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Determinants of Quality Learning in Rural Community High Schools in Solomon Islands

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Abstract: Solomon Islands has been implementing various education reforms to improve its delivery of quality learning in schools. Among the reforms is the introduction of the Community High Schools mostly in rural areas as a way to increase educational access in rural Solomon Islands. Using a case study approach, this study examines the nature of this reform in rural education with particular reference to how well rural Solomon Islands is faring in terms of quality education ideals. Based on in-depth interviews with the case study school principals and teachers and site visits, the study identifies lack of financial resources, inadequate teaching and learning resources, lack of qualified teachers, low teacher-student ratios, frequent teacher absenteeism and lack of community support as the key issues that are hindering the provision of quality learning. There are number of implications derive from the findings. The study identified that there is a pressing need for the rural day-community high schools to be upgraded to boarding school status to accommodate students recruited from distant villages. The scarcity of land and financial resources are preventing the schools to improve the quality of learning. If education is to be a tool for rural development, policies must be implemented to assess educational inputs and outcomes. The low teacher-student ratio and the on-going problem of lack of resources could be addressed by amalgamating the existing small rural community high schools into regional boarding schools. Finally, in order to regain community support schools need to embrace the concept of a community learning centre as a means of providing community education and skills training to entire the community thus contributing to rural development.

Keywords: Rural Education, Quality Learning, Community High School, Solomon Islands

Introduction

ACCCESS TO QUALITY education in rural areas has been consistently neglected in many developing countries. Many governments either lack the political will or the capacity to meet the educational needs of huge numbers of rural people. Neglecting rural education would mean that children growing up in rural communities have not had access to quality education. Many children have to walk long distances daily, only to find a school in poor condition, without furniture, learning materials, drinking water or toilets, and sometimes even without a teacher (UNESCO, 2003p. 154).

Rural people are often caught in the vicious cycle of having no access to the services and opportunities that might lift them out of poverty, provide educational opportunities, gainful employment, adequate nutrition, infrastructure and communications. According to UNESCO (2003) over 70 percent of the world's 1.2 billion poorest people live in rural areas on less than a dollar a day. The issues concerning rural people have been prevalent for many years but have not been adequately addressed. This is a testament that "there is evidently a lack

of political interest in the rural world and in many cases, legislators do not assess the importance of education for rural people in the development of their countries” (UNESCO 2003).

On the basis of these perspectives, the primary purpose of this study is to examine the determinants of quality learning in three rural Community High Schools (CHS) in Solomon Islands.

Related Literature and Definitions

A number of changes have altered social life in many rural communities over the last 20 years, and a small research literature examines these influences in relation to demography and economy ((Barkema & Drabenstott, 2000; Goetz, 2000; Hobbs, 1994; Stephens, 1992; Taylor, Martin, & Fix, 1997). For example, Bryant & Grady (1990) examined the effects of changes resulting from overall out-migration or from the in-migration of diverse groups-on rural school systems. With a similar focus, Theobald (1988) analyzed the impact of suburbanization on rural districts.

Nevertheless, urban sprawl in parts of developed nations like United States is clearly having an impact on some rural communities and the schools serving them (Goetz, 2000; Gordon, 1986; Hobbs, 1994). As Hobbs (1994 p. 154) notes, “a growing number of rural places are becoming bedroom communities-with all that implies for schooling.” According to Howley, et al(2005) these implications have rarely been studied.

In rural education research, the rural context upon which the research is situated warrants an important consideration. According to Coladarci (2007, p. 2) “there is no single definition of rural, as any reader of rural education research quickly, and often incredulously, learns.” What should drive rural education research is primarily investigating rural phenomena that could assist in improving rural education. As such researchers are cautioned:

...not to offer conclusions about rural education just because their research takes place in (or draws on data from) a rural school, community, or region. Rather, researchers must establish warrants, or compelling justifications, for the rural-related conclusions they provide (Coladarci, 2007, p. 3).

Given the complexity in defining the concept of rural some researchers have called for a consistent definition (Helge, 1992) which is probably unrealistic. As Farmer (1997) argued:

There is no singular or multifaceted definition that will suffice to satisfy the research, programmatic, and policy communities that employ the concept. . . . [T]he diversity of purposes for which the measures have been and will be used will likely assure that no universally applicable definition or measurement will be developed. (pp. 623, 625).

As Coladarci (2007) contends that widely used definition of rural seems to centre around formal classification schemes such as population size, population density, proximity to an urbanized area, type of economic activity, income and educational-attainment levels, commuting patterns, and the many other empirically ascertainable factors. In this research, rural schools are the schools located in isolated and remote islands separated by vast distance from the urban centres. These schools are located in village-based communities where people’s livelihoods are largely dependent on subsistence farming with little access to basic services.

To guide rural argument, “the rural education researcher then crafts provocative research questions, the answers to which thus necessarily throw light on rural education” (Coladarci, 2007, p. 3).

Within this framework, this study aims to investigate the question: “What are the prevalent issues that undermine the provision of quality learning in the case study CHSs? Therefore, the answers to this question would shed light on the nature of rural education in an isolated island. This study adds to the literature on rural education research by offering a picture of what is happening in a rural island community, where the tensions associated with socio-economic factors seem to be affecting quality learning ideals in the schools. Because the analysis of data clearly point to the issues prevalent in the three schools, the researchers see value in presenting the findings in the context of a case study approach. Relying solely on qualitative methodology and focusing solely on one island, the study does not provide strong warrant for claims about generalized causal relationships. Nevertheless, the example of what is happening in these three schools is instructive, showing the types of challenges with which other rural schools in the country might also faced.

Rural Education Context in Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands is a developing nation comprised of an archipelago of 922 islands and is about 1,860 kilometres north-east of Australia and located between 5 and 12 degrees south latitude and 155 and 170 degrees east longitude (Stanley, 1993). It has a population of more than 500,000 (Moore, 2004). More than 80 percent of the population live in rural villages with limited access to basic services. The state of the natural and socio-economic environments in Solomon Islands has been the subject of debates among concerned citizens for example the inequitable distribution of benefits of the country’s natural resources has been blamed for the eruption of the ethnic conflict in 1998.

The increasing population is posing challenges on all sectors of development. In the education sector, this would mean that there would not be enough spaces in the schools to cater for the school population. Rural-urban migration is a problem that needs to be considered in the discussion of quality learning. The rural population of the Solomon Islands, according to the 1999 Census, was 345,310. This comprises 84.4 percent of the country’s total population. This large rural population underlies the importance for quality education in rural schools Solomon Islands in training human resources needed for nation building and particularly in rural development. Despite the large percentage of the population living in the rural areas, the Solomon Islands also has a fast-growing urban population, which was posing threat to national development. The nation’s urban population growth rate is 3.8 percent, which is higher than the national population growth rate of 2.8 percent. As urban migration increases, an increasing number of rural youth will move to urban centres. Maebuta (2007) reported that 97 percent of urban squatter household heads migrated from rural areas and 57 percent attained only primary education while 43 percent reached secondary education. The influx of rural people to Honiara city has resulted in an unplanned squatter growth. Such revelations question the quality of education provided in the rural schools.

The increasing population has seen the remarkable growth in the number of students going to secondary school and the majority are rural students (Table 2). There are no data available to compare the previous years’ enrolment to the recent years’ enrolments, however, increasing enrolments are prevalent as noted in number of education reports such as the Ministry of

Education and Human Resources Development (2007a). Table 3 indicates that 89 percent of the 140 secondary schools are located in the outer islands and provinces which are classified as rural secondary schools. Table 3 further reveals that the average enrolment in rural secondary schools stands at 312. However, in most of the isolated schools as exemplified in this study, the enrolments are less than 100 students.

Table 1: Number of Secondary Schools by Type and Province

Province	Number of Secondary Schools			
	CHS	PSS	NSS	Total
Central	6	1		7
Choiseul	8	1		9
Guadalcanal	19	3	3	25
Honiara	• 14	• 1	• 1	• 16
Isabel	4	1	1	6
Makira and Ulawa	8	1	2	11
Malaita	35	3	1	39
Rennell and Bel-lona	2	1		3
Temotu	4	1		7
Western	15	2	2	19
Total	115	15	10	140
Key: CHS-Community High School PSS- Provincial Secondary School NSS-National Secondary School • Urban Secondary Schools				
Source: (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2005b)				

Table 2: Secondary Schools Enrolments by Type and Province

Province	Secondary Schools Enrolments			
	CHS	PSS	NSS	Total
Central	2,120	254		5,937
Choiseul	1,630			5,136
Guadalcanal	7,176	1,076	1,219	20,752
Honiara	• 8,939	• 929	•	• 12,540
Isabel	1,588	24		4,667
Makira and Ulawa	2,682	375	488	8,988
Malaita	12,640	993	388	34,606
Rennell and Bellona	207	150		876
Temotu	1,500	87		4,334
Western	5,691	310	770	16,742
Total	44,173	4,198	2,865	51,236
Key: CHS-Community High School PSS- Provincial Secondary School NSS-National Secondary School • Enrolments in Urban Secondary Schools Source: <i>(Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2005b)</i>				

Table 3: Summary of Enrolments in Urban and Rural Secondary Schools

Types of Secondary Schools	Number of Schools	Total Enrolments	Average Enrolment Per School
Urban	16	12,540	784
Rural	124	38,696	312
TOTAL	140	51,236	1096
Source: <i>(Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2005b)</i>			

The Research Subjects and Sites

Thirty eight teachers and three principals participated in the study. They were purposely selected on the basis of their experiences teaching in rural secondary schools. Such selection is to ensure that there was cross-section of views. For instance, an experienced teacher with more than 10 years of teaching would have different views about the nature of rural education than a newly recruited teacher. To ensure confidentiality the teachers and the schools are

given fictitious names in this study, allowing for the researcher’s impressions of the teachers’ and principals’ personalities and schools’ location and characteristics.

Three Community High Schools in *Temotu Nendo* were selected to participate in the study. *Temotu Nendo*’s also known as Santa Cruz Island is located in the far eastern tip of Solomon Islands. The location of the three selected schools is shown on Figure 1. Representivity is not a criterion for the selection of study sites and participants to determine the quality of rural education in the country. The overall emphasis is to situate the research on studying phenomena ‘in situ’, ‘in practice’, ‘in the everyday’ (Orlikowski, 2000; Suchman, 1987).



Figure 1: Location of the Study Sties

The islands in the *Nendo* region are rural and remotely isolated from the rest of the country. Given this demography and geography, the selected schools are typically rural with poor socio-economic conditions.

Thirteen of the teachers selected for this survey are female and 28 are male. With two exceptions, all of them had less than five years of teaching experience. One of the teachers had taught in three different rural schools over 30 years while the rest had been at their current school since they started teaching. Of the three principals interviewed, one was a female and two were male. Two of them have had more than five years as a school principal, while the other one was just appointed at the time of the study.

In terms of training, 13 of the teachers do not have a teaching qualification and are in the category called ‘Teacher in Training’ (TIT). This category of teachers is created by the Solomon Islands Government as a response to the teacher shortage in the country. Such teachers would undertake their teacher training while on the job. Seventeen of them had a three-year (full-time) Diploma in Teaching, five had graduated with one-year part-time TIT Certificate in Teaching (Secondary) and two had a Degree in Education. The rest of the teachers had qualifications in other fields. Three of the teachers were trained overseas while the rest were trained locally at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE) in Honiara. All the teachers admitted that they would like to further their training so that they can improve the quality of education in their schools.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

The primary sources for data collection were site visits and interviews with the teachers and principals. The interviews were conducted during the site visits and after each visit detailed notes were taken of the schools’ amenities and teachers’ views and perceptions. This research employed the semi-structured interview with the school teachers and Provincial Education Officials. To probe deeper insights into the issues surrounding quality of learning, the researcher used the conversational approach to follow up on key issues. This is known as *na eyapwenga* in *Temotu Nendo*. This approach ignited the respondents to talk freely (*eyapweti*) about their experiences, practices and perspectives. Data generated on these aspects are regarded as important for identifying the determinants of quality learning in the case study schools. With a view of further enhancing the trustworthiness of the data, personal interpretations and opinions are constantly triangulated with the documentary evidences and data gathered from the Provincial Education Officials. The findings are reported in the form of a series of narrative. The narrative reporting would provide a holistic picture of the prevalent issues impeding the quality of learning in the case study schools.

Results and Discussion

The aim of this research is to present a typical case study of the provisions of quality learning in rural community high schools. Hence, it is not intended to provide critical discussion about the barriers to quality learning. However, the findings of this case research could stimulate more studies so that the barriers to quality learning can be critically analysed. The key areas identified as determinants of quality learning in the case study schools are finances, teaching and learning resources, staffing, students and community support.

School Finances

The provision of quality learning for the case study secondary schools is expensive. Hills Community High school and Bay-view have low student enrolments compared to Central Community High School. In HCHS and BCHS the student-teacher ratio is correspondingly low and the cost of teachers’ salaries in relation to student number therefore high. When all the costs of running HCHS and BCHS are spread across their low enrolment, the unit cost (the average cost per student) is distinctively high (See Tables 4, 6 and 7).

The costs of managing these schools like other schools in the country are obtained from three main sources namely school fees, school grants and through community fundraising. The major proportion of school revenue is expected to come from school fees. However, most of the rural parents are subsistence farmers who cannot afford to pay the school fees. As a result the schools depended on grants to fund their operational costs.

In the recent years, 60 percent of school grants are funded by the Solomon Islands Government and 40 percent by European Union (EU) Stabex 99 Fund. The unit cost is SI\$750¹ per student for boarding schools and SI\$500 for day-schools. The total secondary school grant is SI\$19, 521,000 (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2007a). EU has committed a total of over Euro 29 Million from its Stabex 99 Fund to help finance the Education Sector Investment and Reform Program (ESIRP) in Solomon Islands from 2004-2015 (European Union, 2006).

All the three case study schools are day-schools and are entitled to SI\$500 per student. However, the schools complained that the grant is not regularly paid on time. In 2009, the Government implemented the fee-free basic education policy for primary education and junior secondary (Forms 1-3). In addition to this policy, the principals of the case study schools confirmed that they are also charging Form 1- 3 students an average annual contribution of SI\$300 per head. The principals reiterated that the Government grants do not cover the needs of the schools particularly the infrastructure developments of the schools. Thus, the schools resorted to charging the annual contribution and increased school fees in the upper secondary level. The average annual school fees in the upper secondary is SI\$600. The recurrent budget of the three schools is listed in Table 4.

Table 4: Secondary Division Annual Recurrent Budget by Schools

School	Senior Secondary School Fees SIS	Junior Secondary Contribution SIS	Government School Grant	Teachers Salary and Allowances SIS	Grand Total SIS
HCHS		19,800	33,000	230,599.48	283,399.48
BCHS		12,600	21,000	152,832.34	186,432.34
CCHS	77,400	72,600	185,500	494,145.62	829,645.62

Source: (Temotu Education Office, 2010)

The amount allocated for teachers salary and allowances are not paid to the school but directly paid into the teachers’ bank account fortnightly. For accounting purposes the teacher’s salary and allowances are listed against each school by the Ministry of Education (Temotu Education Office, 2010). Table 4 further indicates that HCHS and BCHS do not charge upper secondary school fees because they only offer junior secondary education (Forms 1-3).

An Officer in the secondary division of the Ministry of Education confirmed that mismanagement of school funds is obvious in many schools in the country particularly in the rural schools. Hence, over the years a series of school finance training workshops has been conducted by the Ministry’s Planning and Implementation Unit with the Stabex 99 Office. The

¹ At the time of the research, the exchange rate was about SI\$7 = US\$1.

aim of the workshops is to train school principals and bursars in planning their capital budget particularly utilizing their school fees and grant and revenue from other sources. Sound management practices have been neglected in the running of schools over the years.

In well-managed schools, the enrolment numbers ensure economic viability and accountability of the schools when it comes to government funding. While the Ministry of Education has set a minimum number of enrolments, many schools still set their enrolment numbers to maintain or increase their annual grant allocation. Nevertheless, when sound management is absent in the school, the Government could reduce or withhold funding to schools. For most schools the economics of student numbers plays an important role in school-based planning.

Teaching and Learning Resources

A library has always been an integral part of the resources for teaching and learning. However, this study found that the three schools do not have proper libraries. In these schools there are no separate library buildings. What exist as ‘libraries’ are housed in congested spaces in the school buildings. The library space is merely storage for school textbooks with very few additional reading books.

Science and vocational subjects such as industrial arts, agriculture and home economics require laboratory-designed classrooms. The site visits revealed that all three high schools lacked specialized classrooms. The teaching of science and the vocational subjects are further faced with the problem of lack of equipment and tools.

The three schools have been incorporated into existing primary schools. The original objective of this innovation was to offer basic secondary education up to Form 3 (Year 9). However, most schools have moved on to offering secondary education beyond Form 5. For instance, CCHS offers up to Form 5 and planning to have Forms 6 and 7 in future. It is evident that the existing infrastructure cannot accommodate the demands and expectation of senior secondary education. For the schools visited, building more classrooms is not possible because the schools do not have enough land for expansion. This is a serious concern as expressed by one of the principals:

When the secondary division started there [were] no classrooms [so the school] used a double classroom building of the primary division, causing displacement in two primary classes. One [used] a church building while the other used a fellowship house and sometimes the teacher’s kitchen (Principal A, 10 March 2010).

School textbooks are necessary components in the teaching and learning process in the absence of well stocked libraries and other resources. The principals and the teachers reported that they did not have enough textbooks to enable effective teaching and learning. One of the newly appointed TITs lamented that he was frustrated when he found out that the school did not have basic text books for social studies. To overcome this problem, the teacher resorted to using his high school notebooks to prepare his lessons. Two principals expressed similar sentiments:

We borrowed textbooks from CCHS. It was difficult because we were only given one copy per subject and the copy was only for the teacher. Now there are textbooks available but not enough (Principal A, 10 March 2010).

Hardly any textbooks for any of the subjects so we have to ask other schools if they could lend us anything they can spare. Recently the school tried to get some from Honiara but there are hardly any books too in Honiara due to high demand from the schools around Solomons (Principal B, 11 March 2010).

Staffing

Table 5 shows the profile of teachers at the study sites. The profile suggests a male-dominated teaching force with 68 percent is males and 32 percent are females. Of the total teachers, 42 percent are qualified with diploma in education/teaching, 5 percent have graduated with bachelor's degree in education or in teaching and 12 percent are qualified teachers with a teaching certificate. Of the five teachers in the certificate in teaching category, four of them are qualified primary teachers but have been co-opted into secondary because of teacher shortage in their respective schools. In the TIT category, 32 percent are Forms 6 and 7 school leavers. The rest of the teachers (4 percent) are degree, diploma and certificate graduates in other fields.

In summary, 59 percent of the teachers are qualified while 41 percent are not qualified for secondary teaching. Despite the gap between qualified and unqualified teachers, the question remains: “how are teachers translating their skills into quality classroom teaching-learning?” For teachers to make this happen, they must serve with high levels of competence and professionalism.

Table 5: Teachers Profile by Schools and Percentage of the Total

	HCHS	BCHS	CCHS	Total	As a percent-age of the total
Bachelor's degree in education/teaching	0	1	1	2	5%
Diploma in education/teaching	4	2	11	17	42%
Certificate in education/teaching	1	1	3	5	12%
Bachelors Degree in other fields	0	0	2	2	5%
Diploma in other fields	0	0	1	1	2%
Certificate in other fields	0	0	1	1	2%
TIT: Form 6/7 school certificate	3	5	5	13	32%
Total	8	9	24	41	100%
Males	6	6	16	28	68%
Females	2	3	8	13	32%

Source: Fieldwork Data

The other trend observed during the site visits was that not all the subjects in the secondary curriculum are taught in the schools, as one of the principals reported:

Home economics has not been taught until this year 2010. However it is only taught in Forms 1 and 2. Technology and design (industrial arts) has never been taught. These subjects need specialized teachers, tools and equipment plus their own specialized building and these are lacking in our school. The school [does] not also have the prescribed curriculum materials for these subjects (Principal A, 10 March 2010).

Whether or not a school is fully staffed with qualified teachers, teacher absenteeism is one of the major issues confronting the quality of education in the case study schools. Students reported that it is common for teachers to not turning up for classes. A casual conversation with a sample of 30 students at the time of the study confirmed that on average teachers missed five contact periods in a week. There are four terms each with 10 weeks on the school calendar so this would mean on average in a term students may be denied 50 instructional periods. The quality of learning is further hampered when students are not given supervised learning activities during teachers' absences. Such teachers' unprofessional behaviours have been a subject of complaints among rural parents. The Solomon Islands Teaching Service Handbook (2007, p. 31) clearly states that "the principal/head teacher of each school shall maintain a daily register of teachers present at the school. The register shall be used to inform fortnightly payroll reports to the Education Authority." It appears that this policy is not vigilantly implemented by the schools. The principals confirmed that the obvious reasons for teacher's absences are due to sickness, death in the family, bad weather preventing teachers to commute to schools and travelling to the provincial town on pay days. While, these reasons are justifiable, the frequency of teacher absenteeism is a serious concern which warrants an urgent action.

Students

In 2010 the enrolment in the selected schools stood at 479 students with the age ranging from 15 to 20 years. Two of the schools recruited students within their catchment area and also in the nearby villages on the island. Only CCHS enrolled students from other provinces, particularly those whose parents were posted to work in *Lata*. The latter are officers from government services and other organisations that have offices in *Temotu* Province. The students' enrolment by gender and school is shown in Table 6 indicating a male majority with 53 percent of the total enrolment while female student enrolment at 47 percent.

Table 6: Student Enrolment in the Case Study Schools, 2010

School	Males	Females	Total
HCHS	36	30	66
BCHS	22	20	42
CCHS	195	176	371
Grand Total	253	226	479
As a Percentage of the Total	53%	47%	100%
<i>Source: Fieldwork Data</i>			

Table 7: Teacher-Student Ratio in the Case Study Schools, 2010

School	Number of Teachers	Student enrolment	Teacher-student ratio	Teachers required compared to national teacher-student ratio (1:35)
HCHS	8	66	1:8.3	2
BCHS	9	42	1:4.6	1
CCHS	24	371	1:15.5	11
Grand Total	41	479	1:11.7	14
As a percentage of the total	53%	47%	100%	
<i>Source: Fieldwork Data</i>				

The low teacher-student ratio when translated to the actual teaching in Table 8 reveals that the teachers have a low teaching load per week. Nevertheless, in terms of providing quality education, the lower the teacher-student ratio and teaching load the more quality time teachers could spend on lesson preparation and adequately addressing individual students’ learning needs. As such the classroom teaching and learning could be more clinical in nature, with individual student’s needs addressed. Small rural secondary schools still need specialist teachers to cover curriculum range. Hence, the provision of secondary education to rural areas will necessarily mean low teacher/student ratios and workload. Having itinerant teachers in cluster schools for some specialist subjects may be feasible provided that transport is available.

Another key student issue is that of accommodation. Assessing rural education needs to go beyond the classroom walls because external influences could affect quality of learning. As mentioned earlier all the schools are day schools so many students are commuting every day from home to school. Students who are from distant villages are attending the schools under the guidance of their relatives, known in Solomon Islands as the *wantok* support network. The *wantok* system is traditionally based on kinship, clan, ethnicity and language

(Kabutaulaka, 1998). For host relatives, the system is a burden as their student *wantoks* are depending on them for their basic needs. In the context of this study it would mean that more people are likely to live in homes within the catchment area of a school resulting in over-crowded households, making home study extremely difficult.

Table 8: Average Teaching Periods per Week

School	Average periods per week	Average periods per day (Total of 7 periods per day)
HCHS	13	2
BCHS	9	1
CCHS	18	3
<i>Source: Fieldwork Data</i>		

Community Support

Community support is an important component of the community high school concept. The concept was initiated on the understanding that education is an integral part of the community and the community should take the leading role in running the schools. The case study schools had attempted to involve the community in the implementation of their projects but in practice little support is gained from the community. The principals acknowledged that there are talents in the community but utilising them could incur large costs because the community always demanded payment for their labour. The principals reiterated that support from the community is lacking because the school grant and payment of school fees had led to the widespread belief that the schools have considerable funds. For example, a principal commented that:

Parental support is very poor as can be seen in the school contribution by parents. [The] turn out for bazaar is always poor. Parents’ contribution in school work is also poor. For the new classroom block there is only very little that parents has put in with regards to financial support or labour (Principal B, 11 March 2010).

Implications

From this analysis number of implications can be made. Firstly, in order to improve the quality of rural education, students’ welfare must be among the top priorities of the Solomon Islands Government. The concept of an exclusive day-community high school is not adequate in isolated rural communities, particularly when students are recruited from distant villages. Therefore, it is a high priority that the rural day-community high schools must be upgraded to boarding status so that students who came from distant villages can board at the school. This would relieve the host relatives from the burden of looking after many students. In the absence of boarding facilities, the *wantok* support network will continue to impinge on the quality of education because many relatives are living in one household with students having poor conditions to study at home. Another feasible suggestion is to have hostel for borders that can be ran by local business people or community organisations in association with the

school. This arrangement can relieve the school from financial burden associated with boarding facilities and encourage local entrepreneurship in rural education.

Secondly, the introduction of CHS as an initiative to increase access to secondary education is credible. However, further developments aimed at improving the quality of rural education are hampered by lack of land and finance. The problem of inadequate resources arises when the schools want to expand and offer higher secondary education beyond Form 3. The original aim of the CHS was to provide vocational-based education to equip students with skills for living. If the CHSs keep implementing this concept they would have not faced a lot of problems.

Thirdly, this study confirms that the economics of rural schools warrants government attention in its national development goals. The provision of grants to schools has been around for many years yet no government has ever attempted to match the grant to the learning outcomes. If provisions for quality learning in rural secondary schools are to be improved, sound policies must be implemented to measure resource inputs against the quality learning outcomes. Such assessment would enable the Government and schools to utilize allocated resources in improving the quality of learning.

The study further reveals that schools in the rural areas are staffed by many unqualified teachers. Every year a number of teachers graduated with teaching qualifications and many of them opted to teach in urban schools. In order to attract qualified teachers to rural schools, one of the sound policies is for the Government to institute special allowances for teachers serving in the rural schools. Such a policy would induce qualified teachers to serve in the rural schools. Similarly, the low teacher-student ratio and the on-going problem of lack of resources could be addressed by amalgamating the existing rural community high schools into regional boarding schools. Amalgamations would maximise scarce resources by pulling them together into larger regional schools.

While many parents and Education Authorities are condemning teacher absenteeism, little has been done to research the issues surrounding the problem. Therefore, the seriousness of the problem on student learning warrants further research to investigate why there is a high rate of teachers' absenteeism in rural schools.

Finally, the lack of community support has implications for rural education. Education must not be limited to school children but extended to the entire community. The school must embrace the concept of a 'community learning centre' in order to contribute to rural development. This would involve running short courses and workshops for the community during school breaks or during weekends. For instance, a home economics teacher could conduct a sewing workshop for rural women in their catchment area. The Ministry of Education has a non-formal education division so a policy of developing 'community learning centres' in schools should be one of the key responsibilities of that division. When schools become actively engaged in community training needs, the community would be more likely to claim the ownership of the school and in turn render its support to the running of the schools.

Conclusion

As it is acknowledged at the outset, this study describes the nature of providing quality learning in three rural Community High Schools and is not intended to provide strong warrant for claims about generalization. However, there is every reason to believe that the determinants

of quality learning as exemplified by the case study schools are typical of any rural school in Solomon Islands. The provision of quality learning in rural schools nevertheless can be improved, however, and the discussion above is meant to shed light on possible ways to effect such improvement. This study holds no presumption that readers will find this discussion complete or inarguable; like any study, the research may have biases and blind spots. But if the findings cause rural education researchers to raise more questions, then research to improving rural education will continue. In Solomon Islands, the study revealed that 89 percent of the country's secondary schools are located in rural and isolated islands therefore the Government as one of the key consumers of such research need to give rural education a higher priority in the national resourcing. The priority areas as exhibited by the findings are increasing financial support to schools; improving students' welfare, addressing frequent teacher absenteeism, provide inducements for rural schools so as to attract qualified teachers, improving teaching and learning resources and encourage community support. These areas are pillars to providing quality learning in any setting. However, as the study revealed, there is a need to improve these areas in the three schools which may be the case for most rural schools.

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List of A cronyms

- BCHS: Bay-view Community High School
CHS: Community High School
CCHS: Central Community High School
ESIRP: Education Sector Investment and Reform Program
EU: European Union
HCHS: Hills Community High School
MEHRD: Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development
NSS: National Secondary School
PSS: Provincial Secondary School
SIS: Solomon Islands Dollar
SICHE: Solomon Islands College of Higher Education
TIT: Teacher in Training

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