

Shifting policy perspectives and practices: From access to basic education to prioritising revenue collection

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School leaders in the Solomon Islands have shifted away from the basic education policy that promotes equitable access to quality basic education to practices that target high enrolment to generate revenue. This research highlights the implications of this shift and its impact on quality education. It aims to find the balance between the school's financial viability and the imperative to provide equitable and quality education for all children. The research examined the following questions: 1) What are the different types of fees charged for educating a child in the Solomon Islands? 2) Are schools enrolling students in numbers that match the infrastructure and human resources available locally? 3) Are the grants provided by the government adequate to administer schools? The significance of the study lies in its potential to inform education policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders about the consequences of this changing agenda. Parent's experiences of fees charged, school children's and teacher's experiences on the impacts of high enrolments are explored. School Leaders' rationale for charging different types of fees was sought. Twelve participants were involved in this research. Data collected via tok stori were recorded and subsequently transcribed, qualitatively analysed and thematically organised. Data showed that schools in the capital, Honiara, experienced high school enrolment, putting pressure on the limited infrastructure and overloading teachers. Apart from normal fees, schools charged fees for registration, school development, church programs, parent contributions and student transfers. The study provides important insights into the challenges posed by the shifting perspectives and practices towards prioritising revenue collection over access through increased student enrolment

Keywords: tok stori; practitioners; school fees; equity, access

INTRODUCTION

Increasing access to quality basic education for all children remains an educational priority for the Solomon Islands as a nation. The Education Framework 2016-2030, National Education Action Plan 2016-2026, the Fee-Free Education Policy 2009, the Grant Policy 2010 and the School Infrastructure Policy 2010 provided the direction for actions to implement the internationally agreed goals for universal basic education, captured in *Education for All* (UNESCO Bangkok, 1990). Basic education in the Solomon Islands is defined as the level of education from primary grade 1 to year 9 secondary level (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, n.d.). However, schools seemed to have deviated from the intended aims of access and (FFE) to increasingly focus on enrolling more students and collecting revenue. This research used Rationale Choice Theory to examine the reasons underlining the shift by school leaders. This article reports on the research results, identifying the impact of the change in school practices on teachers, students and parents and establishing why school leaders have deviated from government policies guiding access.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders about the complexities and consequences of shifting priorities in the education

sector. By providing a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities, the study can contribute to formulating more effective and sustainable education policies, ultimately benefiting the children of the Solomon Islands and potentially influencing educational practices in similar contexts.

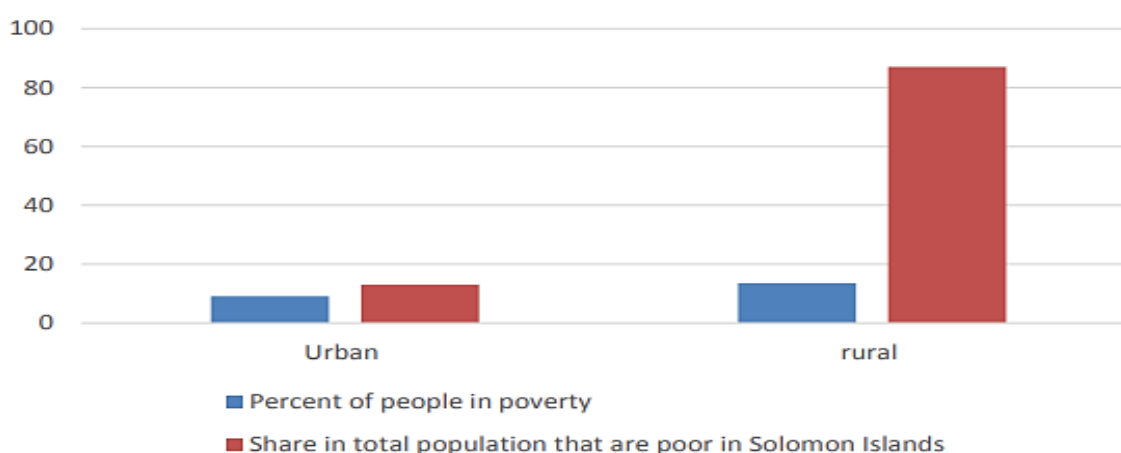
BACKGROUND

The Solomon Islands is an archipelagic state in the southwest Pacific Ocean, approximately 2,000 km northeast of Australia. Its land mass of 28,400 km² extends over nearly 1000 islands comprising nine main island groups. The capital, Honiara, is located on Guadalcanal, the largest island (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.) (see Figure 2).

The population of the Solomon Islands, estimated to be about 734,887, is predominantly Melanesian (about 95%), the rest being Polynesian, Micronesian, Chinese and European communities (Solomon Islands National Statistic Office, 2023). Sixty-three distinct languages are spoken in the country, with numerous local dialects. English is the official language, but Solomons' Pijin is the lingua franca for most people (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.).

Despite its natural and cultural wealth, the Solomon Islands contend with economic challenges. As one of the Pacific's least affluent nations, the country faces elevated costs associated with service delivery due to its small and geographically dispersed population. Most residents are engaged in subsistence and cash crop agriculture, with only a fraction participating in wage-earning endeavours. Some 12.7% of the population in the Solomon Islands live below the poverty line and are classified as 'poor', but poverty was recorded to be 87% in rural areas, as shown in Figure 1 (Solomon Islands National Statistics, 2015).

Figure 1: Rural-Urban dimensions of poverty



Source: Solomon Islands National Statistics Office and the World Bank Group (2015), *Solomon Islands poverty profile based on the 2012/13 household income and expenditure survey*.

The year 2020 witnessed the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Solomon Islands' economy, with a 4.5% decrease in GDP growth (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs, n.d.; Solomon Islands Government, 2022). This economic downturn persisted, with a further 4.5% contraction in 2022, marking the third consecutive year of

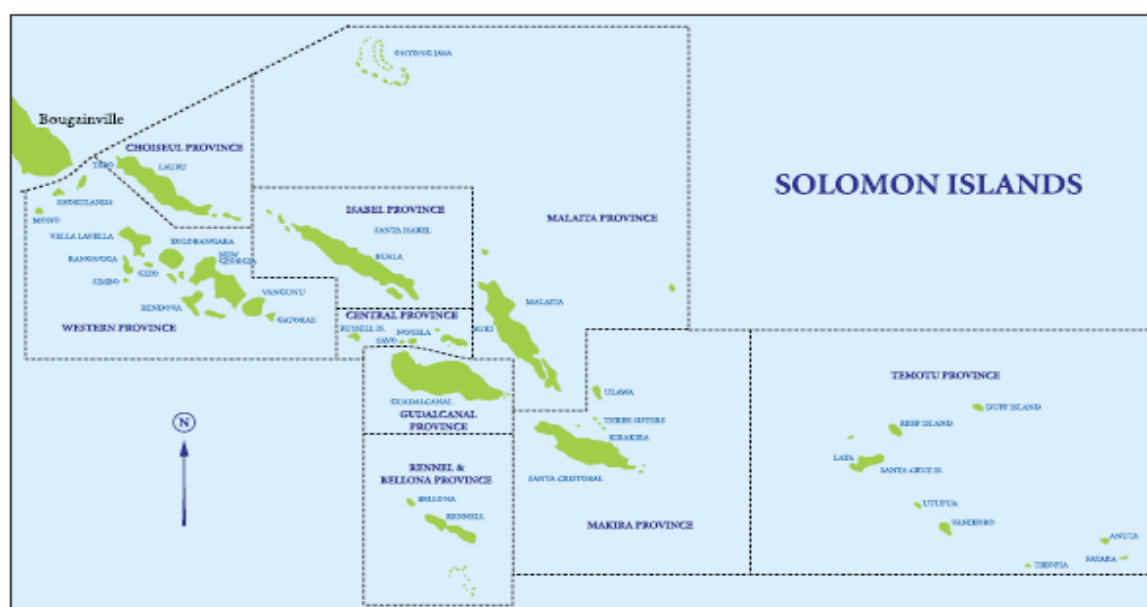
negative growth (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). COVID-19 has impacted employment with the ‘no job no job’ policy in the Solomon Islands, resulting in 26,000 people out of job (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

Education in the Solomon Islands is not compulsory. The Education sector has 1,050 schools, of which 243 are community high schools, 16 provincial secondary schools (PSS), 10 national secondary schools (NSS), 510 Primary Schools and 284 Early childhood Centres (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

Long-term trends show late age entry to school, high over-age enrolments, high levels of repetition in primary, low survival rates across the school years, gender parity inequities and infrastructure shortages (Solomon Islands National Education Strategic Plan 2022-2026, n.d.). Most students leave school before reaching senior secondary due to the cost of education, shortage of infrastructure and lack of accessibility to nearby schools (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

The unique blend of geographical, economic and demographic elements defines the backdrop against which the Solomon Islands’ educational challenges and policy shifts must be understood.

Figure 2: Map of Solomon Islands



Source: Solomon Islands Government. (n.d.). *Solomon Islands National Education Action Plan 2022-2026*

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rationale Choice Theory states that individuals use rational calculations to make choices and achieve outcomes aligned with their objectives (Ganti, 2023). Adam Smith was one of the first economists to develop the underlying principles of the Rationale Choice Theory. Applying this theory to schools suggests that school leaders make decisions to maximise their own benefits based on available options and incentives, and these decisions are made by weighing the potential costs and benefits of various choices. Rationale Choice Theory assumes that individuals are rational actors who aim to maximise their self-interest while considering constraints and opportunities within their decision-making context.

When examining why school leaders change their practices from the original basic education policy that promotes students' enrolments to equitable, quality basic education to the new normal enrolment that seemed to prioritise revenue collection, Rational Choice Theory proposes that school leaders consider factors such as financial gains from increased enrolment, potential improvement in infrastructure due to increased funding, and prestige associated with higher student numbers. Furthermore, School leaders may face pressure from stakeholders, including government bodies, parents and their own institutions, to generate more revenue. These external forces can force school leaders to prioritise enrolment growth that even goes beyond the capacity of the available teaching and learning facilities.

Moreover, Rationale Choice Theory suggests that if schools face financial constraints, leaders may perceive that the capacity to generate needed additional revenue from school grants and parental contribution will become possible by increasing student enrolment. Using enrolment numbers as a determining factor to generate a substantive amount of revenue may also affect the quality of education because of infrastructure shortages and limited resources. Rational Choice Theory suggests that school leaders are willing to compromise the quality of education by enrolling more students to generate revenue to meet school needs that are not approved under the schools' grants policy.

METHODOLOGY

This research was guided by a qualitative research design suited to exploring feelings, ideas and experiences. Data collection was carried out in a narrative manner (Eze & Ugwu, 2023). The research was concerned with gathering data on the experiences and feelings of participants regarding school leaders' deviation from the basic education policy of promoting equitable access to quality basic education to practices that use enrolment to prioritise revenue collection. The fit between methodology and research field (Sanga et al., 2018) provided a direction for choosing Melanesia *tok stori* as the data collection instrument. Using the Melanesian *tok stori* method was influenced by the need to employ a communication mode relevant to the cultural context of study participants.

In its natural form, *tok stori* is an accepted means of sharing knowledge in Melanesia (Vella & Maebuta, 2018, cited in Sanga et al., 2020). The protocols for storytelling within this mode emphasise participation, relationship-building, trust, and active listening, sharing and responding (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018). Moreover, *tok stori* can be conducted in face-to-face settings, online or using digital devices, offering flexibility and user-friendliness for research in the Solomon Islands context. *Tok stori* for this research was conducted face-to-face with three parents, three school leaders, three schoolteachers and three students from three different secondary schools in Honiara who consented to participate in the *tok stori* sessions held at different times.

Research questions

To better understand the rationale behind the shifting policy perspectives and practices of school leaders, this article seeks answers to these questions raised in the *tok stori*.

- 1) What are the different types of fees charged for educating a child in the Solomon Islands?
- 2) Are schools enrolling students in numbers that match the infrastructure and human resources available locally?
- 3) Are the grants provided by the government adequate to administer schools?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of education as a fundamental human right and a powerful driver of development has long been recognised globally. Education for All (EFA) and Education for Sustainable Development are global initiatives directly linked to article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, n.d.) and the *Millennium Declaration* in 2000. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) emerged from development agendas from the World Bank, IMF, UN agencies and OECD—the agendas aimed to interlace human development with economic and social progress. Education was identified as an agent for poverty reduction, improved health, gender equality, peace and stability (UN News, 2015). The post-2015 development agenda demanded a broader, holistic and more ambitious vision than the EFA used for the MDGs, and this led to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), aimed at completing unfinished business of MDGs and moving beyond halfway targets to get to zero (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.). The MDGs and, later, the SDGs set global educational targets, with the Pacific Commitment for EFA goals outlined in the *Pacific Regional Education Framework, Moving Towards Education 2030* (PacREF) (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, n.d.). In aligning itself with these global commitments, the Solomon Islands demonstrated its determination and commitment to education through various past frameworks, including the current *Education Framework 2016-2030* and the *National Education Action Plan 2016-2026*.

Fee-free education initiatives

A significant approach to achieving the complexity of EFA goals, particularly in low-income countries, has been implementing a fee-free education (FFE) policy, which is the government's commitment to increase equitable access to quality basic education. Under the FFE commitment, the government subsidises all school fees by providing grants to schools to cover teaching and learning costs and relieving parents from the financial burden of paying fees. However, the grant policy regulating FFE requires parental contributions. The grant policy, however, does not specify the amount needed as a parental contribution for rural and urban schools, a loophole school leaders take advantage of to impose fees of varying amounts.

The introduction of the FFE policy resulted in a notable increase in primary children's and junior secondary education enrolments of 48% and 70%, respectively (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.). Initially, this initiative operated on a partnership and cost-sharing basis between parents and the government (Ministry of Education and Human Resources and Development, 2012).

Under the provisions of the FFE policy in the Solomon Islands, no child is to be removed from school even when parental contributions are not paid to the schools, exacerbating the issue that some children benefit from other children's contributions. Free education does not meet the indirect cost of education, which some parents cannot afford (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

In Papua New Guinea, Tuition Fee-Free Education (TFFE) covers children from year 1 of primary education to year 12 of secondary education. TFFE has helped alleviate the financial burdens for parents, but parents are still expected to pay for parental contributions and meet other education-related costs (Magury, 2022).

The concept of free education in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea can give parents false hope because education is not entirely free. Parents must still cover expenses such as contributions, uniforms, transportation, stationary and field trips.

Challenges in achieving EFA Goals through FFE

After 15 years (UNESCO, 2015). The findings of the UNESCO *Education for all 2000–2015: Achievements and challenges. EFA global monitoring report 2015* (UNESCO, 2015) found that after 15 years of pursuing EFA goals, only one-third of countries have achieved all measurable targets. The challenges related to FFE were explained as the gap between countries' policy, practice and economic capabilities to support and harness access agenda through free education (OECD, 2017). Aid donors' support to implement free education is vital, especially in low-income countries in the Pacific, like the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, which suffer significant challenges due to factors such as small economies, political instability, changing government priorities with leadership changes and external shocks such the COVID-19 pandemic (Magury, 2022; Grant & Hushang, 2021). For example, Papua New Guinea experienced political leadership changes, which saw the TFFE policy being abolished and later reactivated, leading to fluctuations in education budget allocation (Grant & Hushang, 2021). In the Solomon Islands, a change of leadership at the Ministry of Education level in 2021 led to statements that education is no longer free and parents must pay after COVID-19 (No Fee free Education this Year, News, 2021).

Despite budget constraints, FFE policies remain an ambitious agenda. In The Solomon Islands, the basic education policy outlined a partnership and cost-sharing arrangement between schools and parents. However, parents do not accept the cost sharing arrangement (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2009). Parents believed the free education policy would take the financial burden of educating children away from parents (Hess, 2013, cited in Viennet & Pont, 2017). The restrictive nature of the free education policy targeting academic activities caused schools to find ways to meet other operational and development needs.

FINDINGS

This study's school leaders' practices of shifting the focus of student enrolment from providing equitable access for all children to quality basic education (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2009) to targeting high enrolment for revenue collection has brought about significant consequences for the parents and the education system

This section presents the perspectives and experiences of parents, school principals, teachers and students to provide insight into how this shift in policy-related practice has affected access to education and the quality of learning. The major themes of the findings were drawn after analysing participant's responses to each research question.

1) What are the different types of fees charged for educating a child in the Solomon Islands?

Parents' expectations and realities

Parent 1 expressed confusion regarding the definition of 'fee-free education' as they find themselves still burdened with various contributions and fundraising requests. They argued that free education should remove all the financial burdens from parents.

Fee-free education had encouraged high enrolment. But I thought that the fee-free education should mean that no money should be requested from parents except for school uniforms,

lunch money and transportations that we meet. The school asked parents for contributions, and they asked us to contribute in fundraising drives. This is confusing.

Parent 2 shares the struggle faced when charged high transfer fees, which can be almost unaffordable, hindering access to what they perceive as quality education provided in prestigious schools.

When I asked the school to transfer my grandson to this school, they told me that I should pay SBD1000 in order to transfer the child. I think this is a form of fundraising because there is no rationale behind it. I do not have an employment, and I am a widow. I come to town to find better education for my grandchildren.

Parent 3 highlighted the economic challenges families face that rely on their salaries for survival and education expenses. This raises concerns about the policy's sustainability and impact on families' financial well-being.

I have four children, all in school, but the company where my husband is employed paid for the fees, but still, we have to borrow money from friends to keep the family till the next pay. I was thinking about those families that use their salary for survival while at the same time divide the income for fees and transport.

Parent 3 further highlighted that FFE had benefited families because the government pays the bigger portion, and schools are not pressuring parents to pay the parental contributions.

We can slowly pay for the parental contribution and other school contributions because I do not see any pressure from schools in getting us to pay. The bigger portion of the school fee is taken care of under the grant.

The future of the policy

The parents interviewed for this research were concerned about the future of the FFE policy and its enforcement. Parent 1 questioned whether the policy is still active and when it might end. The uncertainty surrounding the policy created anxiety among parents.

My child is now in year eight, and I am paying for her school fees in a boarding school that amounts to SBD2500 per semester, and parent contribution is SBD200-00. I am not sure if the fee-free policy that was imposed is still enforceable. When is this policy coming to its final term? It seems to me that the policy is not active.

The dormitories are too small, and when I see my daughter sleeping in an overcrowded room, I am worried about her health. Schools should enrol to fit their situation.

2) Are schools enrolling students in numbers that match the infrastructure and human resources available locally?

Impacts of high enrolment on quality of education

Students spoken with provided accounts of the negative effects of overcrowded classrooms caused by high enrolments and insufficient resources. They mentioned sharing desks and disruptive learning environments due to uncontrolled noise levels.

Student 1: There are many of us in a classroom, and we do not have enough desks for everybody. Three of us share a desk that is meant for two people.

Student 2: I have to ensure I arrive in school first to get a chair and desk. Those arriving late may have to listen to the teacher from the corridor.

Teacher 1 expressed the struggles to provide quality education in overcrowded rooms. They noted issues related to classroom management, limited resources and the need for specialised teaching strategies in overcrowded classrooms

I have an experience of teaching 70 students in a class. I do not understand if the student-teacher ratio has changed with the free education policy in place. Because I have a very big class, I choose to be absent from teaching a class just to take a break. I used teacher centred approach in teaching. We failed to follow OBE approach in teaching.

The call for teacher preparation

Teacher 2 stressed the importance of teacher preparation programs, particularly for new graduates, to equip them with effective classroom management skills and teaching strategies tailored to overcrowded classrooms.

New graduates will face real challenges with classroom management, and SINU [Solomon Islands National University] should best prepare teachers to teach in overcrowded classroom. They need to be trained to develop new and effective classroom management skills and teaching strategies that worked in overcrowded classrooms.

Q3 Are the grants provided by the government adequate to administer schools?

Challenges faced by principals

School principals acknowledge that the policy's grant allocations are inadequate to cover the high costs of operating schools, particularly in urban areas. Therefore, they resort to charging 'high parent contributions' to cover various expenses not covered by the grants, such as electricity, water bills and staff welfare. They noted that parents still cannot pay the contributions, and school leaders' intentions of enrolling more students do not overcome the funding gap.

We have very high cost of operating schools in town. The electricity and water bills are very high. Teacher's rental and welfare are covered by the school through parent contributions. Since the grants are inadequate, the school has to charge the fees in the name of parent contribution. But, we do not strictly demand parents to pay because the grant policy does not expect school leaders to force parents. The parental contribution is an obligation within the cost-sharing commitment for free education between government and parents. Many parents still cannot pay up their children's contribution because of financial difficulties. The MEHRD¹, through the grant policy, does not permit school leaders to send children out from school even if they do not pay for the parental contributions.

Inflating enrolments to maximise grants

One school principal admitted to inflating student enrolments to receive larger government grant allocations, while another admitted to accepting transfers even towards the end of the final semester. Participants also revealed other ways to generate larger grant allocations, such as keeping transferred students' names on the school's records, even when they moved to new schools. The more students enrolled, the more substantial the government grant, which raises questions about data accuracy and resource allocations to schools.

¹ MEHRD- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development.

Inflating the SIEMIS² form is a game that some schools are practising. Even when children transferred to another school, the former school do not erase the names but still count them in the SIEMIS form. What happened was that the transferred student's names can appear in their new school and old schools at the same time. Number is important. The more we enrol, the bigger the grant allocations to support schools financially through grant money and contributions.

The shift from the policy practices of enrolling to increase equitable access to quality basic education to a trend of enrolling students for revenue generation has implications for quality education. While the policy aimed to remove barriers to education, the voices of parents, principals, teachers and students, as reported here, revealed significant challenges and concerns. Addressing these issues will require a comprehensive approach that considers the sustainability of the policy, adequate funding, teacher training and strategies to improve the quality of education in overcrowded classrooms.

DISCUSSION

Shifting policy perspectives and practices from access to basic education to prioritising revenue collection captured the transformation observed in education policy priorities and practices in schools. This article investigated how this shift impacts various stakeholders, including parents, school principals, teachers and students, as discussed.

Parental expectations and financial burden

The shift in practice from the basic education policy intended to provide increased equitable access to quality basic education to an approach that appears to emphasise growing enrolment of revenue collection has significantly impacted parents.

Initially, parents expected that the free education policy would alleviate the financial burden of educating their children, limiting expenses to uniforms, lunch and transportation. The gap between parents' expectations and the reality of education policy is not unique to the Solomon Islands. Studies from various contexts have shown that parents often expect free education to remove financial burdens, including additional fees and contributions. For example, in Papua New Guinea, many parents think that when the government introduced the TFFE, it pays for all the requirements for educating a child (Magury, 2022). However, the reality proved more complex, with schools requesting additional contributions and organising fundraising drives. This shift in practices has led to confusion among parents and raised questions about communication within the education system. Clear communication within the systems and awareness of parents' needs are crucial in aligning parental and policy expectations (UNESCO MAB, 2018).

Furthermore, the burden of transfer fees imposed by some schools in the Solomon Islands can be a significant barrier to accessing quality education for low-income families. This aligns with the idea that high transfer fees hinder education access, particularly for vulnerable populations. The shift towards revenue collection challenges the fundamental principle of providing equitable educational opportunities to all, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

² SIEMIS is the Solomon Islands Education Management Information System.

Parents' financial situations

The shift in policy practice also reveals the diverse financial backgrounds of parents affected by these changes. While some parents struggle to meet basic survival needs and bear the extra charges imposed by schools, others are more financially stable. This variation underscores the policy's impact on families across different socioeconomic strata. The added financial strain cannot be overlooked, even among families with the financial means to cover these charges. It becomes evident that the policy, intended to reduce the financial burden on parents, has not achieved goal uniformly across all segments of society. It was also noted that some families paid contributions while other families did not, but schools could not expel students from the system because of the provisions of the Solomon Islands' FFE policy (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2008). Overall, the FFE program, regulated under the grant policy of 2010, still does not adequately address the educational challenges children from disadvantaged families in the Solomon Islands face because the cost of education remains one of the reasons why children from these families leave school early (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

Uncertainty about the policy continuity

One of the concerns among parents is the uncertainty surrounding the future of the free education policy. The fear that the policy might be abolished without warning adds anxiety to parents. The instability generated by this uncertainty can influence parents' decision-making processes regarding their children's education and financial planning.

Impact on school principals and their strategies

From the perspective of school principals, the shift in policy priorities is reflected in the challenges they face in sustaining their schools. Grants allocated under the free education policy often fall short of covering basic operational costs, including staff welfare and infrastructure development, due to the narrow scope of the policy provisions. Consequently, schools are forced to seek alternative means of financing, and that is to rely on parent contributions. The limitation of the policy was the lack of guidelines to regulate the amount that schools can request as parental contributions. The loophole in the policy allowed schools to charge different types of contributions and other types of fees.

Unlike their rural counterparts, urban schools encounter specific challenges in engaging parents in school development programs and fundraising activities. The contribution in kind was not possible for urban schools, especially with working parents. This urban-rural divide in parental involvement questions the feasibility of a uniform policy approach across diverse educational contexts.

Enrolment for revenue and its consequences

The most alarming revelation from this research is the practice of inflating enrolment figures to secure larger grant allocations. While this strategy may temporarily alleviate financial pressures on schools, it comes at the cost of educational quality. Overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of desks and disrupted learning environments have become the norm in such schools. Overcrowded classroom issues and challenges were also reiterated in a study on the challenges of FFE in the Solomon Islands (Wairiu et al., 2022).

School leaders have important roles in creating a climate that welcomes, supports and rewards innovative thinking and problem-solving (Dinsdale, 2017). Papua New Guinea experienced high enrolment and retention from its TFFE policy, contributing to lower the quality of education due to inadequate facilities, teachers and monitoring and evaluation of the policy (Hongga, 2020). Similarly, in implementing access to primary education, the African nation of Tanzania experienced challenges related to a shortage of infrastructure, poor academic performance and a shortage of teachers (Haidari, 2021).

The capacity of countries to implement free education was questioned, given the mismatch between policy and practice. Uncontrolled enrolment strategies have broader implications for the integrity of the education system. They raise concerns about accountability in reporting enrolment figures and limiting the credibility of the educational data on which policies are based.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our research highlights the profound impact of the shift in policy perspectives and practices from prioritising access to quality basic education to a trend that emphasises revenue collection. This transformation has far-reaching consequences for parents, school principals, teachers and students. It underscores the importance of adequately financing the FFE program so that schools have enough funds to properly implement the basic education policy that promotes equitable access to quality basic education through free education. This involves aligning policy implementation with the needs and expectations of parents and students, ensuring equitable access to quality education and maintaining transparency and communication within the educational system. As policymakers continue to navigate these changing priorities, it is crucial to consider the voices and concerns of those directly affected by these policies. By addressing the challenges and uncertainties raised by our findings, policymakers can work toward a more balanced approach that prioritises both access to education and the sustainability of educational institutions.

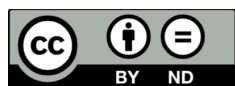
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