

Teaching in difficult times: Solomon Island teachers' narratives of perseverance

By Greg Burnett & Jeremy Dorovolomo¹

Abstract

This article reports on a preliminary study of five teachers who taught through the years of ethnic conflict between 1998 and 2003 on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. It is grounded in a belief in local experienced teachers' intimate understanding of their own teaching contexts and their ability to persevere in difficult circumstances. The teachers' voices, like those of teachers elsewhere in the Pacific region, are barely audible amid a cacophony of educational discourses² authored by a variety of groups both within and outside the Pacific community that tend to disavow teachers' lived experiences and understandings. The articulation of these voices in this article, firstly, affirms the professionalism of Solomon Island teachers and, secondly, opens up understanding of conflict as it relates to teaching and learning in the Pacific region. It is hoped that this study will also contribute to a more informed understanding of how conflict related trauma impacts on wider processes of schooling, the post conflict re-building of schooling in the Solomon Islands and elsewhere in the Pacific region where contemporary life is also marked by conflict.

Key words

Solomon Islands, Pacific, teachers, conflict, schooling, discourse

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² Smyth, J. (2001) *Critical Politics of Teachers' Work: An Australian Perspective*. New York: Peter Lang.

Background

Tensions in the Solomon Islands between Guadalcanalese and Malaitan militants began on Guadalcanal, the main island, in 1998 and continued until 2003 with the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands (RAMSI) peace keeping initiative. This initiative has been effective in restoring law and order and ensuring personal security for everyday people in the Solomon Islands. However, unrest over election results in 2006 indicates tenuous peace only with indications that RAMSI will need to remain for up to a decade³. The ongoing presence of this mainly Australian led mission treads a very contested line between responsible development assistance implied in the mission's name *Helpem Fren* (helping friend), Australian self-interest in stabilising what is perceived as the Pacific "arc of instability"^{4,5} and maintaining Solomon Island sovereignty over its own affairs⁶. Debates, therefore, continue domestically and across the region about the viability of the mission, its aims, scope, strategies, and length of commitment.

The years of conflict prior to RAMSI impacted socially and economically across the country, but particularly Guadalcanal. Accounts of the conflict have begun to emerge focusing on the complex and contested historical, cultural and economic aspects of the

³ Commonwealth of Australia n.d. *Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Retrieved October 18 2006 from http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon_islands/helpemfren/working_together_brighter_future1.html

⁴ An Australian government term in the 1960s for Indonesia and Timor but recently extended to include Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, countries with varying degrees of political and economic instability that are *perceived* by the Australian government as potential conduits of terrorism.

⁵ Dobell, G. (2006) The Pacific 'arc of instability', *Correspondent's Report: ABC Radio National*, August 20th. Retrieved October 18 2006 from <http://www.abc.net.au/correspondents/content/2006/s1719019.htm>

⁶ Dillon, M. (2006) Over the horizon: long term implications of Australia's engagement in the 'arc of instability', *New Matilda: A Different Tune*. Retrieved October 16 2006 from <http://www.newmatilda.com/policytoolkit/policydetail.asp?PolicyID=519>

relationship between the people of Guadalcanal and nearby Malaita⁷. This study chooses not to focus on the politics of that conflict, instead concentrating on schooling and the conflict, and in particular teachers' work. There is great risk associated with capturing the voices of teachers who have been intimately involved in communities in conflict and will continue to be intimately involved, as only teachers can be, in communities that continue to experience tension in the re-building process. We have sought to do this by recording teachers' narrative accounts^{8,9} of what happened in their communities, schools and classrooms and how teachers responded in what were difficult times to teach.

Teachers' voices

The focus on teachers' voices is significant given the "cacophony of educational discourses"¹⁰ in the Pacific that leave teachers silent about themselves and their work. In Pacific education debates *culturalist* discourse^{11,12} is particularly dominant¹³, as are a number of others, including discourses of *moralism*, *economic rationalism*,

⁷ see Moore, C. (2004) *Happy Isles In Crisis: The Historical Causes for a Failing State in Solomon Islands 1998-2004*. Canberra: Asia Pacific Press.

⁸ Søreide, G.E. (2006) Narrative construction of teacher identity: positioning and negotiation, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 12(5), pp. 527-547.

⁹ Watson, C. (2006) Narratives of practice and the construction of identity in teaching, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 12(5), pp. 509-526.

¹⁰ Smyth, J. (2001) *Critical Politics of Teachers' Work: An Australian Perspective*. New York: Peter Lang.

¹¹ Stolcke, V. (1995) Talking culture: new boundaries, new rhetorics of exclusion in Europe, *Current Anthropology*, 36(1), pp. 1-24.

¹² McConaghy, C. (2000) *Rethinking Indigenous Education: Culturalism, Colonialism and the Politics of Knowing*. Flaxton: Post Pressed.

¹³ Burnett, G. (2006) "Culture isn't what it used to be": problematising pedagogies of cultural difference in Pacific education, in Nandan, K. & Prasad, M. (eds) *Dreadlocks Interrupted*, pp.112-128. Suva: Department of Literature and Language, University of the South Pacific.

*educational quality and technicism*¹⁴. These dominant discourses re-present teachers and teachers' work in narrow ways and thus exclude alternative discourses, particularly those authored by teachers themselves. Further critical analysis, beyond the scope of this study, is needed to determine the asymmetrical power relations in Pacific education between Ministries of Education, employers, regional institutions and media to name but a few *and* teachers. However, all tend to dis-avow teacher authority and by degrees teachers' professional status in the region, leaving teachers as Gayatri Spivak's¹⁵ "subalterns", unable to speak.

In affirming Solomon Island teachers' authority and understandings we draw upon the theoretical underpinnings of 'situated/situating pedagogies'¹⁶, where experienced 'local' teachers have unique understandings of what is pedagogically appropriate and successful. These understandings are based on teachers own careful readings of their school's community contexts. We add, by way of support, that the efficacy of teachers and their understandings are also pivotal in the literature on teacher reflective

¹⁴ Burnett, G. & Lingam, G. (2007) Reflective teachers and teacher educators in the Pacific region: Conversations with us not about us, *International Review of Education*, Vol. 53. No. 3. pp. 303-321.

¹⁵ Spivak, G. (1988) Can the subaltern speak?, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds, Nelson, C. & Grossberg, L., pp.271-313. Illinois: Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.

¹⁶McConaghy, C. (2002) Situated Pedagogies: researching quality teaching and learning for rural New South Wales schools, a discussion paper prepared for the ARC Linkage 2002-2004 Productive Partnerships for Teaching Quality: Quality Improvement, School-community Practice and Teacher Education in and for Rural and Remote Settings.

practice^{17,18} and in the transformation of professional practice through action research^{19,20,21}.

Teachers' voices also need to be heard for reasons other than providing professional affirmation. Post-conflict rebuilding in education is particularly marked by New Zealand aid in the form of expertise, material resources and funding^{22,23,24}. Pacific educational aid, particularly from Australia and New Zealand, is often criticised for fulfilling donor agendas and failing to heed local concerns^{25,26}. Therefore as post-conflict futures in the Solomon Islands are being worked out it is imperative that the voices of local teachers who know schooling best be heard.

The researchers' gaze and difference

The desire to convey teachers' voices about their professional selves calls for sensitivity lest this study sublimates the very voices it wishes to make audible. Several points need to be made here. Firstly, the study is motivated by desires of *advocacy* on

¹⁷ Johnson, G. & Stevens, E. (2002) Moving from the personal to the political in teachers' reflective practice, *Queensland Journal of Educational Research*, 18(1), pp. 7-22.

¹⁸ Maloney, C. & Campbell-Evans, G. (2002) Using interactive journal writing as a strategy for professional growth, *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 30(1), pp. 39-50.

¹⁹ McNiff, J., Lomax, P. & Whitehead, J. (2000) *You and Your Action Research Project*. London: Hyde Publications.

²⁰ Hopkins, D. (2002) *A Teachers' Guide to Classroom Research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

²¹ Mills, G. (2000) *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher*. Columbus: Merrill.

²² NZAID (2004) *Solomon Islands Factsheet: New Zealand's Aid in Solomon Islands*, New Zealand's International Aid & Development Agency, October.

²³ Hobbs, M. (2003) *\$11 million boost to education in Solomon Islands*. Retrieved August 18, 2006 from <http://www.beehive.govt.nz/ViewDocument.aspx?DocumentID=18149>

²⁴ UNICEF (n.d.) *Solomon Islands Child Friendly Schools*. Retrieved August 18 2006 from <http://www.unicef.org.nz/projects/solomonis.html>

²⁵ Sanga, K. & Taufe'ulungaki, A. (2005) *International Aid Impacts on Pacific Education*. Wellington: He Parekereke, Institute for Research and Development in Maori and Pacific Education, Victoria University, & Suva, Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific.

²⁶ Sanga, K., Chu, C., Hall, C. & Crowl, L. (2005) *Re-thinking Aid Relationships in Pacific Education*. Wellington: He Parekereke, Institute for Research and Development in Maori and Pacific Education, Victoria University, & Suva, Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific.

the part of the researchers. We re-assert statements that teachers' voices about their work need to be heard in *all* the current debates concerning educational futures in the region. The study is underpinned by strong beliefs in Pacific teachers' intimate and expert knowledge of their teaching and learning contexts. Secondly, the collecting of teacher narrative as research methodology would seem the most appropriate means of giving voice to teachers on issues of conflict and schooling. Narrative, in this case, simply means "stories of personal experience, utilising a range of formats, dimensions and possibilities"²⁷. Thirdly, as two researchers, an Australian²⁸ removed from the conflict and a Solomon Islander²⁹ now in Fiji, we recognise the problematic nature of our authority to speak on behalf of others. However, we cautiously position ourselves with other researchers in similar fields. We see parallels between ourselves and researchers, counselors and teachers working with refugee children^{30,31,32}. We also see parallels with studies of trauma upon children and their families in conflicts elsewhere including Israel³³, Sierra Leone³⁴ and Northern Iraq³⁵. Both our study and these involve

²⁷ Watson, C. (2006) Narratives of practice and the construction of identity in teaching, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 12(5), pp. 509-526.

²⁸ In addition to Australia's RAMSI leadership discussed earlier there are ongoing tensions between the Australian and Solomon governments over a number of other issues (see Berry, 2006). These sorts of tensions contribute to a reductive identity politics in Pacific educational research that strongly links identity to place, thus, making Greg's position as researcher problematic.

²⁹ Jeremy lived and worked as a teacher trainer in Honiara from 2000 to 2003. He and his family were victims in the conflict prior to relocation to Fiji.

³⁰ Hamilton, R. & Moore, D.(eds) (2004) *Educational Interventions for Refugee Children: Theoretical Perspectives and Implementing Best Practice*. New York: Routledge.

³¹ Schlosstein, C. (2003) Refugee children: casualties of world conflict, presentation at Our Children the Future Conference, Adelaide Convention Centre, 1- 4 May 2003

³² Sims, M., Hayden, J., Palmer, G. & Hutchins, T. (2000) Working in early childhood settings with children who have experienced refugee or war-related trauma, 25(4).

³³ Laor, N., Wolmer, L., Mayes, L. Gershon, A., Weizman, R. & Cohen, D. (1997) Israeli preschool children under scuds: A 30-month follow-up, *Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychology*, 36(3), pp. 349-356.

³⁴ Bretherton, D., Weston, J. & Zbar, V. (2002) Peace education curriculum development in post-conflict contexts: Sierra Leone, paper presented at 16th Australian International Education Conference, Hobart, Sept.30th-Oct 4th.

viewing conflict and its effects through a multi-faceted prism of cultural, economic and social difference.

Articulating the experience

Five teachers (Mere, Tarome, Anna, Aata and Taniela³⁶), all from different provinces and working in different locations during the conflict were interviewed while completing professional upgrading at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji, most just 12 months after the RAMSI intervention began. These teachers, by warrant of their further training, are recognised by the Solomon Islands government as possessing expertise and commitment to their teaching. The researchers can testify to this in the diligence and critical reflection upon their practice observed while studying at USP. The five teachers saw their university study as an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of teaching in the conflict and on the roles they played and saw our desires to collate their narratives as an opportunity for further reflection. A formal interview schedule formed the basis of each interview, although was not always adhered to as individual teachers had unique experiences to relate. All teachers were given the opportunity to review and revise the transcripts that were made of each interview.

Just as we as researchers have had challenges in eliciting teachers' narratives of conflict, so too did the teachers face challenges in articulating what they experienced.

³⁵ Punamäki, R., Muhammed, A. & Abdulrahman, H. (2004) Impact of traumatic events on coping strategies and their effectiveness among Kurdish children, *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 28(1), pp. 59–70.

³⁶ Names are pseudonyms.

Some of these challenges resulted from expressing the violence in a language other than their first language, for some in English as a third language. However, perhaps more significantly the teachers' narratives have emerged as a result of teachers also looking at events through a multiple prism of gendered, classed and ethnic difference. Some of the teachers were female, caught in what was essentially a male dominated and enacted conflict. Similarly, in the early stages of the conflict all teachers were, in a socio-economic sense, relatively socially mobile, caught in a conflict enacted in part by unemployed and dispossessed youth³⁷. Again, most of the teachers were non-Malaitan/non-Guadalcanal caught in a conflict dominated and enacted by people of those two ethnicities. In each case the narratives have to be read against multiple degrees of difference that filters how the conflict is experienced and articulated.

Accordingly, as Watson³⁸ suggests, based on her work with teachers' narratives and identities, narratives can not necessarily be 'mined' for the truth or reality of what happened but instead say more about how teachers construct their own identities. Our study concedes to this in affirming Solomon Island teacher professionalism among other identity positions such as caring, committed, fearful and politicised, to name but a few. However, we would argue that teachers' closeness to, and expert knowledges of, their teaching contexts is justification enough for their narratives of teaching through conflict to be heard *alongside* the multiple discourses concerning teachers and their work articulated by non-teaching others in the Pacific region. For reasons of

³⁷ Moore, C. (2004) *Happy Isles In Crisis: The Historical Causes for a Failing State in Solomon Islands 1998-2004*. Canberra: Asia Pacific Press.

³⁸ Watson, C. (2006) Narratives of practice and the construction of identity in teaching, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 12(5), pp. 509-526.

convenience only, the teachers' narratives are summarised according to: what teachers experienced; how they mediated the conflict; the observed impacts on children; and school organisation; and post-conflict futures.

Experiencing conflict

Taniela's opinion was that the Solomons conflict was not on the same scale as conflicts reported elsewhere and thought himself not alone by citing government's relative inaction to intervene in schooling:

Our government knew if they had to close down all schools then that means we had gone to a stage where the country was in a state of anarchy. My feeling that time was that we hadn't reached that stage like Somalia, Liberia or Rwanda in Africa.

It is difficult to place the Solomons conflict within the larger global picture where Schlosstein³⁹ states from 1990 to 2000 ten million children have been traumatised, two million died, six million disabled, five million placed in refugee camps and 12 million lost homes as a result of war. In the period 1998-2003 the conflict was intermittent, varying in intensity by location. It was certainly possible to be surrounded by tensions but regard them, on a global scale of turmoil, as low level. In some parts of Honiara schools continued to function normally. In other parts of the city there were occasional early finishes or temporary closures depending on outbreaks of violence. However, beyond the capital in the surrounding rural areas the conflict was more dramatic. Here the physical and emotional violence of the conflict was experienced in overt ways.

³⁹ Schlosstein, C. (2003) Refugee children: casualties of world conflict, presentation at Our Children the Future Conference, Adelaide Convention Centre, 1- 4 May 2003

Schools closed more frequently, for longer periods and in some cases closed altogether. Away from these areas it was perhaps the length of the conflict rather than the intensity that affected most people. There was a continual uncertainty about what would happen next and how long it would last that produced the fear that all teachers mentioned.

Mere, who was teaching in a rural community in the lead up to the conflict, described how she and her family moved three times because of the violence and each time closer to the relative security of Honiara. In the first two instances the move was prompted by a direct confrontation with militants who approached the school compound. Mere's own reflections were:

I just remember the principal called us one day and said, "I think the fight is getting worse so I just want you to be calm. Don't panic. If anything happens, please be a good example to the children and to the parents".

The school eventually closed and in turn became a safe haven for the displaced after the conflict had moved on. Mere's second move was a result of a direct threat from a machete wielding militant telling everyone with affiliations to islands outside of the conflict to leave immediately. Again Mere reluctantly bowed to pressure and left, this time to Honiara:

He had a bush knife and said, "Nobody's going to stay here. If you're from a different island, you are not going to stay here. Anybody staying back, I will cut him or her with this knife". I can remember that man until now. That's the only thing that made us climb the truck and evacuate to town. I didn't want to go. I just wanted to teach.

Elsewhere on Guadalcanal schools closed when children stopped coming as a result of militant activity in the area. Teachers also had difficulty traveling safely between home and school. Sometimes schools made independent decisions whether to continue, at other times central government issued directives.

At one school in Honiara there was a permanent presence adjacent to the school compound of armed militants, allegedly there for the school's protection. However, Tarome believed these people were using the school as a pretext for their own purposes in the conflict:

Those men from _____ were just sitting around the fence near the gate. They were sitting there because they said they were guarding the place, providing security. But not for the school, it was for their own benefit. They had guns, they had knives. They were there everyday.

Similarly Taniela, teaching in a rural school reported how militants used his school as a blockade for monitoring movement through the area. Schools are often used as community focal points in times of normalcy but because of their centrality become similarly useful in times of conflict:

Militants came inside the school, set up their blockades at the school, so the flow of the school programme was disturbed. The moment they came inside the school, students and staff start to fear.

In outer islands schools the conflict brought only indirect effects. The most significant were the students and their families arriving from Guadalcanal seeking safety on home

islands. In such cases students told others of their experiences. Teachers all over the country experienced long periods without salary payments and as a result had cause to come into Honiara to try and obtain wages. This travel presented itself with bureaucratic frustrations that compounded security risks:

There is no bank at _____ so we have to come to Honiara. Then coming to Honiara is another problem. Lack of transport, no flights, and coming into Honiara itself is not safe. If you come to Honiara and by the time you reach Honiara, still the salary hasn't come in. That's another problem again. So you're wasting all your effort to come over there and nothing happens.

Mere felt it was the female teachers that found personal security harder to maintain, particularly outside of school and while traveling alone. Public transport and taxis became increasingly dangerous to use. If little was experienced directly at school then certainly many teachers and their students had experiences of conflict outside school. These invariably were of gun fights and knife wielding militants. Anna experienced one such episode with her son while going about normal evening routines:

One afternoon I went to Chinatown and saw it with my own eyes. I was there with my own child and there was a group who came and tried to get into a store and there was a man with a gun. He threatened every one of us and I held onto my son and we ran.

The teachers interviewed had a variety of experiences with the conflict, some directly and at school, others indirectly or within their communities. In any case the teachers were also victims of the conflict in that they were exposed to danger or at the very least uncertainty. At the same time however, they sought to continue teaching to bring about a sense of normality for the children in their care.

Mediating conflict

Many teachers continued teaching but under fear for personal safety and the safety of their families. The level of fear varied depending on the situation teachers found themselves in, that is, where they were teaching and whether they were of a particular ethnicity. In school many felt the need to remain neutral. Tarome, from Malaita, found this difficult:

There were Malaitans nearby, so if I say bad things about them they will do something to me or my family. So even though I want to support the other group I really do not do that. I had to remain neutral. We do not want to be in trouble. Even though they say things about the Guadalcanal people we just be quiet.

All teachers described how they sought to re-assure frightened children or at least tried to maintain a semblance of normality. Mere, for example, said she:

Really pretended to the children that everything was OK. But, you know, the children kept telling me, "Teacher, I'm scared". They were telling me all sorts of things and I said, "No, nothing will happen to us". I just tried my best to tell them all the good things.

Tarome helped children by making deliberate pedagogical choices and changing the way she taught:

Even though we were going through the conflict I tried to do things that would attract students ... interesting things. Because if you just stand in front of the blackboard and talk they can't listen, they can't concentrate so I have to get them doing things [playing educational games] to stop them looking outside.

Taniela who taught in a secondary school helped the older students in ways more appropriate to their age:

I associated with the students a lot. By associating with the students, they feel someone is concerned for them. What I normally do is to see the students in the evening, sit down, tell stories, talk with them so they feel that someone is there. So I sometimes make it an excuse to go around with them. Instead of going straight and disturbing them I make an excuse of “any bilnut (betel nut)?”

Teachers were sometimes forbidden by principals to talk directly to children about the conflict. However, there was at least one instance where a “Peace Group” was allowed into a school to speak. Prior to their arrival teachers had noticed an increase in toy guns brought to school. The Peace Group, utilising an early RAMSI strategy for the disposal of illegal arms, destroyed the toys in front of the children:

They came to the school to talk about guns because at that time the kids put toy guns in their bags, then they came to school and started to do this (she points), pointing the guns at the other students...so the Peace Council officers came into the school to destroy the toy guns and tell the kids that guns are not good. They put them in a pile and they smashed them with timber. One boy ran crying because his dad spent more than \$30 for that gun...they looked like real guns.

In taking on a mediating role teachers were placing what Laor *et al*⁴⁰ calls a “protective matrix” around the children. It is this shield of care which provides the buffer between the child and the conflict and minimises the onset of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Aata saw this role for himself clearly and could easily imagine the impact on the children if he did not play that role:

It was the responsibility placed upon us to take care of the kids that kept us going. If we had shown signs of despair and hopelessness then what message would we give our students? We had to be strong so our students could have something to hope for.

The protective matrix afforded to children in the conflict in many cases was limited where parents had been traumatised or incapacitated. The fear expressed by children was sometimes a fear for their parents' safety. Mere noticed this in some children:

One little girl in my class, she's a very clever girl but she lived really far. She has to walk to school and then I see her school work, its not to the standard where she used be. You know, active. She's always sleepy. Just because the parents are awake, afraid.

Mere and her principal were willing to keep going for the sake of the children. She invited the parents of the children in and told them she would continue teaching and ensure the children's safety. Parents appreciated this and would occasionally send in money to support her after the salary stopped being paid.

⁴⁰ Laor, N., Wolmer, L., Mayes, L. Gershon, A., Weizman, R. & Cohen, D. (1997) Israeli preschool children under scuds: A 30-month follow-up, *Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychology*, 36(3), pp. 349-356.

But I didn't think to stop. Maybe I thought that if there's a gun pointing at my head, and the bullet goes in then I'll stop. But I just want to go on and teach.

Similarly Anna bracketed her own sense of security and developed a way of blocking out fear for the children's sake:

Just keep out of trouble. I don't get myself immersed in what I hear. I just keep focused on what I'm supposed to teach. One of the things that kept me going was I have this love for teaching. I love to be with children. I feel sorry for their future. I always commit myself. Every day I go to school. I want to make my students come to school because... they are affected, parents might be involved as rebels or MEF (Malaita Eagle Force), so if they come to school I feel that I'm someone that they find comfort in. That's how I see it.

Of course continuing in the midst of conflict and attempting to remain neutral was challenging. Teachers described anxiety over unavoidably stirring up trouble within the community if they became involved. It was this concern about something unmanageable arising that kept many neutral. This was an impossible path and inevitably conflict emerged over the school or a teacher taking a side in the conflict.

The following exchange between Taniela and the interviewer illustrates this:

Taniela: There is one case in _____ school. Those students were inside the student's dormitory. We tried to discipline them, we were actually sending them out of the school but the reaction was different. There was a threat coming back to the school from those parents of the students. You'd like to discipline them inside the classroom, the students would always take advantage of the situation.

Interviewer: So the school received a threat? They even came into the school demanding compensation. Asking the school to pay \$5,000. Did the school body ever give them the \$5000?

Taniela: In order to save someone's life we're under the barrel of the gun.

Interviewer: Yes.

Taniela: Even the Principal and the whole community fear but later they came to some understanding so there was a rational decision taken by the administration. Instead of expelling the students, they had to make a transfer from _____ to other schools.

On occasions teachers had to solve tensions between children while attempting to bracket their own beliefs about the conflict. There were times when the teachers' own sense of social justice was challenged by the children thus making it impossible to remain apolitical:

This tension made these children from _____ proud. I don't know why. They don't see what they are doing is bad. So I was telling them. I wanted to see their reaction and they went "Ha". They shouted and I turned around and said, "Why are you happy? Aren't you ashamed that you people have overpopulated our islands? That's how the tension came about". Well, it was not good for me to act that way, but when I saw them reacting that way I felt very bad.

Each of the teachers interviewed continued teaching despite the conflict and made great sacrifices to do so, including their own personal safety. All spoke of a desire

to be there for the children and to mediate the effects of the conflict in the absence of any precedent to guide them.

Conflict and children

The literature examining conflict related trauma experienced by children discusses post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or its variants and the care needed in diagnosis.

Schollstein⁴¹ lists: irritability and crying; disrupted sleep and appetite loss; development regression; failure to reach developmental milestones; exaggerated startle response; anxious reactions to unfamiliar situations and people; and emotional withdrawal as characteristics of young children suffering PTSD. Additionally, the younger the child the greater the chances of developing PTSD later in life, up to three times more likely in children under eleven years of age⁴². With or without PTSD children who have experienced conflict related trauma are more likely to have poorer school performance, decreased reading ability, lower grade point average and more school absence⁴³.

Certainly the teachers we spoke to described children in ways that could potentially warrant a PTSD diagnosis. At the very least the conflict was a direct cause of behaviour change while at school. Behaviour change needs to be seen as both a symptom of trauma experience as well as a coping mechanism for dealing with trauma.

⁴¹ Schlosstein, C. (2003) Refugee children: casualties of world conflict, presentation at Our Children the Future Conference, Adelaide Convention Centre, 1- 4 May 2003

⁴² Schlosstein, C. (2003) Refugee children: casualties of world conflict, presentation at Our Children the Future Conference, Adelaide Convention Centre, 1- 4 May 2003

⁴³ Stein, B., Jaycox, L., Katoaka, S., Wong, M., Tu, W., Elliot, M. & Fink, A. (2003) A mental health intervention for schoolchildren exposed to violence: a randomised controlled trial, *JAMA*, 290(5), pp. 603ff.

Sims *et al*⁴⁴ list a number of behaviours, albeit inappropriate, that children demonstrate as coping behaviours. These include: unusually withdrawn behaviour; chronic fear; fear of benign items and people; unnatural clinginess and over dependent behaviour; aggression and alteration to moods.

Several of the teachers noticed an incessant almost obsessive talking⁴⁵ about the conflict. They also drew and wrote about the conflict whenever they were given the freedom. Mere expressed it thus:

All the conversation. Everybody was talking. The children, if one or two of them were together, they are talking about the militants. They are talking about the fight. They say, "Teacher, you know what?". They come in and they say all sorts of "You know that man. Yeah, the one shot, yeah, they shot somebody like this, last night". I said, "No we are not talking about those people." It's really disturbing everything they say, they want to talk about the conflict. I think some of them, especially the Guadalcanal students, are really, I don't know, they are scared.

In addition there was an observable fear in children, sometimes a fear for themselves or at other times a fear for their parents. The fear for their parents' safety, for example, over a father who had to leave the safety of the house each day and travel to a

⁴⁴ Sims, M., Hayden, J., Palmer, G. & Hutchins, T. (2000) Working in early childhood settings with children who have experienced refugee or war-related trauma, 25(4).

⁴⁵ Frater-Matheison, K. (2004) Refugee trauma, loss and grief: Implications for intervention, in Hamilton, R. & Moore, D.(eds) 2004 *Educational Interventions for Refugee Children: Theoretical Perspectives and Implementing Best Practice*, pp.12-34. New York: Routledge.

plantation area for work is indicative of a rather tenuous 'protective matrix'⁴⁶ around that child:

I think you can just see it in their eyes. They are always, they had sad eyes and they, you know, come and they said, "You know last night, we were scared, you know there, there was a fight, something, some shoot-out somewhere." There were gunshots every night, you know. They were telling other kids that "You know last night I heard this and that." Morning talk, they say all sorts of things that happened in the night. I heard from them how they talk, they said they are sorry for their Daddy, he has to go and work in the garden.

Tarome also commented on the fear she observed. It was not overtly expressed but instead visible in children's changed behaviours. She "never saw them crying or things like that but they looked scared like something was bothering them". She also noticed a particular change in behaviour of children she otherwise termed as quiet ones: "during the conflict they were the ones that used to move around the class and were wild. They can not concentrate, they do one or two questions and they roam around the classroom". At the very least the conflict annoyed children as it meant that they could not come to school where interesting things happened. Mere described how bored the children were at home when they could not travel or when school closed.

Teachers also reported children playing out the adult conflict in school thus demonstrating an awareness of what was happening around them and an understanding of the politics of the conflict. In many cases the Guadalcanal children stopped coming

⁴⁶ Laor, N., Wolmer, L., Mayes, L. Gershon, A., Weizman, R. & Cohen, D. (1997) Israeli preschool children under scuds: A 30-month follow-up, *Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychology*, 36(3), pp. 349-356.

because of on-going threats both in and out of school. However, it was possible for either group of children to target the other. Mere described how children would express tiredness in the conflict and also her own fatigue in offering comfort to children:

The _____ children would come to me and share their thoughts and what they think about why the fight started. They said to me, "You know, teacher, we are not bad people. We don't want to fight. But you know it's getting harder for us. These people are not respecting us, and I think, you know, they do the same things to all of us. They don't respect us, I think we are all, I mean, affected by their attitude." I can't say anything, I don't take sides. I'm a victim too.

Aata described how many of the older students seemed de-motivated to attend school and try hard. This "joylessness"⁴⁷ is also a common symptom of traumatised children.

Aata noted:

Some students saying what's the point of going to school when we have this problem in the country. To a greater extent the crisis de-motivates students' learning, both inside and outside of the classroom. Some students in my class who have been really good in their academic performance prior to the crisis have performed really badly.

As well as fear and anxiety the children were also seen as aggressive. The aggression was directed at other children and at teachers whether the teacher was from one of the warring ethnicities or not. Teaching became extremely difficult:

The _____ kids were so aggressive, they sometimes bully others in the class. For example, one which I saw. A child from my place, these other

⁴⁷ Frater-Matheison, K. (2004) Refugee trauma, loss and grief: Implications for intervention, in Hamilton, R. & Moore, D.(eds) 2004 *Educational Interventions for Refugee Children: Theoretical Perspectives and Implementing Best Practice*, pp.12-34. New York: Routledge.

students came and said “Hey, you’re also supporting the _____ people” and was pointing a pencil at his forehead.

They find it hard to control them in class. Sometimes when they are teaching, I don’t want to mention them again, they just stand up and walk around or if they want to say something, they just say it out not in a more mannered way, say, ‘excuse me’. They go out or come into the classroom anytime. There is no respect. This is what I hear from other teachers, the secondary teachers especially.

Taniela who taught in a secondary school related some of the behaviour change he saw in the older children:

Even if there is a small argument they always reply “mifala militant too ia iu no save mi fala militant?” (We are militants too, don't you know we are militants?) So this kind of phrase they continue to say it again, yeah, some students especially those from Guadalcanal, where they actually face the militants when these people came and destroy. There is one girl, she was dreaming and she screamed in the night thinking the militants are coming into their house. These kinds of things they happen.

The teachers interviewed, like teachers anywhere, are afforded insights into children’s behaviour like few others. It is clear that the conflict has had a negative effect on many children. Behaviours described could be explained in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder, although further specialist assessment of individuals would need to be made.

Conflict and School Organisation

Schools invariably became dysfunctional during the conflict, something that Bretherton *et al*⁴⁸ notes is typical in conflict. In terms of teaching, the curriculum was prioritised, exam classes were given priority and some classes were sent home after Maths and English. There was no pattern to the disruption as it was contingent upon the ebb and flow of the conflict itself. Teachers' salary was not paid for months and when it was it became increasingly difficult to meet increasing costs of living. At least one teacher attributed lack of salary to theft by militants:

After sometime the militants took all the money. There was no money to pay the teachers, and the currency was going down. I think the school closed for seven or eight weeks. No, I was not paid. Maybe after six months.

Despite this the Ministry of Education issued little formal guidance to schools. Decision making in response to conflict was made at the school level thus making individual school leadership critical. There were those school leaders who insisted on continuing, instructing staff to teach but not mention anything about the conflict:

Our head teacher told us not to mention the tension to the kids. So...teach them what we are supposed to teach but nothing about the tension.

In many cases teachers observed a general drop in morale amongst colleagues. Many knew of schools where teachers, battling with anxiety and without salary, stopped coming to work, particularly Guadalcanal teachers. Mere knew of one pregnant colleague from Guadalcanal whose family insisted she stay away from work for her

⁴⁸ Bretherton, D., Weston, J. & Zbar, V. (2002) Peace education curriculum development in post-conflict contexts: Sierra Leone, paper presented at 16th Australian International Education Conference, Hobart, Sept.30th-Oct 4th.

own safety. Another teacher, however, noted it was Malaitan teachers who were fearful, with many desiring to leave for their home island. Some were aware that they were not as committed to their teaching as they once were. Tarome put it thus:

I was not feeling good at that time. I had fear in myself and that really hinders me in my teaching. I just stand in the classroom with fear. But I have to be there because I am dealing with human beings. My teaching friends sometimes don't want to come to school. They will stay at home and then its coming up to 9 am and they will then make their way to school. They come late.

When staff did attend their conversations were dominated by news of the conflict:

People came late. Everybody was talking. The main thing they want to talk about is the fighting and then the next thing is going to the classroom.

The result for the children was a drop in morale and a questioning of the purpose of schooling. Those old enough began to reflect on the wider conflict and lose hope for the future:

Psychologically students were affected. Especially when teachers weren't around to teach, and also the idea that, "what's the rationale for going to school when the country is a mess?" Students were affected too through the nonpayment of their school fees by parents and also not being given extra finances by their parents which they had previously enjoyed.

Official supports from the Ministry and the Union were non-existent. At the local level people helped each other. Teachers helped meet children's financial costs for stationery and at times food. Likewise there were those families who would provide material support to their child's teacher when they could. Aata and Taniela observed

school staff supporting each other by covering one another's absences as well as materially:

The crisis to some extent brought teachers closer together. I remember when I traveled to a nearby village I was given money by staff members to purchase bags of rice for them. Even basic food items were not available in the nearby shops. We never did this prior to the crisis as food items were available in nearby shops. Staff members were also cooperative in doing gardening and also in going fishing.

We really struggled, we didn't get any kind of support, even the school administration didn't provide us with anything. I depended on my husband or we teachers come together and put money in and then helped each other.

Occasionally there would be assistance given by churches, NGOs and politicians but it was never consistent or it was given directly to schools for student support while teachers received nothing:

Well, the crisis affected everybody in the country one way or another. Parents weren't exempt. There was some support from various church groups and women's fellowship groups, but these were just one-off assistances providing one free meal for students. These began in the pre-conflict period. I could not remember any assistance given to the school by the communities just because of the crisis. I did remember a parliamentarian paying unpaid school fees for 70 or so students from his constituency. It totaled to about 50 000 or so dollars and it greatly assisted the school.

In some cases life became impossible and teachers were forced to find alternative means of income, particularly those with families. Some insisted that children bring in

money, others turned to fishing or gardening to support their families. Sometimes classes were dismissed early to enable teachers to engage in other activities:

Later on there were no rules, teachers were selling to get food. They were not in their right time in the classroom. The children were victims now because the teachers were finding money for their survival. And then they announced that children had to bring one dollar to school for the teachers. But then the parents are also affected. But they did bring like one dollar or something for them.

Teachers' salaries were not paid consistently and sometimes we had to miss collecting our salaries after 3 to 4 pay days! This was absurd. So we had to look for other alternatives just to survive. And through this we sometimes dismissed our class early. I think this problem was prevalent in all schools and other government sectors in the country.

In the case of non-government schools cash flow was much better. However, where teachers were tempted to remain away because of the tension pay was withheld, thus putting teachers in very dangerous situations. Some teachers, because of their ethnic affiliation, joined the conflict:

Some of the teachers got involved. The Malaitan male teachers got involved in the tension, they joined this army group and some of the other teachers because of the salary problem because it was like six fortnights, if I can remember, we didn't get our salary.

All teachers considered the conflict a significant time in their professional lives. The conflict gave rise to a range of critical reflections⁴⁹ whereby teachers saw beyond themselves and their immediate needs and made linkages between their work and “the

⁴⁹ Valli, L. (1997) Listening to other voices: a description of teacher reflection in the United States, *Peabody Journal of Education*, 72(1), pp. 67-88.

social and political implications of teaching and schooling”⁵⁰. Many perceived schooling in terms of the nation’s social futures and saw themselves having leading roles. Mere learned to be “really strong for them” after going through the conflict which she described as “a mountain”. The conflict enabled her to see children in a different light, paying more attention to their needs. Similarly, Tarome began to bracket her feelings of insecurity as a young teacher in order to consider the children and their futures:

I am patient and I have courage to do things, so when life is hard I have to carry on. That’s the only thing that motivates me. My family helps me. From my heart I know that I am dealing with human beings not objects so I think these children need me. I need to teach them so I have to go to school...that’s the only thing that keeps me going.

Conflict and Educational Futures

It is difficult to gauge the impacts on children long term. Schlosstein⁵¹ suggests “a long entrenched mythology in all cultures of children’s innate ability to forget and spring back undamaged from their worst experiences”. Certainly Tarome believed there had not been permanent damage to any of the children. Anna, on the other hand became emotional when asked what impacts she thought the conflict would have on children and their futures:

⁵⁰ Spalding, E. & Wilson, A. (2002) Demystifying reflection: a study of pedagogical studies that encourage reflective journal writing, *Teachers College Record*, 104(7), pp. 1393-1421.

⁵¹ Schlosstein, C. (2003) Refugee children: casualties of world conflict, presentation at Our Children the Future Conference, Adelaide Convention Centre, 1- 4 May 2003

As a teacher, I feel sorry for the kids for their future (emotional pause) and I see that our future is not bright.

Mere, who taught closer to the conflict also considered the future fraught. She commented on the lost years of schooling for many children, the already noticeable effects, and the feelings of helplessness to try and remedy this:

How many children in the Solomons have lost their education? I cannot number them. I know there are so many that have not gone to school. They have lost their opportunity. In the Guadalcanal Plains, also in Malaita, also in town. So many students who have lost. I had a girl in my class who I try with. She had lost 2 classes and I tried to bring her to Grade 6 level and she's really big and she's older but I can't squeeze in those 2 classes. I try to catch her up using my own hours, Sundays, Saturdays. Just try to bring her up but I can't.

There is a danger of adding to rural disadvantage that already existed in the Solomon Islands prior to the conflict. During the conflict it was rural children and their families and possibly urban poor who suffered the most. Conversely, it was the children of the relatively well-off who lived in the greater calm of Honiara and who went to fee paying non-government schools who escaped the impact of the conflict. Anna supported this observation:

It will be true like the government students will be really affected in their performances, unlike the private schools.

Taniela also the conflict in terms of family break down with an increase in separation and divorce rates and the impact on children because of this. This represents yet

another example of the breakdown of the protective matrix that might otherwise assist children to cope with the conflict:

I must say that this ethnic tension is an opportunity for others to get '02' [new and multiple partners], yeah, because if you look at the ethnic tension, most people divorced. It's a good number of them...it's an opportunity for others to get a new wife.

In addition to emotional and psychological restoration there is a need for school infrastructure reconstruction. Government, with outside assistance, needs to re-build. The re-building needs to be also more equitable, something that Taniela saw as lacking in the lead up to the conflict. Some parts of the country lacked reasonable facilities for schooling:

Like building more schools like Malaita schools...even the government should build a college. That could be one way to bar the situation, because education is still a problem today, even the people from Guadalcanal will still look at _____ as their school. The priority is for students even though it's a Catholic school still they have the feeling "dis wan hem school blo mifala" (This is our school) and should be a priority, a step forward, a shift. To build more schools in Honiara, a central part of the country. It's a turning point, focusing more on developing our provinces, rather than coming to one place.

Mere also saw a more peaceful future as dependent on greater social justice within Solomon Island society, believing inequity to be one of the underlying causes of the conflict:

Some people are angry because they are ignored. When you satisfy everybody, everybody is happy. And that's where trouble comes around. Some people have opportunities and some not.

Replacing lost infrastructure was considered only part of the answer. Nearly all teachers spoke beyond the physical rebuilding and more even distribution of resources across all groups in the country. They envisaged a pedagogical response in terms of curriculum change and saw education decision makers having a role in a more peaceful future. Bretherton *et al*⁵² argue that peace can be learned, but only with good teaching, thus pointing to a need for teacher training to deal with the aftermath of the conflict.

Aata put it thus:

The crisis has left a lot of questions for educational decision makers. How can education decision makers re-look at the curriculum in a way that would bring about social cohesiveness and unity amongst the many different cultural groups?

The idea of changing the curriculum to include peace studies is not straight forward. Bretherton *et al*⁵³ argues that it must be more than a mere add-on and be demonstrated substantially in the lives of those who teach. They warn that teachers can not transmit a "culture of peace" if they have not internalised a culture of peace themselves. Teachers and the whole community must "configure their mindsets" lest efforts be considered

⁵² Bretherton, D., Weston, J. & Zbar, V. (2002) Peace education curriculum development in post-conflict contexts: Sierra Leone, paper presented at 16th Australian International Education Conference, Hobart, Sept.30th-Oct 4th.

⁵³ Bretherton, D., Weston, J. & Zbar, V. (2002) Peace education curriculum development in post-conflict contexts: Sierra Leone, paper presented at 16th Australian International Education Conference, Hobart, Sept.30th-Oct 4th.

merely rhetoric. Taniela put it thus: “One thing is missing is there is no respect. That’s why it happened.”

Several teachers saw a role for teaching values, either through a social studies component of the curriculum or through Christian education. Still others saw potential in Solomon Island cultural values for dealing with conflict. The re-insertion of values education into formal school curriculum is part of a world wide trend⁵⁴ evident also in the Pacific region^{55,56}. Others, however, sees other approaches to conflict needing to occur first. Bretherton *et al*⁵⁷ in their work with refugee children saw educational futures as having four basic elements, with dealing with trauma and communication first followed by conflict management and human rights and democracy later. Schlosstein⁵⁸ also considers addressing directly the impacts of conflict as a necessary pre-requisite for both children and teachers. Dealing directly with the conflict was certainly discouraged during the conflict however, at least one teacher saw counseling as a necessary first step in restoring peace:

⁵⁴ Scapp, R. (2003) *Teaching Values: Critical Perspectives on Education, Politics, and Culture* New York: Routledge Falmer.

⁵⁵ see Asia Pacific Network for International Education and Values Education (2002) *Learning to Be: A Holistic and Integrated Approach to Values Education for Human Development*, Core Values and the Valuing Process for Developing Innovative Practices for Values Education toward International Understanding and a Culture of Peace. Retrieved Nov 15 2004 from <http://www.unescobkk.org/ips/ebooks/documents/apnieve2/>

⁵⁶ see Meleisea, P. (2004) Cultural values of peace in the Pacific Islands: a case study of Samoa, in Nan-Zhou, Z. & Teasdale, B. (eds) *Teaching Asia-Pacific Core values of Peace and Harmony: A Sourcebook for Teachers*. Bangkok: UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education.

⁵⁷ Bretherton, D., Weston, J. & Zbar, V. (2002) Peace education curriculum development in post-conflict contexts: Sierra Leone, paper presented at 16th Australian International Education Conference, Hobart, Sept.30th-Oct 4th.

⁵⁸ Schlosstein, C. (2003) Refugee children: casualties of world conflict, presentation at Our Children the Future Conference, Adelaide Convention Centre, 1- 4 May 2003

They should have some sort of counseling for students. They are affected already. The MOE should provide some kind of counseling in the school and look at some of the strategies.

In addition to curriculum change teachers saw the need for quality school leadership as a pre-requisite for more peaceful futures. As mentioned before the conflict brought some principals into the spotlight with school cohesiveness contingent upon the school leader. This response from teachers might also be a result of wider debates over political leadership during the crisis years and the levels of corruption and nepotism that many perceived exacerbated the conflict:

We can say that we need a lot of things and a lot of resources. But all these things come under good leadership. I mean, you can make a lot of things, but if the, you know, the government is nothing, then all will be affected. Secondly how can we train educational leaders to be better prepared to tackle such problems in the future?

Conclusion

Contemporary Pacific life is increasingly marked by conflict, in contrast to the “Pacific” discourse of the colonial imagination that named it thus⁵⁹ and the popular, mostly non-Pacific imagination, that still has romanticist desires for the region. Recent tensions in Fiji, for example, continue to have, an impact on social life generally but more specifically on how schooling is done. During the euphemistically named “events of 2000”⁶⁰ the parliamentary hostage crisis took place over several months directly

⁵⁹ Edmond, R. (1997) *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁰ Field, M., Baba, T. & Nabobo, U. (2005) *Speight of Violence: Inside Fiji's 2000 Coup*. Auckland: Reed.

across a narrow road from one primary school. Once the hostage crisis was resolved the rebels took over a primary school in Suva's northern outskirts. Bullet holes still present in classroom walls in this later school testify to stories known well by teachers, children and their families involved but have never been subject to a wider audience or analysis. Conflicts in Papua New Guinea, Bougainville and Vanuatu have also impacted on schooling in those places yet remain under-reported. Solomon Island teachers' voices need to be heard alongside the traumatic stories told by teachers elsewhere as a collective means toward considering how conflict impacts on schooling and what schooling can contribute towards peaceful futures. Teacher educators might also ask in what ways can teachers be better prepared for such contingencies.

Although more investigation is necessary, the narratives of those Solomon Island teachers presented here tentatively construct teacher identity as professional, persevering, understanding, resourceful, courageous and reflective among many other qualities under the pressure of violent conflict. The narratives also point to a body of knowledge accrued by teachers of teaching, how to mediate conflict, relate to children and function in schools and communities in very difficult circumstances. The lessons of perseverance contained in their stories are worth hearing, particularly as a semblance of peace continues to emerge post-conflict and as re-building in the Solomon Islands is on-going.

The teachers interviewed believed that schooling and their work as teachers has a role in creating peaceful Pacific futures, particularly through a re-thinking of curriculum,

through a greater focus on equity and social justice in schooling and through a strengthening of school leadership. Current rebuilding efforts led by both outside agencies and educators within the Solomon Islands would do well to heed these voices and invite participation from teachers who over many years of service know intimately their children, their families, schools and communities.