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Re-thinking Citizenship Education (CE) in the Solomon Islands

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Abstract

This study explores the ways good and active citizenship may be motivated and enabled through school curricula in the Solomon Islands. The curriculum policy is relevant and contextually connected to the life ways of local people, a factor which is currently missing in most curriculums. This research was undertaken to assist in finding answers to the issues and problems currently faced in the Solomon Islands. It was premised on the assumption that past and current school practices did not prepare students adequately on how to conduct themselves and effectively relate to their diverse neighbors and live as good and active citizens within the complex and dynamic national social environment of the Solomon Islands. It found that participants agreed to teach moral values but questioned the sources of those values. They also agreed that in order for Citizen Education (CE) to be successful, virtues and moral values must come from cultural and religious values common to most Solomon Islanders.

Introduction

CE is an instrument used by Democratic states to prepare their citizens for the challenges of this new century (Print, 2008). In the Solomon Islands, challenges are numerous and complicated: "ethnic intimidation, forced eviction, murder, rape, arson, and open warfare among certain ethnic groups" (Sanga & Walker, 2005, p. 7). The authors note that these events occurred among conditions of deep social inequalities including corruption, crises in the justice, legislative, and bureaucratic systems, and a general lack of respect for diversity. Moreover, the state lacked the capacity to unite people of different ethnic groups. In situations of contesting multiple identities unity is challenged, thereby resulting in a shaky national identity and a reduced capacity for social acceptance (Rueda, cited in Purta, Schwille, and Amadeo, 1999). In the Solomon Islands, such long-standing issues have become the subject of much debate among education reformers, politicians, civil society, women leaders, youth, and the general population. Therefore, citizenship is an important component for Solomon Islands curriculum. The relevant and contextual values of citizenship when integrated in the national curriculum may solve the challenges of ethnic relationships, unity in diversity, national identity, and respect for the social and physical environment.

Education context of Solomon Islands

Under the provisions of the National Education Act 1978, Solomon Islands schools are established to meet the goals of education for the country. The education system is centralised with all functions determined by the state including the designing, developing, and financing of the curriculum.

In the postcolonial period, the academic tradition imposed by the colonial government of training students for paid employment has been retained (Solomon Islands Education Strategic Plan, 2005). This has caused considerable challenges which might not be easily solved by the government.

While the secondary education system has been rapidly expanded to accommodate the high population growth rate – currently estimated to be around 2.7% (Dorovolomo, 2005) – the highly competitive exam-oriented education system has prevented many students from reaching the final stages. Where do the rest of the students go? What do they do next? Are they prepared for life after school? How do they respond to the needs of the society? Rather than answering these I merely raise them to illustrate an important issue for the educational situation in the Solomon Islands.

Citizenship Education

Herbert & Sears (2006, p. 1) define CE as "the preparation of individuals to participate as active and responsible citizens". CE has always been intended to help integrate diverse populations into a single national culture based on the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and human rights (Herbert & Sears, 2006; Osley & Stakey, cited in Wylie, 2004). CE is the teaching of values that consider citizenship knowledge based on governance, rights, and responsibilities (Deuchar, 2007), so developing good citizens who are law abiding, work hard, and possess good character. Advocates argue that the teaching of values should be the fundamental principle of schooling if the state or individuals want harmony among citizens (Lynch, 1992).

What constitutes an effective and adequate model for CE may be contested, however. While rights (entitlements) and responsibilities (duties and obligations) are regarded as basic components, CE may also be regarded as enabling participation in political arenas and/or active involvement in politics (Lawton, 2001, cited in Adeyami, Boikhuso, and Moffat, 2003). Consequently, the notion of CE is far from static (Heater, 1999; Ross, 2006) because the term is defined contextually.

Some consider CE to be the most effective means to imbue children with values that stabilise the society (Heater 1999) through loyalty to the state. To provide equal recognition to all citizens loyalty has to be nurtured among challenges and dangers of discrimination. Loyalty requires its citizens to demonstrate values and disposition of character that are acceptable and proper under the jurisdiction of the state. All indi-

viduals are obliged to act and behave in ways that show tolerance to one another for the good of "human-human and human-environment harmony" (Lynch, 1992, p. 27).

The study participants

The observations in this paper are based on a study conducted to explore the meanings and understandings attributed to the term "citizenship" by a group of twenty-one purposively selected Solomon Islanders comprising two Ministry of Education officers, and students, teachers, and principals from one rural and one urban school. Individual and group interviews focussed on exploring participants' understandings of the term citizenship.

Methodology and Method

This research employed a qualitative research design, which studied things in their "natural settings and making sense of, or interpreting phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring with them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, p.4). A vital implication of this choice is that the research was placed in a natural setting where the researcher was able to access sites and participants, using methods that were "interactive and humanistic in order to build rapport and credibility with the individuals in the study" (Creswell, 2003. p.8). The study focused on observing a variety of perceptions to allow for multiple sources of evidence to be obtained from participants (Creswell, 1994). The researcher was able to explore the phenomena in their natural settings (Anderson, 2002) and to make sense of, or interpret, the phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring with them (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

The participants were either interviewed as a group or as individuals due mainly to availability. The one-on-one interview was used for the two Ministry of Education officers, one curriculum officer and each of the two school principals. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) maintain that interview is not an easy option, because it involves a conversation between two people. The vital aspect for the interview is the way it obtains information about a topic or subject. "It has been said that while other instruments focus on the surface of the elements of what is happening, interviews give the researcher more of an insight into the meaning and significance of what is happening" (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.23).

Data coding and analysis

A tape recorder was used to record the interviews. Burns (1994) suggests tape recording to be the best method as "raw material will remain for later studies while not taking notes enables the researcher to take part in conversations in a natural way" (p.284). The data was transcribed from Pijin (a borrowed national language or lingua franca made from a variety of languages including English) to English. The scripts were then coded using "sign posts" (Barbour, 2008). They were indexes that

represented the data. This is an inductive process of narrowing data into few themes (Creswell, 2001, cited in Creswell, 2008). In line with the coding guidelines suggested by (Creswell, 2003, cited in Creswell, 2008) the following coding steps were used: To obtain a sense of the whole picture, I read all transcripts and noted ideas as they came to mind. I began the process of coding by identifying text segments, placing a bracket around each and assigning a code word for it. The codes were grouped together into patterns to provide an answer to the questions that are used in the field work. The purpose is to find themes that form the base of the analysis. It gives the researcher clear direction. As Grbich (2007, p. 25), points out, it will provide "deeper understanding of the values and meaning which lie therein". The importance of this preliminary analysis was to highlight and identify emerging issues important for the study. The data was visited many times to ensure that nothing was missed out.

Findings

Respondents defined CE as the teaching of values that aim to unify through developing new relationships among people with diverse cultures. The reasons given for such a definition are that Solomon Islands' society is drastically changing due to modern influences and people have different perceptions when observing and interpreting their surrounding world. One Education officer described CE as the provision of knowledge that educates people about right and honourable behaviours with responsibility, developing informed citizens who have the capacity or knowledge to judge based on moral values. This includes the teaching of values that prepare students for their future.

A principal defined CE as knowledge taught in schools that develops students to be good and active citizens, asserting that what is significant is the teaching of values that are culturally and religiously relevant to people's way of life. Another principal explained that the values that stabilise families and communities are practiced by elders, "big men", and recognised by society as morally relevant and important for our society. He observed that in today's societies developing students to become good citizens is quite difficult due to the changes in behaviour and lifestyle found among youths. Therefore, using the formal school system as the resource to disseminate citizenship knowledge, values, and skills is fundamentally important.

One teacher described CE as formal learning of the concepts of citizenship, another as the teaching of values to conserve the environment, building relationships with people of differing cultures, and formal teaching of moral values. It is common knowledge that among the daunting issues in the Solomon Islands is the deliberate destruction of the physical environment by large-scale logging activities. The environment as a whole has not been well cared for, resulting in infertile gardening areas, contamination of drinking water, and pollution of waters from which people gather food. One MOE respondent pointed out that it is imperative to educate people about the values that create a safe environment for people to live in and enjoy.

Students also indicated support for the notion that values necessary for Solomon Islands should be included in the teaching and learning environment.

CE to educate students to become good citizens requires the teaching of values in both formal and non-formal settings. This is due to concern over behaviour that undermines the modern rule of law, cultural values, and religious values. In Solomon Islands' social environment the changing nature of behaviour among youths can be seen after the recent social unrest. A teacher expressed this sad truth as being due to the respect which was commonly practiced in the country declining to a devastating degree, detrimentally affecting the structures of all sectors of the society.

The teaching of values in citizenship is seen as important for social stability. Participants asserted that we have to introduce citizenship values into our school systems – particularly the teaching of ethics and virtues – to solve issues of disrespect, immorality, dishonesty, hatred, and instability which currently disrupt the society. In such a chaotic environment, the teaching of CE based on moral values seems vital. However, there are mixed reactions to the teaching of moral values: some see them to be contradictory to democratic values, while others note the changes of behaviour have cost the country significantly.

The preferred values, knowledge, and skills

According to participants, the most appropriate values for CE in the Solomon Islands are those that can unite people and create a safe and enabling society. People have seen the rise of social problems, violence, disunity among different ethnic groups, and disrespect to leaders, family values, cultural values, church rules, and the rule of law.

While respondents view the promotion of virtues and moral values in schools as highly desirable, they retain reservations about the source of the values to be taught. Some insist that virtues and moral values must derive from the cultural and religious values common to people in the Solomon Islands. These include respect for one another, culture and religion, the environment, and people's background. The inclusion of values that engage students to be responsible citizens is vital. These include moral values, which hold respect, honesty, and teaching of relationships to unify the geographically, culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse people of Solomon Islands. A teacher explained that cultural and religious values are important teaching components for Solomon Islands formal education system because the rules that have traditionally governed people are no longer respected. The social environment of Solomon Islands is very complex, particularly when numerous issues undermine the people's or state's capacity to satisfactorily resolve everybody's issues. In such a complex environment the inculcating of common cultural values and religious teachings is seen as a unifying instrument. One teacher noted that these moral values existed and continue to exist among people despite the challenges the country has gone through. The teaching of moral values is considered relevant to

people's way of life because people of the Solomon Islands value their cultural norms and religious principles immensely and with pride.

However, it could be argued that the reason that Solomon Islands has experienced so many social problems is because people are becoming reluctant to uphold their cultural values. As one principal said:

> We think that sending students to schools will develop them to become good citizens. But this is not happening. If those traditional values can be promoted in the school systems it would help to address our current volatile situation. Honesty, respect, ethical and truthful practices, and acting with a clear conscience are important values that need to be taught in schools, as is teaching about faithfulness, building relationships, showing moral behaviours, and living according to the principal of justice. However, young people increasingly consider only skills and knowledge of subjects that will give them formal careers as important.

One student said,

> "Learning about moral values does not give me knowledge to have formal employment in the future". Some teachers shared this view, "Students equate education with formal employment and take for granted having moral behaviours, never considering moral values as respect, care, and honesty as fundamental to unity which is the prerequisite for a safer living environment".

Such a perspective is very worrying in the Solomon Islands. One MOE officer lamented, "It is a drastic setback to Solomon Islands to note that young people nowadays see the teaching of good values as something primitive or of the village." Similarly, one respondent noted that in city schools the control of student behaviour is becoming very difficult, rules to govern students are not respected, there is a drastic decline in moral behaviour, students are challenging the school authorities about their rights, and parents in urban areas are finding it difficult to control their children. Teachers supported this view, stressing that the teaching of values on virtues would solve current behavioural problems, change students' perceptions regarding education, and improve current social chaos. The preferred common values for CE include respect, honesty, care, accountability, and ethical leadership. It was particularly stressed by some that the value of respect is eroding.

However, in contrast to the perspectives presented above, it is encouraging to see that some students have retained respect for traditional values. According to students, the relationships people have with each other and the respect rendered towards people and elders are the marks of a good citizen. One student describes a good and active citizen as someone who demonstrates leadership qualities among people, shows moral character to those they lead, and shows good respect to others in the community. Another student expressed that moral values such as respect for one another, public properties, and the rule of law is significant for Solomon Islands.

Values considered for Solomon Islands Citizenship Education

Participants identified the following knowledge, values, and skills as appropriate for promoting good relations and unity amongst the diverse population of Solomon Islands.

Rights

According to respondents, selection of values has to be carefully considered. Some values, although important, contradict people's culture and customs. One such value is that of individual rights and freedom. One MOE respondent observed,

> "The teaching of rights may conflict with our cultural and religious values. In urban areas in our country it is confusing for parents. The conventions of rights of the child are based on individualism while the cultural understanding of rights is collective. Maybe people who support individualism do not know how to handle their child and think the law will correct their child. That is not true, therefore we should be careful when we try to preach the concept of rights."

In relation to the difficulties experienced by urban schools, one principal expressed that the concept of rights is now becoming dominant among people and institutions. However, rights are related to respect and responsibility, not just individuality. Rights that do not incorporate respect should not be promoted in schools. If rights are to be taught in schools this must be done with clear guidance and taught alongside responsibility.

Responsibility

One principal pointed out that the teaching of duties and responsibilities is relevant for Solomon Islands because the cultures of the country are founded on the notion of responsibility. Each person is responsible for his own and others' lives, expressed in the Solomon Islands as the "wontok" system. While wontok literally means "speak one language", this refers not to just the spoken language; it also means having concern for people of the immediate family, extended family, community, ethnic group, and even the immediate country when you are abroad. It contains an understanding of shared responsibility, obligation, and care.

The wontok system is founded on duties that people render and the responsibility that one is entrusted to carry out in order that people may provide trust, confidence, and respect. In this regard students need to be inculcated with values that develop them to become responsible beings. Principals perceive that trust, confidence, and respect are eroding in the Solomon Islands societies: people no longer demonstrate accountability to themselves, their neighbours, institutions, and the environment. The teaching of duties and responsibilities would uphold the values of culture including reinforcing the communal framework.

Respect

The value of respect refers to treating others with consideration and regard. Respect is an important value in all cultures in the Solomon Islands. Teaching the values common to all will cause people to respect and understand each other, their neighbours, and how the social environment lives together peacefully. As stated, a system of values of citizenship already exists; the challenge is to effectively incorporate it into the education system. MOE staff advocated a moral values-based approach to Citizenship Education.

Care

The value of care concerns having a sense of caring for both yourself and others and acting with compassion. The direct opposite of the value of care is what is often practiced in the Solomon Islands today. According one teacher, *"Young people do not have any regard for themselves and others, or the state institutions, including the rule of law, property, and their neighbours"*. Young people develop a caring attitude towards others from teachings of national and local institutions: therefore, educating students with values from our culture and religion will enable them to develop character that demonstrates care.

Tolerance and Understanding

The values of tolerance and understanding concern the acceptance of people's differences and being aware of others. According to a MOE respondent:

> Changes in our societies have caused people not to understand each other. Many things have come as a point whereby Solomon Islanders lack the knowledge to understand and fail to relate to each other, (then) they break the law and the law punishes them…Since we are in the process of rebuilding Solomon Islands, it is timely to develop a curriculum that promotes values to maintain the unity of the nation.

Ethics and Honesty

Honesty is the ability to be truthful, to be sincere about finding and expressing the truth, and requiring truth from others. According to MOE staff, the "teaching of honesty is very critical to today's Solomon Islands society". One principal noted, "The structure of local and national institutions are violated by dishonesty and then justifying the act as relevant to cultural values or "wontok system", when in fact it is a deliberate violation of modern structures. A teacher said, "People who are honest in their dealings with people should act as role models. People must be role models in their own settings". One MOE staff member expressed, "In order for our societies to live up to the standard of honesty and ethical behaviour, it is very important to promote honesty and ethical values in formal systems as well as at home and in the communities as part of the CE programme".

Cooperation

Cooperation is about working together to achieve a common goal, providing support to others, and engaging in peaceful resolution in conflicts. In a diverse country like Solomon Islands the need to emphasise unity and other cultural values which create respect and cooperation to build relationships is vital. Although they are diverse, Solomon Islanders are one people under the modern rule of law. It requires teaching the value of cooperation to unite people of different cultures and ethnicity.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find ways in which CE may contribute to solving the challenges faced by Solomon Islands. It is evident that CE may help to avoid a repeat of what was experienced in the country from 1998 to 2003. The fear is that Solomon Islands could once again erupt into violence.

The key to the overall effectiveness of any CE initiatives will be the extent to which what is taught in class translates to how students live their daily lives. CE has always been equated with the knowledge, values, and skills that families, communities, and nation states use to promote behaviour that is acceptable and to merge people with differing backgrounds. The principal focus of the CE concept is to eliminate injustices commonly found among people because of differences in ethnicity, status, and ownership of resources. In addition, it links to the knowledge, values, and skills that empower people to play a part actively and ethically in the process of nation building, development, and harmonious living.

Therefore, it is recommended that CE be embedded in the formal curriculum of the Solomon Islands. The process recommended is to review the curriculum to identify parts which need amendment to cater for any approved policy statement that includes Citizenship Education. Any programme of citizenship has to include knowledge, values, and skills on rights and freedom. These concepts in the Solomon Islands have often been misinterpreted. For example, Solomon Islanders have little understanding of the notions of (individual) rights and freedom as promoted by democratic societies. Such misconceptions need to be addressed formally while students are young. Equally important are concepts relating to duties and responsibilities, national identity, social cohesion, and the themes of moral values and social virtues.

Finally, in a country with diverse cultures, languages, and ethnicities, notions of citizenship vary from province to province, community to community, and family to family. The most significant aim of CE is the promotion of solidarity and unity.

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