

## Access, ethical leadership and action in Solomon Islands education: A *tok stori*

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**John Iromea**

University of Sydney, Australia: [jiro8728@uni.sydney.edu.au](mailto:jiro8728@uni.sydney.edu.au)

**Martyn Reynolds**

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand: [martyn.reynolds@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:martyn.reynolds@vuw.ac.nz)

*This article presents an investigation of a “grass roots” understanding of the relationship between ethical leadership in Solomon Islands and access, equity and quality in education. Access to education, a key element of the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals, is generally an aspirational matter framed by concrete factors such as new building programs, increased numbers of teachers, and so on. However, discussion about access can helpfully be extended by paying attention to ethical educational leadership because it supports students to attend school, especially when associated with the related concepts of equity and quality. This article re-thinks access through a tok stori process in a Solomon Islands context. We propose a concept of access that employs a nuanced, strengths-based, widened lens to take account of ethical, creative and purposeful actions of school leaders. This enables education authorities to recognise and develop the “soft” leadership skills and ethical positions of leaders who have the potential to provide day-to-day enhancement of access through the ways they manage educational tensions.*

*Keywords: Solomon Islands; leadership; education; tok stori; ethics; strengths-based*

### INTRODUCTION

The international education community emphasises the need to implement steps toward achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education for All (EFA). The Solomon Islands’ Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) seeks access, equity and quality education for all Solomon Islanders, regardless of gender, background, or ability (MEHRD, 2016). When access is discussed in Solomon Islands education, it has generally been in relation to increased finance, provision of buildings and growing the teaching force (Rodie, 2014) rather than as a function of leadership.

Globally, leadership has been understood in many ways: behaviour, influence over others, individual traits, interaction patterns, perception of others regarding legitimacy of influence, role relations and the occupation of an administrative position (Yukl, 1994). Solomon Islands leadership literature pays attention to several leadership models, including the Big Man (Rowland, 2016) or Big Woman, (Pollard, 2006); tribal Chief; and *Lida*, relevant in civil society and formal sector organisations. Positional

school leadership in Solomon Islands takes place in local Solomon Island settings, but is generally understood by reference to leadership models from other domains (Ruqebatu, 2008). To be successful, however, school leadership must resonate with locally framed ethics.

Leadership programs have been developed that have influenced the quality of education in Solomon Islands (Sanga, Maebuta et al., 2020; Sanga, Reynolds et al., 2020). However, little general attention has been given to the potential to produce positive change of local relational leadership as practiced by leaders with institutional positions in the educational work force. Equally, little work has examined how school leaders adopt ethical stances to support current generations of children to experience enhanced access to quality education.

The core of this article is an investigation of a “grass roots” understanding of the relationship between ethical leadership in Solomon Islands and access, equity and quality in education. This focus is not intended to distract attention from wider developments nor absolve policymakers and funders of responsibility for improving educational access or for reviewing equity and quality as essential aspects of education. Instead, we aim to extend the frame of responsibility by reviewing how ethical, leaderful actions can enhance access to equitable and high-quality educational provision.

We point to the ethics of taking action to facilitate access through two vignettes at school level. In our account, the leaders’ actions reflect everyday situations in Solomon Islands education. The argument values “soft” leadership skills and ethical leadership positions in pursuit of access as adjuncts to ministry and provincial level “hard” initiatives and donor-funded projects. Widening the field of responsibility in this way raises the stakes for policymakers to invest in the development of ethical school leaders.

The article begins by offering a sketch of context through a discussion of education that references international and Solomon Islands policy. We then provide a brief review of leadership in Melanesian education. Next, our methodology is presented through the literature of *tok stori*. Following this, we develop two vignettes through *tok stori* to form the data, which we discuss to reveal an extended frame for viewing access to quality education and other significances of ethical leadership. Finally, we present implications of potential value in other contexts.

## **ACCESS, EQUITY AND QUALITY IN EDUCATION**

### **Solomon Island education**

Following independence in 1978, the Solomon Islands government fully administered what had been a colonial education system (Rodie, 2014) with the aim of building a focused, rounded and well-grounded education system to prepare Solomon Islanders to meet the myriad of development challenges and changes that Solomon Islands faced into the future (MEHRD, 2016).

Authority for Solomon Islands education is not wholly centralised. Provincial and church Education Authorities (EAs) and some communities assume partial responsibility (Rodie, 2014). Johannson-Fua et al. (2018) noted that community involvement in the systematic rethinking of educational development is very important. This article takes devolution further by examining the potential for improved access,

equity and quality as a consequence of ethical leadership in response to needs and circumstances at a local level.

An element in the framing of education in Solomon Islands is the UNESCO policy of universal basic education for all as a right (UNESCO, 2002). As part of its response to SDG 4, MEHRD developed the National Education Action Plan (NEAP) for 2016–2030. NEAP emphasised access and, in keeping with SDG 4, a central aim of NEAP is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (MEHRD, 2016, p. 3). This is in a context where the gross enrolment rate at school years 10–13 was 35% in 2016 (MEHRD, 2017).

Research suggests that equitable access and success in education depend on the quality of school leaders as well as on the effective implementation of national education policies and practices (Nthebe et al., 2016). Within NEAP, leadership is a key support for the achievement of SDGs (MEHRD, 2016). However, there is a dearth of literature to describe the relationship between the ethics and actions of leaders and learners’ access to education at the grass-roots level.

### **Leadership in Solomon Islands education**

Effective educational leadership can be measured in diverse ways (Daniëls et al., 2019). Within Solomon Islands education, one way of judging the effectiveness of leadership is the degree to which education policies and practices lead to visible, valued outcomes. In Solomon Islands education, valued outcomes include equal access to school (MEHRD, 2008b; 2016); the provision of quality assessment tasks (Rodie, 2014); evidence of quality teaching and learning resources; success of staff in higher training and qualification (Iromea, 2020; MEHRD, 2015); leaders actively assuring the availability of funds (DFAT, 2017; MEHRD, 2008a); and the higher academic achievement of students (MEHRD, 2012).

MEHRD (2016) holds that access is the backbone of the Solomon Island government’s approach to sustainable education development, and, certainly, the outcomes valued in Solomon Islands are largely irrelevant for children who cannot attend school. Significantly, the vignettes presented below suggest that some aspects of access-based policies remain only partially implemented. Shortcomings imply that the relationships between systemic educational provision and effective educational leadership in Solomon Islands requires further development.

In global literature, there are accounts of the links between leadership and educational quality. Pak (2015) suggested that an effective education system reflects teachers and principals with positive attitudes toward teaching and learning; schools with good character have quality teachers and leaders who develop and equip students with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that promote future learning. McLaughlin (1995) drew attention to schools as learning environments in which the full potential of a student should be recognised by school leaders. In this view, schools are organisations set apart by community leaders to educate younger generations for future eventualities. Consequently, there is a relationship between community sustainability in Solomon Islands, effective school environments and educational leadership.

One element of leadership is creatively managing tensions, such as between long-standing Solomon Island views of school effectiveness as being closely associated with

academic assessments and results (Rodie, 2014) and the multiple aims involved in effectively educating Solomon Islands' citizens (MEHRD, 2016) to become useful to community and social sustainability. For instance, a school may want to develop practical village-useful "industry" but finds opposition from parents who overwhelmingly value examination results as a route to paid employment (F. H. Kwaina, personal communication, July, 2016).

The management of tensions is a complex task that requires effective leaders who have a positive mindset towards students' integral development (Australian Academy of Science, 2011). Creative school leaders are those who can support the realisation of MEHRD's (2016) approach to the holistic development of school students through the enhancement of academic, social, physical and spiritual growth. However, there is little evidence in the literature of creativity as an aspect of leadership training for educators in Solomon Islands.

A second tension faced by Solomon Islands education leaders is the need for pragmatic navigation between aspirational policy and day-to-day actuality. Even though enhanced access is a system aspiration, Rodie (2014) found that students' access to formal education remains constrained by lack of space and low financial resources to build facilities equipped for teaching and learning. In this situation, without alternative drivers of change, patterns of inequity and poor-quality education are likely to persist. Leaders have a choice: to wait for MEHRD, donors or other bodies to enhance access to quality education in their area of influence, or to act themselves within their everyday constraints to improve access. Choices of this nature are ethical as much as practical.

## METHODOLOGY

*Tok stori* is a Melanesian placed-based dialogic understanding of the world (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019). Some researchers point to correspondences between *tok stori* and *talanoa* in certain situations (Sanga et al., 2018; Talanoa & Development Project, 2005), while in other contexts, clear differences may be observed (Sanga et al., 2018). As engagement, *tok stori* involves dialogue through which people share space and talk about their experiences, clarifying ideas without judgement.

Located in a relational ontology, *tok stori* fosters respectful relationships. *Tok stori* involves "reciprocal learning, capitalizing on the experiences of others in similar contexts" (Sanga, Maebuta, et al., 2020, p. 24). Trust is built among those involved because, as a relational activity, *tok stori* creates a safe space for deep conversation (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019). *Tok stori* encourages deep engagement since the process involves storying experiences.

*Tok stori* is not only about chronological or narrative storytelling. It is also about sharing the intimacy of what people know but keeping shared secrets sacred in a way that opens them to intellectual scrutiny. A central idea in developing *tok stori* through digital means is that *tok stori* is more than simple narration; storied data develops through the iterative *tok stori* process, and this can be across video sessions and over time.

Away from authorship, we (John and Martyn) have developed a friendship over time through face-to-face contact in Wellington and Honiara. We are educators with experience in secondary education and interest in the role of leadership in school improvement, particularly in terms of equity. John is from Malaita, Solomon Islands.

He is on a break from school leadership while he completes his PhD in that area. Martyn is an Anglo-Welsh migrant to Aotearoa New Zealand. His school-based leadership career is over; he now provides research, evaluation and professional development support in Aotearoa and across the region. This paper grew through a *tok stori* methodology (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020b) shaped by distance and mediated by technology.

The setting of the stories that form the data in the article is the Solomon Islands, and the experiences are John's, first or second hand. He presented them to Martyn via a video conferencing platform because of the distance between Sydney and Wellington, our respective bases. In addition, the COVID 19 situation curtailed expected opportunities to meet face-to-face. Mindful of the cultural framing that can be applied to video conferencing (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020a), we decided to take a "digital practice turn" (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020a) and continue to push the boundaries of *tok stori*. This is because, for us, *tok stori* is about caring and changing lives. Thus, the main aims of our engagement were to deepen our friendship and to experience the enjoyment of this as well as to explore and continually re-create a new world of understanding through narrative exchange. Authorship is a clear second. Because of our contexts, at times the digital link was in real time and included video, which helped to transform virtual space into *tok stori* relational space (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020a). At others, emails substituted asynchronous storytelling.

We argue that several elements make this methodology *tok stori*. These are more to do with how we understood the process ontologically and less about the form or method of what we did. The whole engagement was built on friendship and mutual respect. Although face-to-face contact originally facilitated the development of a warm relationship, distance and digital mediation did nothing to cool it. In other words, if we claim each other as *wantok*, a common Solomons Pijin term that is a "unifying symbol that reflects the identity of people" (Fito'o, 2019, p. 55) location is of little significance; we tend to use the words, *Hi wantok*, as a form of greeting to frame our engagement in a relational way.

Contextualising *tok stori* through being *wantoks* seeks to signal and then reinforce an open or free space. The *tok stori* space becomes available for us to share and to interact relationally and unconditionally. The qualities of the space are important to us because to carry out in-depth inquiry by storytelling in a peaceful unifying atmosphere, there is a need for balance, unity and safety. Finding a balance in *tok stori* (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019), rendered in English as "oneness" and indicated by "*wantok*" in Solomons Pijin, means we "*tok as wan*", converse as one people, with common interest and a desire to be close, regardless of background. Thus, through *tok stori*, a mutually beneficial partnership developed between Martyn's ignorance-based inquisitiveness and John's experience-based introspection as the narrative data became wedded to explanatory data.

In *tok stori*, information is exchanged in reciprocal ways, and can be modified as a result of interaction (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019; Sanga et al., 2018). Martyn wanted to understand layers beneath the surface of the events described in John's stories. This is attention to the "why" and "how" below the "what". A rhythm developed of a story being told, interrogated, selectively retold and re-interrogated as speaking and listening roles passed back and forth over time in the safe space of friendship (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019). The effect on Martyn was that he was able to glimpse more deeply

into the Solomon Islands context. For John, the result was the vocalisation of what had been submerged understandings. Surfacing these understandings allowed him to investigate, refine and connect incidents and motivations originally separated in time. The end result was a series of vignettes, two of which are presented here.

### **TOK STORI DATA**

In this section we present two vignettes developed through *tok stori*. Each vignette is divided into an initial section that deals with access and ethics, and a subsequent section focused on leadership action. The material, which refers to John's first and second-hand experiences, has been subject to redaction for ethical reasons.

The discussion acknowledges the challenges faced by education systems to achieve aspirational goals and seeks to avoid placing blame for any shortcomings. Instead, by reframing the concept of access beyond centrally controlled "hard" features, we aim to illustrate the importance of ethical leadership at the school level. As a result, we draw attention to the value of deliberate attempts to develop "soft" skills of grassroots ethical educational leadership.

#### **Vignette one: Shift system**

Vignette one depicts the way ethical leadership identifies the potential of existing resources to help meet the aspirational goal of government, parents and students to increase access to education. It begins with a description of the situation in a high school during a recent school year.

Students were overcrowded, with three or four students per desk, whilst some of the students without tables and chairs had to sit on the floor. Others stood for the whole 40-80 minutes period inside the classroom and outside, listening and writing down notes. There was a dilemma to enrol more students to meet the government policy of "access" and there was this question of adequate and quality teaching and learning . . . I see the need for education, and I could see how struggling and desperate parents are in search of education for their children. I felt obliged and responsible to wipe away their visible and invisible tears. There are school policies for selecting transfer students and the government allows one teacher to 35 students in class. I had to bend the rules, not break the rules. I took control of the selection of transfer students. I told all the teaching staff and the principal that we are going to take all the students who want to transfer into our school. It is not their problem. It was our problem to find ways for students to have access to learning because that is their right. They must learn regardless of their background or academic performance. So, I accepted all the students who came to seek for space in my school.

This section illustrates a common tension (Pak, 2015) between the laudable national goal of increased access to education and realities on the ground. The school leaders were aware of the centrally devised policies of enrolment, class sizes and funding formulae while negotiating with realities of resources. However, in the Solomon Islands policy setting, given the level of monitoring by central authorities, actors are able to implement policy creatively and adaptively.

The leader's reading of the situation is in line with the ethical stance promoted by the MEHRD (2011): to act with "integrity, honesty, equality and impartiality" (p. 37). Honesty involves admitting there is an issue to be solved; integrity means accepting that

lack of access is experienced by students but must be owned by those with power to change the situation; equality involves accepting that the right to education is equal, regardless of origin or prior performance; and impartiality means welcoming all who wish to learn. The ethical stance of the leader in the vignette is to take responsibility. This decision is grounded in empathy for students and parents, mindful of the emotions attached to the struggle for education, and cognizant of the potentially life-changing value of education. However, leaderful decisions in Solomon Islands education take place in a context where ethical dilemmas are frequently encountered. These might include the way the *wantok* system, a system of interpersonal connection and obligation (Fito'o, 2019), can affect decisions; nepotism (Nanau, 2011); and bribery (Vasethé, 2020).

The decision to assume responsibility for access meant accepting all students who wanted to enrol through transfer. Consequently, devising a practical way to meet the goal of enhanced access to education became the next step. This action, not unique to this context, is described in the next section of the vignette.

We had two kinds of school programs. The mainstream normally runs from 8 am to 2 pm. The Shift Program runs from 2 pm to 6 pm. I decided to come up with this Shift Program due to the high demand from the public to provide opportunity for their children who really want to continue with secondary education. Teachers were fully informed, and their claims were met according to agreement and expectations. Most of the teachers were our school's teachers and some were outsourced. The program ran well for two years, though there were challenges in terms of lack of central support-finance, and recruitment of full-time staff for shift classes. The Shift Program actually helped a lot of parents who wanted their children to go on to Form 6 or Year 12 to at least get an opportunity to go to tertiary institutions. It assisted a lot of students by offering them second chance into formal education and some ended up in colleges or universities . . . These two programs were successfully completed despite challenges faced. I found this initiative very helpful for Solomon Islands, and it may be for other Pacific Island nations.

This solution is an example of creative leadership ethically managing the tension between aspiration and reality. Creativity can be seen in the way leadership identifies time as a “soft” resource that can be re-thought so that the “hard” matters such as desks and rooms can be shared equitably.

The actions of the leader address the issue of quality education in at least three ways. First, class sizes are reduced by increasing the number of teaching sessions. This has the potential to scaffold more teacher-student interaction. Second, proximity between teacher and students is improved if students are in smaller groups. This allows teachers to have a helpful closer view of how students are learning. Third, keen students are rewarded by inclusion; they are offered an opportunity to belong, regardless of their educational history and length of association with the school.

### **Vignette two: Graduation**

Vignette two depicts another way ethical leadership skilfully identifies time as a “soft” resource that can be reframed to ensure continued access to education in circumstances where a lack of finance might close access. This recollection is of an experience told second hand.

It was in October, when X was a deputy principal. Unexpectedly, there were some parents from [a distant] Province who came to the school and asked to see him. These were the parents of the Year 12 students who were about to attend their graduation before sitting for their final examination. The deputy asked them to tell him about their problem or issue. And they started to tell about their children's school fees. They shared their stories about their [sponsor]. These poor parents had waited for so long . . . Unfortunately, the payment was delayed and so the parents were worried about their children, thinking that the school would send their children home for failing to pay their school fees and that would affect them so much. The worst scenario would be that if students didn't pay their school fees, the school would send students home . . . to put pressure on fee payers to quickly pay their outstanding fees.

After having some discussion, the parents begged the deputy to allow their children to attend their classes and also to take part in the graduation. He thought deeply about the parents' concern and need for their children to continue with education and to attend their graduation. That was a crucial moment for him—to find ways to assist the parents; instead of punishing their children for non-payment of school fees, he thought that he must try to do something to help them.

This section of the vignette provides an illustration of another common tension: the school relies on fees to provide education to students, but these students have not paid theirs. Future difficulties are likely if a precedent is set of educating non-paying students. Complicating factors exist in this vignette in that the families have a distant home base and consequently less immediate access to resources than local families. Promises have been made but broken regarding fees payment, leaving the families in limbo awaiting the action of others.

The ethical stance of the leader is to accept the problem rather than assign it to the family. The deputy leads with integrity towards both learners and institution; he not only knows that the students need access to education but also that the school needs money. Consequently, he knows he must actively find a solution and not turn a blind eye. The creativity of the action taken is revealed in the next section of the vignette.

The deputy told the parents that he would see the principal and he talked to him about the delay in the payment of their children's school fees. The principal advised the deputy to issue letters to students who did not pay their school fees and send them home. In fact, the deputy was not in the mood for sending students home for non-payment of school fees. He was worrying about the concern of the parents and these nine Year 12 students who were in their final year, and they were getting ready for their graduation and final exams.

He told them that he would try his best to help them. He could see from the students that they were not settling down and they were worried about their education. So, he took the names of the students and told them to go back to their classes.

Later, the deputy asked principal if he could allow him to deal with the students and, if possible, allow the students to continue to attend their classes and prepare for their graduation. The principal had some doubts, and he recalled a good number of students who never paid their school fees. However, he allowed his second in command to take the responsibility and told him to go and see the graduation committee chairlady to deal with the group of students.

The chairlady told the deputy that her graduation committee would not allow students who failed to pay their school fees to attend the graduation. A thought

quickly came into the deputy's mind that actually worked out for them on that day. He thought that he should tell the chairlady about an arrangement that he made with the [sponsor] to see him soon to talk about the payment. . . . In fact, he had not made any arrangement yet, but he was creating a positive story for the chairlady to consider the request.

So that was the time the chairlady accepted the request, and the deputy submitted the names of those nine students to her committee for graduation. Finally, the students were graduated. They were presented with graduation folders that contained letters (not real graduation certificates) saying that they would collect their graduation certificate later after completion of school fees. The parents were happy, and they came to say thank you. After the graduation, arrangement was made with the [sponsor] and payment of the students' school fees were finally settled.

This section of the vignette shows that, like the deputy, the principal is aware of the key dilemma—balancing the need for fees against the desire for education. The principal tolerated the actions of the deputy, who had patience with the sponsor. The revised situation, which anecdotal evidence suggests is frequently employed at the tertiary level in Solomon Islands, provides more time in which to create a resolution.

The ethics of embroidering reality for the graduation committee chairwoman are questionable. In the distortion offered by the deputy principal, an imagined plan is described as if achieved so that the ethic of honesty is in question. This points to the contextual complexity of ethics. In any situation there are multiple layers, each with its own attendant ethical reference. Should 100% honesty in the relationship between the leader and the staff member be given priority over access, the focus of the relationship between the leaders, students and parents? Perhaps in balancing the layers of ethics, the leader's actions can be appreciated in reference to the outcome: the “soft” resource of time is expanded to allow the students continued access to education while the immediate dignity of the chairwoman and her committee is respected. Distortion may not be ethical but following the letter of the school's policy would remove access to education and erode equity.

A further aspect of ethics in this vignette is that risk was born by the deputy, not the students and parents involved. One can only speculate what would have happened had the fees not been paid. What is clear is that the uncertainty was eroding the quality of educational experience of the students and that this was defused by the deputy accepting responsibility. Their support of continued access to education had long-term positive consequences.

Last year, 2019, we met one of the students who went further to do his nursing program at the Solomon Island National University. He is now currently working as a nurse at the National Referral Hospital in Honiara. There were others who went further to continue with formal training at the USP centre in Honiara and some of them are now working for the government and private sectors.

Long-term consequences like these illustrate the potential of ethical leadership to take actions that support access to quality education. Ethical leadership involves those with power accepting responsibility to act in support of goals such as SDG 4. Students' subsequent contributions to the nation show the value of leaders' creativity, decision making and actions.

## DISCUSSION

The two vignettes offered above provide “grassroots” scenarios through which to review the concept of access. In the first, student access to education is supported by the creative use of time so that a Shift System enlarges provision. In the second, by disassociating the time of fees payment from the time for ongoing study and graduation, the spirit of SDG 4 was prioritised over the letter of school policy. Put together, the vignettes suggest that improved access to quality education is more than a matter of increasing the numbers of teachers and buildings or providing additional funding. Access can also be a matter of the decisions and actions of ethical leaders responding to everyday situations.

Leadership that embraces the ethics of “integrity, honesty, equality and impartiality” (MEHRD, 2011, p. 37) can support access through creative approaches such as in the vignettes. Given the significance of ethical leadership in schools and its outcomes, a balance between leadership and systemic aspects of education has great potential to support goals such as SDG 4. Consequently, a premium should be placed on training that supports school leaders to employ their lived schema of leadership (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019) in which the tears and petitions of students and parents are powerful motivations towards ethical behaviour and action.

The vignettes also show the educational potential of decision making at a local level and suggest that it is helpful for EFA to be understood beyond the entry point into education to include security of educational continuity. Long-term educational stability of access is implied in NEAP’s intention to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (MEHRD, 2016, p. 3). However, as the vignettes illustrate, there is often a tension between local decision making and top-down policy construction. Localisation of decision making may bring locally experienced benefits at the political cost to central bodies of a shift in power in developing and other countries (Packalen, 2007). Despite the potential advantages of local decision making, tension can be felt by school leaders charged with implementing policy while managing their schools in a relationally rich environment.

Central bodies clearly have a role in decision making at a national level. However, over-retention of decision-making power may be an expression of low confidence in local decision making. One way to encourage central confidence in decentralisation is the provision of training to support school leaders to make appropriate ethical decisions. This kind of training has the potential to support school leaders to appreciate the power of empathy-driven ethical decisions. The vignettes show how such decisions can contribute to access at the local level and thus be significant in the lifelong learning of individuals.

Solomon Islands is not unique in posing ethical dilemmas to the school leader, although different ethical challenges may exist in other contexts. Further ethical issues in Solomon Islands education include the use of funds, undue influence on school practices by individuals such as elected representatives, effects of certain applications of the *wantok* system, and managing staff absenteeism. Thus, deliberate efforts to develop the ethical decision-making capacity of school leaders is of great significance in and beyond Solomon Islands.

The core of this article has been an investigation of leaders’ understandings of the relationship between ethical leadership in Solomon Islands and access, equity and

quality in education. The contribution of this article is to argue the case for valuing the “soft” skills and ethical leadership positions of leadership that are associated with maximising equitable access to quality education as an adjunct to ministry and provincial level “hard” initiatives and donor funded projects as well as to contribute in other ways. Re-contextualising key concepts in educational policy and planning (Sanga, Maebuta, et al., 2020) such as access, equity and quality enable a wide, nuanced and actionable approach to be taken so that value is placed on the creative skills and ethical positions of leaders on the ground—they are the ones who can make a difference.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This article has presented two “grass-roots” vignettes of ethical action by school leaders as the basis for a discussion of how access can be re-viewed so that the significance of soft skills and ethical stances complement the more general focus on “hard” materials such as buildings, finance and staffing. We have linked ethical action to taking responsibility, not so that policy makers and donors are absolved of responsibility, but as a way of recognising and honouring creative everyday practices at the local level. In this way, some of the dots can be joined between high-level educational policy and local level practice, perhaps supporting more coherent discussion across the layers of organisation in Solomon Islands education. The need to connect policy and practice is especially pertinent in situations where aspects of policy are funded on donor aid framed by worldviews and educational frameworks derived from afar. In these circumstances, deep contextualisation is required (Sanga, Maebuta, et al., 2020).

The use of *tok stori* by school leaders to find solutions to local issues is an element of contextualisation with great potential (Sanga, Reynolds, et al., 2020). As this article has illustrated, *tok stori* has potential in Melanesian contexts to reveal facets such as ethical action, creativity and significant tensions in the everyday lives of school leaders. It has been used in leadership development programmes (Sanga, Reynolds, et al., 2020). John has experience of its educative power at the staff-room level, where local responses have been developed to school security by involving senior students and staff in decision making. Continuing education during Covid 19 school shutdowns is another context where *tok stori* among local stakeholders might provide bespoke solutions in the face of centrally made decisions.

Issues can be created where contextualisation is lacking. An example is the conflict between central school enrolment policies that dictate ratios of students to classrooms and numbers of students on the ground whose parents are seeking enrolment. In this case, pressure from the parents and community encourages school leaders to enrol their children, a situation affected by the strong cultural relationships people have in the Solomon Islands. In local settings, what matters more than set ratios is responding to the needs of the parents and the community as indicated by their tears and petitions.

Some of the thinking and practice described in this article has value beyond the immediate context of Solomon Islands. As an example, during a recent educational engagement with Marshall Islands school leaders, Martyn heard of an arrangement similar to the Shift System described in Vignette One as a school leader’s response to over-crowding. What is significant is that this outcome did not arise because of pressure from centralised administration but was the result of ethically focused leadership. Taking a wide approach to what access means and adopting creative actions to enhance

the educational experiences students involves both creative skills and an ethical stance to steer creativity. Taking steps to deliberately develop ethical school leaders has potential to provide another arrow in the bow of educational administrators as they seek to fulfil the aspirations of SDG 4 and to provide support for school leaders in navigating ethics in their everyday leadership.

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*Access, ethical leadership and action in Solomon Islands education: A tok stori*

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