with an education system that is transformative in its support for and encouragement of exemplary school leadership. Rather regrettably, the Solomon Islands system is a killer of school leaders.

References


Editor’s note:

A colleague at USP read this article and felt that readers of this journal would be interested to know if there had been any effort to improve the situation regarding Solomon Island school principals since this research was completed. Patrick Turanga’s comments are given below, and we also include a postscript from co-author Stanley Houma.

From Patrick Turanga:

After reading the article, I wish to share some personal experience in my capacity as a school principal, former president of the Solomon Islands National Teachers’ Association (SINTA) and Interim Chairman of the Solomon Islands School Principals’ Association (SISPA) in 2004. During this period the SISPA Executive presented to the 2004 principals’ conference two documents: a draft constitution for SISPA and a formulated Code of Ethics for Principals. These documents were critically debated by the participants and then made resolutions in three areas:

- That the various education authorities develop a clear national policy in relation to the status of secondary schools (national/provincial/community and boarding/non-boarding). This would then be used to determine which principalships fall under the category of a full-time administrator and which involve teaching as well. This would establish a more uniform system and reduce the current confusion.
That principals’ posts be advertised, rather than principals being directly appointed as has been the case. This would assist the process of selection and appointment of officers with the necessary and relevant qualifications and experience. Appointments are to be made on merit only.

That education authorities, together with the Ministry of Education, develop an administrative module designed for principals to be conducted as summer courses at the SICHE during school breaks. This would help principals acquire the necessary skills and knowledge about procedures relating to their areas of duty. Principals would be awarded a formal qualification that would boost their morale and build their confidence.

A post-script from Stanley Houma:

The Solomon Island Ministry of Education initiated a project which was funded by NZAID and implemented by the Department of Education at USP. This was a series of summer schools leading up to a USP Diploma in Educational Leadership and Change. The course attracted 23 principals and 6 education officers. It was so well received that there are calls for it to be repeated.

One thing that was disheartening was the fact that the principals doing the course realised that they lacked guidance from the MOE. An assignment required them to find MOE documents and they were shocked to find out how much information there was, information that they had never seen before.