Re-visiting the social study curriculum of the Solomon Islands

Abstract
This paper provides finding on the relevance of the social study curriculum of Solomon Islands (SI). It reports on the findings of a study conducted with teachers in two case study secondary schools in the Solomon Islands using qualitative methods (group discussions and one-on-one interviews) The study revealed that the current teaching topics, themes and approaches of the social study curriculum are irrelevant and outdated its usefulness. There needs to be a review of the social study curriculum to cater for knowledge, values and skills that are relevant to the 21st century Solomon Island’s society. The study also provides further conceptual insights into Solomon Islands teaching approaches and strategies that are currently relatively unexplored. These include approaches and strategies in teaching of social study that produces good and active citizenship.

Introduction
Social Studies was a subject in the formal education system from around 1897 (Heater, 1999). However, earlier than that, much of the school time was devoted to separate topics of history, geography, and civics. Prior to the 20th century, what was expected was for students to memorise information in their text books and then recite them in class and from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, there were great changes to the Social Studies curriculum and methods of instruction. A period known as the “progression period” that reformed American life through social and political movements influenced by education philosophers such as John Dewer (1900-1902) and the innovation of Parker (1883; 1894). Social Studies was born during this period” (Heater 1999 p.8)

The subject which particularly focused on human behaviour has subjected to more pressure for change than other subjects in the curriculum. This was attributed, to the subject’s relatedness to the rapid rate of social and technological change found evident in many societies around the world” (Heater 1999 p.5). Since its inception as a school subject in the early twentieth century, the subject has been rocked by battles over its purpose, content, pedagogies and the historical account of its origin as a school subject (Ross, 1994).
This study explores the extent to which the Solomon Islands Social Studies curriculum is adequately offering knowledge, values and skills that are relevant to students learning for the 21st citizen of Solomon Islands. It verifies the knowledge and values of the social study curriculum currently used with the behaviours and attitudes commonly found among youths in today’s Solomon Islands.

The literature.

Social Studies is a subject born from the parent disciplines of social science, the humanities, and the natural sciences Cater (cited in Marsh, 1991). It closely links with the democratic ideals and is considered to be part of the general and liberal education that particularly specialises in the education for an effective democratic citizen. Such an explanation was viewed by others as quite narrow, although the disciplines mentioned have important goals (Engle and Ochoa 1988). The reason was that, the contents do not expose children to meaningful contexts. It was viewed as only an exposition of facts and generalisations about which social scientists at a given point in time are in reasonable agreement (bid). Such claim put Social Studies as social science adopted and simplified for a pedagogical purpose and simply means a mere exposition of a relatively small number of facts and generalisations selected from social science and presented to students as truth to be committed to memory (Engle and Ochoa 1988).

While debates on the Social study subject based on content and pedagogies are ongoing, it is the combination of varying disciplines into one teaching subject which shown clearly its integrated nature. It is the only field which attempts to draw different disciplines together. The combined teaching disciplines include social science, the insights of the humanities, sociology, geography, history, and Citizenship Education. Such a combination is seen as value laden and problematic (Hill, 1994). Despite that, the subject matter of teaching of Social Studies is believed to help students construct the knowledge base and aptitude to live with each other harmoniously. However, some writers points out that citizenship lacks clearly defined and generally acceptable boundaries, in varying degrees (Cater, cited in Marsh 1991). This is because people interpret the combined discipline’s concepts, knowledge, values, and skills of social studies according to their context and situation.
Some writers defined Social Studies as a critical study of the social science and history to engage directly in the intellectual process of students whereby the social science and history become instruments in the learning process rather than the ends of education (Ochoa and Engle 1988.. It is an integrated study of social science and humanities to promote civic competence for the purpose of practising problem solving and decision making for developing citizenship skills on critical social issues (Wesley 1978). Such explanation were put on perspective with two of the three Social Studies traditions provided by Wesley (1978), the Social Studies taught as social science which stems from a variety of events that took place in the 1960’s. For instance, a shift from the postwar patriotic rhetoric and to one with a focus on social justice and a more global view (Mutch, 2005).

The aim of Social Studies in such a circumstance was to help children understand the world they were living in and to take their own place in it; in particular, to help children to think clearly about social issues (Mutch, 2005). It mean that teachers acquainted students with the methods of research modes of inquiry and ways of looking at the world adopted by the social scientist. The second tradition is “Reflective inquiry...a tradition which focuses on preparing students for citizenship and is regarded as the most important component of citizenship because it concerns personal choice. Students will need to identify problems and issues and make decisions on matters of policy and belief” (NFEA, p.19). The third tradition in teaching Social Studies is “Citizenship tradition.” This tradition is viewed as the oldest tradition. The essence of the tradition is the deliberate inculcation of what is considered the most desirable knowledge values and skills assumes necessary for survival of the culture. What kind of citizens does society want? What knowledge does society recognise as worthwhile?

**The importance of Social Studies**

The Social Studies curriculum is taught in many if not all formal education systems globally. It has been widely considered as an essential and appropriate approach to deliver and promote the concept and values of Citizenship Education (Marsh 1991; Engle and Ochoa 1988; Allen and Stevens, 1998; Zarrillo, 2004; Hill, 1994; Massialas, and Allen, 1996; Kerr, 2000). According to the literature (Heater, 1999) it is appropriate because it has the prerogative to transmit knowledge and understanding about people, environment, moral values, political structures, government, and how to deal with issues and conflicts of the contemporary period. It is a subject that teaches about
people to help them acquire knowledge and master the process of learning to become active citizens (Ross, 2006). In other related literature, Mutch (2005) noted that, “Social Studies is a discipline that teaches about people, women, men, and children. It teaches about how and why in diverse culture, and in different times, and places they think, feel, and act, and organise their way of life” (p.192).

Furthermore, “Social Studies teaches about how people interact with others and their environments, initiate their responses to changes and meet their political, social, economic, legal, and spiritual needs” (Ministry of Education, 1994. 7 cited by Mutch, 2005). Reley and Wofford cited in Adeyemi, Boikhuto and Moffat,(2003), in discussing the relationship between education for citizenship and Social Studies, have asserted that students should be challenged to apply civic knowledge, skills, and values as they solve real problems either in school, their community, nation, or the world. The Citizenship Education concept seems to be the driving force in education that will promote the values considered important for good and active citizenship (Zarrillo, 2000). It is a subject that is believed to teach children to value themselves by nurturing positive self conception and learning (Mutch, 2005). It should help students adopt healthy values toward school and learning, the social and physical environment, and the political and legal propositions of the state (Zarrillo, 2000). The values that need development and promotion should constitute the standard or criteria against which individual behaviour and group behaviour are judged; beliefs represent commitments to those values (Honesty for example is a value) (ibid.). A set of values that Social Studies emphasis is civic and citizenship values and beliefs that lead to good and active citizenship.

What needs are fundamental to society and how can society meet these needs? In what ways can society select content areas that can best transmit to the next generation? These questions beg scrutiny and are the focus of studies such as this one

The purpose of education and the social study curriculum of Solomon Islands

The purpose of schooling is very much similar in any environment. The education system of Solomon Islands has been developing the citizens of the country through a variety of ways particularly through the teaching of various academic subjects at school. This, as in any country, is to help in creating an enabling atmosphere for the citizens to achieve the broad educational aims
of the state. The overall aims of education in the Solomon Islands are, similar to many of the countries in the Pacific Islands. Education is defined particularly by the academic subjects taught in the formal education system. Such conceptualisation of education by people of Pacific Island nations is narrow compared to the definition provided by Lawton cited earlier in the chapter. As stated by Thaman (cited by Manu, 2009), “current school curricula in most Pacific Islands countries are too academic and geared towards university study, and therefore most school leavers will have learnt little that is of practical value to them in the context of their own societies” (p.50).

However, the concepts of Education and curriculum as observed are far from achieving its broad educational aims. The fact is that, in its current form, education in the Solomon Islands is very limited in its capacity to give students the understanding about values that will affect their behaviours in order to make a positive change to the social, political, and physical environment. It has been found that the curriculum does not enable students to gain understanding of the diversity of community and society and an awareness of equal opportunities, national identity, and cultural difference (Advisory group on citizenship, 1998, p.19 cited in Demaine 2004, p.18).

The Social Studies curriculum of Solomon Islands was developed in accordance to the Education Act 1978 of the Solomon Islands. Similar to many Pacific Island curricula, in the 1980s Solomon Islands Curriculum framework was driven by the global shift in aims, goals, and content to address challenges the societies experienced during that period of time. Particularly, on the changes of behaviours for certain global events. For instance, the changes made to the Social Studies curriculum of Solomon in the 1980s after gaining independence from Britain, are similar to the new Social Studies curriculum promoted in Australia, Canada, England, and the United States (Hebert, and Sears (n.d); Print, 1999). In Australia the study of society and environment encompasses themes such as culture, place and space, resources, time, continuity and change, natural and social systems (Sander & Yulaelawati, 2008).

Similar themes were also adopted into the Social Studies syllabus of the Solomon Islands. These includes social relationships; people, place, and the environment; time, continuity, and change; conflict and cooperation in the modern world; people and their development; industrial and urban growth; and continuity and changes in the Solomon Islands (Secondary Social Studies Syllabus,
Solomon Islands, 1988). These were aimed to expand students’ knowledge and understanding about relationships within the family, respect for environment, events occurring in the past, what is happening in the present, and to anticipate what might happen in the future (Social Studies Syllabus of Solomon Islands, 1998). Such expectation is limited only to memorisation of events. The fact is the framing of the competencies are only on facts, concepts, and generalisations.

**Reality of Social Studies teaching in the Solomon Islands**

Considering the current Solomon Islands Social Studies curriculum, it has the following goals: first, for students to be well informed about other countries’ social, economic, political, and belief systems both past and present; second, for students to be aware of and understand the changes that occurred in the past and are currently occurring; third, for students to develop an awareness of the society’s human and physical resources; fourth, to develop an understanding of the diversity yet independent people; fifth, develop the skills and attitudes needed for them to be committed to play an active role in the life of their communities (Social Studies syllabus, 1998).

However, what was seen was that, the content, themes, and teaching pedagogies in Social Studies appear not to address the current physical and social needs of the Solomon Islands. For instance, teaching about families, religions, denomination and churches, the history of wars, the antigovernment movements, and resolving conflicts seems dogmatic and non influential to the children’s mental, physical, spiritual, and social development. The knowledge received is purely for memorisation of facts in preparation for national examinations. In the current teaching of Social Studies, students receive teaching about families, colonialism, government structures, wars, revolutions, and political systems. However, it is not enough to teach about what happened in the past and acknowledge what the present values ought to be. In today’s reality, it is important for students to have a broader and deeper knowledge of how culture and religion developed humans and the relationship of interconnectedness of people, communities, and the states (Steward, 2007). This will not be achieved by giving students mere facts about the cultures, custom, families and historical events; students need to have critical thinking skills and to be taught key concepts that they can apply to situations.
Further, the current Solomon Islands Social Studies themes and topics have outdated their usefulness (Solomon Islands Curriculum Review committee, 2002). Many of topics were related to the broad goals of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. This can be found in the teaching of themes of government and political changes, early migrations, cold wars, and nationalist movements. Such themes are irrelevant to today’s reality, providing only a large body of knowledge that does not lead itself to any critical analysis of the events and issues of concern. The teaching of Social Studies however, should give students an opportunity to compare and contrast the concepts rather than passively acquiring information as facts. Further, it is vital to relate relevant prior knowledge to present learning and recognize the social realities or what is occurring in societies (Levine, 2007).

In this case, Solomon Islands need a coherent and properly structured Social Studies curriculum that prepares students for the future. The goals have to be rooted in reality (what is happening in the society) and based on students’ own aptitude and experience. Such a claim has shown how important revising the Social Studies curriculum is for the Solomon Islands. How can Solomon Islands develop a curriculum that is relevant and contextual to citizens? This question is the subject matter of this research.

**The study**

The study is qualitative and has situated within the interpretative/constructivist paradigm. The choice of such paradigm was to situate activities that can locate the researcher in the world that is interpretative on materials and practices that make the world more visible (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). In this view, the individual and the world are connected and cannot be separated or function without the other (ibid). With this understanding, the research is placed in a natural setting where the researcher was able to access sites and participants, using methods that are interactive and humanistic that expects to build rapport and credibility with the individuals in the study (Creswell, 2003). The study focuses on exploring a variety of perceptions from samples that were selected from chosen site to allow for multiple sources of evidence to be obtained from participants (Creswell, 1994).
This was a case study and had selected sites that are expected to inform the study. Using case studies as suggested by Yin (2003), is useful to understand a complex social phenomenon such as social study. In this study, two schools were selected. They were, a rural boarding school on Malaita Island and an urban day school in Honiara, the capital city of Solomon Islands located on Guadalcanal. The schools are assumed to satisfy the criteria for obtaining information rich cases.

In case 1, a rural school, a total of 10 respondents participated. Of these, six were students (three males and three females), three were teachers (two male and one female) and one was the principal. In case 2, the urban school, similar numbers and categories of respondents participated. Three male and three female students were selected and organised into one focus group. The characteristics guiding the selection of samples from the urban school was related to the school’s mixture of students from different ethnicities and backgrounds. In the Solomon Islands, there are more than 80 different languages and cultural groupings, spreading among the 900 islands that are divided into nine provinces.

The study used semi structure and unstructured interview question with participants. Using interview methods, involving semi-structured and unstructured questions applied to focus group and one-on-one interviews have generated valuable rich data for this study. In addition, the qualitative analysis and approaches that were used have generated useful themes that informed the study and have answered the main questions explored in this study.

**Findings**

The findings of this qualitative research conducted in the Solomon Islands using personal and group interviews with one urban school and one rural school with students and teachers have found that the current Social Studies curriculum which is a combination of many disciplines, including history, sociology, geography, anthropology, social sciences, and citizenship is already overloaded. The study found that it is impossible to adequately cover themes and appropriate values prescribe in the Social Studies curriculum because there are too many teaching topics and theme. The teaching of appropriate themes were covered but not so much to achieve the expected outcome as stated in the syllabus. As expressed
“We teach about the environment, family relationships and community awareness but this knowledge is for different purposes. Not to develop students to become good citizens” (HUST2). Another added, “I have taught the concepts but I cannot fully recognize the teaching methods to achieve the aims of the topic because it has very limited time and there are too many things to cover” (HSUT1). Furthermore, “What I have in mind for given topics is stirred by different objectives. My deliberate goal is for students to understand the concepts for examination purposes and not so much on what will become of students in their future. …we pick only topics that we consider appropriate from among the many topics given” (HSRT3).

The study found that teaching useful knowledge can be done, but considering the time constraints, and the quantity of knowledge that has to be covered, it is unrealistic for students, given their priority need of preparation for external assessment although, teaching about social realities is an important technique in particular, relating the problems encountered in the society by those to whom the curriculum is taught. The other challenges found the failure in the part of the government to emphasized on social realities instead of passing exams.

According to the study, there has been no indication and reflection from students that Social Studies teaching and the knowledge underpinning relationship has change people’s attitudes. What is the experience was that good values demonstrated by students are learned and acquired from home. As pointed out:

“If some good values are demonstrated at school or outside the school, it is not from what they learn at school. It is from what is learned from home and the knowledge and values received from the teaching of culture and Christian religion” (HSRT2); “The values are covered but not as adequately as what the aims and goals of the syllabus expect. Much of the teaching is done on content only for what is expected to be assessed” (HSUT1).

Concerning current teaching themes and from the receiving end, most students claimed that what they have received in the classroom is important knowledge: the learning about families, community, environment, and government. However, it was the application of the knowledge or values that is lacking, particularly, applying the knowledge outside of the classroom in real world situations.

“We learn about Social Studies topic but have not applied the knowledge outside of the classroom” (HSRS2). Another said, “In form one I learn about the topic ‘My family, our community, our nation’” (HSRS1). Another student said “I learned about the environment, the effects of logging on the environment in from two” (HSUS2).
Another claimed, “I learned about the government but for me to apply the concept in real situations is what is lacking” (HSUS5). One blamed teachers for not teaching them the values stating, “Maybe the teachers have failed to teach about the good values” (HSRS6). Most students claimed that the good values they had acquired were received from home.

The urban principal’s remarks indicated that the current curriculum content of Social Studies is not sufficient to provide students with knowledge that develops them to become good and active citizens. He preferred a change to the current content of teaching citizenship in Social Studies to include values of morality, virtue, respect, and identity and relational unity for a healthy living environment (HSUP).

The study also shows that the social study subject is already overloaded and so the current themes in the social studies are hardly completed by the end of the each academic year. Therefore, to included other themes and concepts in social studies again would be inappropriate and value-laden. However, if social study is to be relevant to today’s situation, it has to be reviewed so that topics that are out of date can be removed to cater for new themes and value that reflects Solomon Islands current society. The finding suggested for a review of the Social study curriculum to cater for themes and topic relating to knowledge and values that will unite Solomon Islands. Currently, the social study makes no change to the students behaviours as the knowledge learn is for examination purposes only. As claimed by one student respondent:

*The teaching of Social Studies that I know of does not change my behaviour. The behaviours, display at school are received from home. Teaching of Social Studies is not successful, because it doesn’t reflected from what people demonstrated out side (HSRS 2).*

The current topics in social studies are: teaching about family, community, the environment, government and changes. The study found that knowledge and values learn from the Social Studies do not help to develop students to recognize the importance of relationship unity and respect for the social and physical environment. That can be justified from the values displayed in the country by youths. From what has been expressed, nothing tangible emerged, among the chaotic situation in the Solomon Islands. There is “corruptions, everywhere, conflicts, everywhere and people are not in good term as seen” (HSUT 1)
In terms of teaching approaches, the study found much of the teaching to focus on the content on what it is expect to come in the exam only. The content includes teaching on events such of wars, or conflicts, their timeline and major historical events. Although teaching methods were provided to teach the themes relevant to capture expected value outcomes, rarely do teachers use the approaches in teaching Social Studies as stipulated in the syllabus. As pointed out by one teacher, he claimed

“I teach about families and community relationship in form one, environment in form two, role of leaders and government in form three. However, those are just knowledge to learn in preparation for examination. They are not there to shape students for their future (HRST3).”

It is also evident from this study that the national examinations often determine the topics that will be covered from the Social Studies syllabus. As another teacher expressed, “Our traditional societies have been teaching and educating our younger folks about community structures, leadership roles, relationships, and moral values from custom for respect for one another ever since” (HUST 4).

**The way forward**

According to the findings, the improvement of the Social Studies curriculum would occur only if the following are addressed: Firstly, a review to the examination system is necessary. There are strong arguments for a change or review to the examination system; particularly to cater for a system that would also consider and accommodate the monitoring of behaviours at school. What is needed is a system that not only monitors students’ academic progress but is also concerned with the behaviours of students. Importantly, both teachers and parents would have the opportunity to monitor the child’s progress. That would certainly keep track of students’ progress academically and behaviourally. Secondly, changes should also involve curriculum models that offer active learning. That may involve changes to curriculum pedagogies. Currently in the Solomon Islands the most commonly used curriculum teaching pedagogies are teacher–centred; primarily the teacher talks and writes notes on the blackboard while students listen and copy the notes in their exercise books. The barrier to learning in this regard is students’ passive involvement in the
learning activities. However, if active learning pedagogies were employed by students the values taught may have real positive implications in students’ lives.

The third preferred change involves policy changes concerning the Social Studies curriculum to accommodate teaching and learning content, themes, and topics that are relevant and contextual to the Solomon Islands in other words, the knowledge and values that reflect the social, political, cultural, and religious ethos of the society. This includes moral values and societal virtues such as respect, relationship and unity, care and responsibility, and honesty and integrity. The inclusion of these contextual and cultural values in the Social Studies curriculum would develop students to be more respectful and have greater unity; they will acquire the moral values to be good citizens and the desire to be active citizens too.

**Conclusion**

It is obvious from the study that there is a need to review the Social Studies curriculum to eliminate content that is irrelevant and un-contextual to the current Solomon Islands society. This would provide room for the inclusion of themes, topics and teaching values that are relevant to the 21st century behaviours. Some of the useful themes, knowledge, values, skills and activities highlighted includes the citizenship values: promotion of rights was implied to have contradicted the cultural and religious values of the society. The misconception of rights which created conflicts needs to be addressed formally in order that students may correctly understand its value when they are still young. Such action would change societies in the future. Equally important are concepts relating to duties and responsibilities, national identity, social cohesion, and the themes of moral values and social virtues. As a country with diverse cultures, language, and ethnicities, teaching on themes that comprise such knowledge, values, and skills is significant for the stability of the nation as a whole.

Further, the study imply a need to change the examination system, to avoid the overtly, abstract transmitting of important knowledge, values, and skills. This will provide an avenue for teachers to teach not content only but also to systematically cover important knowledge, values, and skills necessary for life after school. There is also a need to formulate new assessment and monitoring systems to improve not only students’ academic performance but also to monitor students’
behaviours. Lastly, it is recommended that new policies on curriculum pedagogies be initiated for teaching and learning of the social study curriculum. What it needs is methods that are active. These include teaching methods and strategies such as, dramatisation, student projects, demonstration and other concrete examples. Overall, the Social Studies curriculum may be effective only if themes/topics and goals include values that are relevant and contextual to Solomon Islands. This includes, moral and social values, rights taught with responsibility, national identity, and social cohesion. Moreover, Social Studies curriculum pedagogies need to be active and not passive as currently practiced.

References


