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*The Promise of Education:
Schooling Journeys in the
Southwestern Pacific*

*Rachel Emerine Hicks, Debra McDougall,
and David Oakeshott*

I did not understand what school meant. It seemed so cruel to me that I should be paddled away to a distant village and left there for several months at a time. . . . The daily counsel I received from my father whenever I was home was a source of encouragement for those early years. “My son,” he would say, “go to school. Education is important. You may not understand it today. You will know in the future. Just go to school, my son.”

—ALPHEAUS GRAHAM ZOBULE,
“My Son, Go to School:
A Preview of My Autobiography”

“Schooling journeys” is more than a metaphor in the southwestern Pacific. To step into a classroom, children and youth often travel hours each day or live for months at a time away from their families. The journey of schooling is rarely direct; it often winds between formal and informal learning and in and out of school, work, and home life. And the journey is expensive; many families struggle mightily to gather the money for fees, school supplies, uniforms, and transportation. Young people embark on these precarious journeys, and their families make sacrifices to support them, because schooling promises a better life—a move away from the backbreaking labor of subsistence agriculture toward a reliable salary that will better support their family and community. Because of the structural inequalities in school and a lack of jobs for those who complete schooling, however, few experience the socioeconomic advancement schooling promises. Still, students and their families continue to hope that schooling will

lead to well-paid work. Even more important, though, going to school is seen as key to being a competent and effective person in society—increasingly for both women and men.

Since the 1990s, critical studies of schooling in the Pacific have analyzed formal schooling as part of a colonial apparatus that has devalued Indigenous systems of knowledge; alienated young people from land, language, and family; and created unrealistic expectations of modernist lives. As we begin the third decade of the twenty-first century, these critiques of the coloniality of schooling remain relevant. Even in independent, Indigenous-led nation-states like Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea (PNG), education systems are influenced by outside consultants and multinational organizations. The colonial roots of formal education in the region are undeniable (see Kupferman 2013 on Micronesia), and many donors in the region remain inattentive to local aspirations, relationships, and histories. Yet, an emerging body of research explores how donor-led initiatives can put local contexts and pedagogies at the center of regional educational policy making (Burnett 2009; Coxon 2016; Jesson and Spratt 2017; Johansson-Fua and others 2020; Sanga 2005, 2016; Sanga and Reynolds 2018). Meanwhile, Pacific Islander scholars are rethinking Pacific education by theorizing Indigenous concepts of knowing, developing concepts that tend to entail relationally based forms of learning (Māhina 2008; Nabobo, Houma, and Veramu 2008; Nabobo-Baba 2006, 2012; Nimmer 2017; Sanga and others 2020; Va'ai and Nabobo-Babu 2017).

Building on these studies of contextualized policy and Pacific pedagogy, this special issue contributes ethnographic studies of how ordinary teachers, students, parents, and communities engage with and think about formal schooling. We avoid treating formal schooling as “Western” in any simple way, approaching it not as a foreign imposition but as an integral and valued part of the lives of individuals and communities who are the focus of these studies.

For generations now, education has been central in the life stories of urban and rural people all around the southwestern Pacific. Consider, for example, an eighty-three-year-old woman in Isabel Province, Solomon Islands, who shared with Rachel Emerine Hicks during one of their regular conversations photographs and stories about attending and teaching school in the 1940s and 1950s (pers comm, 3 Sept 2019). Although only primary schooling was available to her, she proudly told Hicks about her children, grandchildren, and now great-grandchildren, whom she had

encouraged and financially supported to achieve higher levels of education. Education is similarly central in the life stories of the Papuan residents of Jayapura interviewed by Jenny Munro, Lyn Parker, and Yohana Baransano (this issue). Their stories convey how deeply rooted schooling is in intergenerational relationships—and how tenuously it relates to formal employment. In the opening epigraph, Solomon Islands scholar, translator, and teacher Alpheaus G Zobule recalls being paddled off to school in the early 1970s at the tender age of five. His father's advice stayed with him during long sojourns in the United States, where he completed an undergraduate degree, master's degree, and doctoral degree. But he continued returning to his home island, where he developed the remarkable language movement described in the article he coauthored with Debra McDougall (this issue). Throughout the region, a desire for education has been passed from generation to generation, and going away to school has become a traditional part of childhood and youth.

In this introductory article, and in the special issue as a whole, we seek to understand why schooling is such a valued part of life in the southwestern Pacific. The dilemmas discussed here are not unique to the southwestern Pacific. Everywhere, it seems, the link between credentials and careers is fraying; young people are completing more schooling than any generation before them but finding fewer opportunities for well-paid, secure employment (on the United States, see Habibi and Kamis 2021). Throughout the Pacific Islands, youth have long experienced “a stark mismatch between the formal schooling that they receive and the employment opportunities that are available” (Lee and Craney 2019, 15; see also Falgout and Levin 1992). Decisions about schooling cannot be understood within the narrow frame of individual aspiration. Even when dominant national and international discourses emphasize individual achievement, young people continue to calibrate their aspirations in terms of how they can serve their families, as Mary Good showed through a study of the “competing responsibilities and ambiguous pathways” of Tongan youth (2019). Moreover, while on the surface it may appear that formal schooling teaches only what is needed for competitive examinations, closer attention reveals that students and teachers engage critically with curricula, using the classroom to establish and transform relationships. To really understand why parents, families, and students make such remarkable sacrifices to go to school, we argue that it is necessary to move beyond a narrow focus on schooling as preparation for employment and instead consider schooling as an integral part of family and community life.

THE SOUTHWESTERN PACIFIC

This special issue focuses on global dilemmas around education as they are manifest in the southwestern Pacific, a region that includes the independent nations of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji, as well as the French collectivity of New Caledonia and the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua, both of which are in the midst of protracted struggles for independence.¹ Conventional mappings of Oceania have labeled this area Melanesia, in contrast to Polynesia to the east and Micronesia to the north. Within this racialized categorization (Melanesia is derived from Greek terms for “black islands”), Europeans consistently denigrated Melanesians in relation to other Oceanian peoples. However, as Tarcisius Kabutaulaka has observed, “Melanesians have recently appropriated the term ‘Melanesia’ and are using it in positive, empowering, and progressive ways to mobilize, redefine, and re-present themselves” (2015, 111). Neither the term “southwestern Pacific” nor the label “Melanesia” clearly delimits this region from the rest of the Pacific; moreover, the region is too diverse in language, culture, and colonial history to invite easy generalization. Yet there are some distinctive features of life in this region that profoundly shape educational experiences, including significant barriers to education, the fact that students often move away from home and engage with people outside of their own linguistic and cultural groups, and the degree to which schooling has been taken up as a local project.

First, relative to other parts of the world and to other parts of Oceania, young people of the southwestern Pacific face significant barriers to accessing education. Historically, these barriers have been particularly high for girls and women, who were long excluded from any schooling beyond a basic village primary school. Despite considerable wealth in natural resources, this region is poor by most measures of income and quality of life: the nations of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea are the lowest-ranked Pacific nations in statistical measures of overall human development, including measures of access to education and literacy rates (United Nations Development Programme 2019). One reason for these statistics is a lack of investment in education or other infrastructure by the colonial administrations that were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Colonial governments relied on Christian missions to establish basic schools (Fife 1991; Thomas and Postlethwaite 1984). Only as Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Papua

New Guinea moved rapidly toward independence in the 1960s did colonial governments become seriously involved in education, focusing on expanding secondary education and sending promising young men overseas to university.

Today, funding remains strongly skewed to the tertiary level, arguably benefitting a small elite rather than the majority. This is particularly evident in Solomon Islands, where the government spends approximately one hundred times more on each tertiary student than each primary student (Close 2020; see also Whalan 2011, 242). These budgetary limitations and priorities have led international donors to play an increasingly important role in funding basic education (Mundy and Verger 2015; Sobhani 2016; Tikly 2004). Donor countries' strategic priorities shape the types of aid countries receive, sometimes undermining local visions of development (Luteru and Teasdale 1993). Nevertheless, over the past generation, global, national, and local efforts to expand access to education have normalized secondary schooling for a generation of young people and have increased educational opportunities for girls and women.

We have already alluded to a second feature of education in this region: schooling journeys usually require movement away from home. Despite rapid and ongoing urbanization, the population of the southwestern Pacific remains largely rural, with many people living dispersed across large volcanic islands on the lands of their ancestors. Even very young children may have to leave their home villages to attend primary school. Secondary schooling requires even more travel, and many families send their children to urban areas to attend more prestigious high schools or tertiary institutions. The quest for education is one factor influencing the high rates of urbanization in contemporary Melanesia (Lindstrom and Jourdan 2017). Importantly, though, mobility in Melanesia is severely limited by powerful barriers to international migration. Many citizens of Polynesia and Micronesia are able to live, work, and study in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the United States, and education in the region is shaped by movement between Pacific Islands and the Pacific rim (see, for example, Lee 2017 on overseas-born Tongan youth). Research in education has emphasized the difficulties that diasporic populations from Polynesia and Micronesia face in US, New Zealand, and Australian schools (Bunn and Lumb 2019; Collet and Berman 2021; Kennedy 2019; Paulsen 2018; Reynolds 2017). In contrast, aside from small seasonal-worker schemes and very selective scholarship programs, citizens of independent Melanesian states have few opportunities to work or study overseas. People of Papua and West Papua Provinces

may attend university in other regions of Indonesia (Munro 2018), but overseas travel is limited for them as well. Although internal migrants do not “negotiat[e] borders” in the same way international migrants do, it can still be a “destabilizing” experience because of the new languages and ethnic groups students must negotiate (Cohen 2011, 105).

In this part of the world, moving away from home—even across a mountain ridge or to a nearby island—almost always entails encountering different languages. The southwestern Pacific is one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the entire world, both in terms of the number of languages spoken and the differences between those languages. Papua New Guinea’s 8.5 million people speak about 840 languages, and there is similar diversity on the Indonesian side of the border in Papua and West Papua. Solomon Islands’ nearly 700,000 people speak 72 living languages, and Vanuatu’s approximately 300,000 people speak 110 living languages (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2020). In the region, only Fiji has an Indigenous language that was standardized in the colonial period and recognized across the country. Elsewhere in the British-colonized southwestern Pacific, neo-Melanesian languages (Tok Pisin, Solomon Islands Pijin, and Bislama), with English vocabulary and broadly Austronesian grammars, serve as the languages of urban life and interisland interactions. Even where the official language of instruction is English, neo-Melanesian languages dominate classrooms and schoolyards (Jourdan 2013). Secondary school brings together students from different regions, providing the grounds for interethnic friendships and encouraging the performance of distinctive ethnocultural identities (Hicks *nd*).

All around the world, modern education systems have aimed to foster a sense of shared national identity (see Weber 1976, 303–338), yet there is no guarantee that students will internalize the nationalist messages they receive (Coe 2005). In the southwestern Pacific, school has often been a site where young people have come to resent or outrightly resist the nation-state. In Solomon Islands, education is arguably a “stepping-stone” to national consciousness (Jourdan 1995), yet grievances about the uneven distribution of services, including education, were a principal driver of the civil conflict that tore the country apart from 1998 to 2003 (Oakeshott and Allen 2015). In Papua and West Papua, students have been at the forefront of resistance to Indonesian domination, motivated in part by their experiences of racism from non-Papuan teachers and students (Munro 2013, 2018). Similarly, experiences of anti-Bougainvillean racism motivated James Tanis to take up arms against Papua New Guinea

in the 1988–1998 war (Tanis and Gray 2002). Yet some interethnic school friendships survived the conflict. One former Bougainville Revolutionary Army commander told David Oakeshott that “some of the PNG Defence Force intelligence officers were actually my friends that I met earlier on in PNG when we were in schooling in [Port] Moresby” (interview, 21 May 2016, Arawa). These officers sympathized with the Bougainville Revolutionary Army’s cause and passed on intelligence about the PNG Defence Force’s plans of attack (for a similar recollection from Solomon Islands, see Tanis and Gray 2002). Far from creating a simple sense of national unity, schooling in this region has arguably helped to bolster ethnonationalist identities by heightening awareness of inequalities within the nation. Yet schooling has also played a crucial role in establishing relationships that cut across these divisions.

A final feature of schooling in the region is the degree to which it quickly became a local project. As was the case in many former European colonies, formal schooling was introduced by Christian missionaries who were training converts to read the Bible (Besnier 1995; Boutilier 1992; Gewertz and Errington 1991; Kulick and Stroud 1990; McDougall 2012; Rutherford 2006; Schieffelin 2000). So central were schools in the missionary endeavor that the term “skul” has come to denote Christianity as a whole in some parts of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2013; Jolly 1994; Keesing 1992, 49). Like Christianity itself, schooling was taken up with enormous enthusiasm by local families, communities, and individuals. In many regions, the first pastor-teachers were not Europeans but other Pacific Islanders (Latukefu 1978), either visitors from other island groups or even local men who traveled to mission headquarters before returning to evangelize their relatives. Celebrations of the coming of the church, nearly ubiquitous in island Melanesia, are also celebrations of the arrival of the school (McDougall 2019; Spriggs 1985).

Schooling may have been a tool of colonial domination, but Pacific Islanders quickly began using it for their own purposes. In her 2016 work on global decolonization, Tracey Banivanua Mar tracked the ways that Indigenous leaders in the colonial era used literacy to petition authorities beyond administrative borders. In the 1960s and 1970s, as more young men traveled for tertiary education, many established more radical networks of anticolonial thought and activism. Although these networks linked the southwestern Pacific to Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and even North America, local histories of schooling in the independent states of the southwestern Pacific contrast dramatically with histories of

schooling in settler-colonial contexts, where school was an overt part of genocide, linguicide, and the cultural elimination of Indigenous peoples (Battiste 2004; Ka'ai-Mahuta 2011; Morgan 2019; Pihama and Lee-Morgan 2019). In countries including Canada, the United States, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, residential mission schools played a shameful part in settler domination and dispossession of Indigenous groups. In areas of the southwestern Pacific where Indigenous inhabitants have retained control of their ancestral lands, Christianity and schooling were more often tools that local actors used to transform *their own* societies. This distinction is critical.

IS SCHOOLING “WESTERN”?

In scholarly work and everyday discourse in the southwestern Pacific, formal schooling is often labeled “Western” to differentiate it from Indigenous, traditional, customary, or local forms of knowledge transmission. Such a binary contrast is evident in the thought of foundational Pacific leaders, even those like Bernard Narokobi, who argued that Western and customary forms of knowledge are compatible (Dobrin and Golub 2020). Anthropologists of the Pacific who turned their attention to formal schooling in the 1980s and 1990s also highlighted contrasts between Western education and Indigenous modes of child socialization. Some studies explored the collision of divergent understandings of what knowledge is and how it is transmitted (see Falgout 1992; Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 1999, 2001; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992). Other work highlighted ways that Indigenous teachers adapted Western school curricula and routines to Indigenous cultural contexts (see Flinn 1992; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1994) or how students managed conflicting expectations associated with traditional rural life and modernist education (Demerath 2000; Fife 1994). These tensions remain important and are explored in several articles in this issue.

At the same time, we see a need to move beyond these binaries. Writing of New Caledonia, Marie Salaün observed that actors with diametrically opposed views on schooling explained why Kanak students performed much worse than European students in terms of a “clash of cultures” (2009). Both supporters of the status quo and advocates of a radical Indigenization of education contrasted the individuality of European students with the collectivism of Kanak students. Such generalizations, Salaün argued, “lead one to believe that the Kanaks, all Kanaks, because they

are Kanak, are indifferent to the educational future of their children, that they do not care at all about access to monetary resources that come with salaried positions, something disproven by all the empirical studies that have been done” (2009, 238). Beyond the field of education, other anthropologists have argued for moving beyond an analytical contrast between Indigenous and Western institutions. In the introduction to a collection of articles on the politics of order in Papua New Guinea, for example, Alex Golub observed that a binary contrast between Western and Indigenous cultural forms tends to see local institutions as inferior or illegitimate imitations of the real thing (2018, 334). Similar arguments have been made in relation to Melanesian Christianity, which is intimately linked to schooling. As John Barker asked, “At what point do Melanesians cease to be converts and begin to be Christians?” (2019, 277). Rather than asking about the relationship *between* Western Christianity and Melanesian culture, scholars have begun to see Christianity as embedded in, not external to, culture (McDonald and Falck 2020; McDougall 2020). In our view, such an approach is just as relevant to education.

The binary contrast between Indigenous and Western knowledge maps onto other problematic dichotomies, including “village life” versus the “modern world.” In the 1960s and 1970s, as colonial administrations in many areas of the Pacific were finally investing in education in order to train local people to take over from expatriate administrators, many began to articulate a “dual purpose” for education—one focused on basic literacy, numeracy, and practical skills appropriate for the majority of rural people living subsistence lifestyles, and one oriented toward higher education for aspiring white-collar workers. The problem with such analyses and the policies they inform is that dual paths in education have never been equally valued (see next section). Such discussions have often assumed that global standards of education would not be locally relevant (see Avalos 1993; Luteru and Teasdale 1993). They also overlook traditions of transmitting esoteric, nonpractical knowledge in the so-called traditional village.

Over the past generation, Indigenous scholars of education have been reasserting the existence of coherent Indigenous intellectual traditions that preexisted European schooling. As Konai Helu Thaman wrote about Pacific studies, decolonizing knowledge is about “reclaiming indigenous Oceanic perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom that have been devalued or suppressed because they were or are not considered important or worthwhile” (2003, 2). Pacific scholars who strive to draw Indigenous traditions

of learning, listening, and critique into dialogue with dominant models of academic research are also part of this movement (Anae 2019, Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2001; Havea 2010; Sanga and others 2020; Naepi 2019; Vaioleti 2006; see also Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens, this issue). In the introduction to their massive *Handbook of Indigenous Education*, Elizabeth Ann McKinley and Linda Tuhiwai Smith described Māori educational institutions as comparable to schools introduced by Europeans in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Traditionally, Māori students were “especially chosen to fulfill special roles in their communities, children were developed, and their particular interests were noted.” Far from being focused on the pragmatic concerns of subsistence, “learning was elevated above the ordinary pursuits of a community, had spiritual elements to it, and there were rituals and protocols to observe” (McKinley and Smith 2019, 2). From this perspective, the problem of Indigenous education is not the lack of a tradition of formal instruction that would be equivalent to a Western classroom. The problem is invasion, which shattered Indigenous forms of knowledge, institutions, and communities.

At the heart of this Indigenous-led work on schooling is the question of sovereignty: Who gets to decide what kinds of knowledge are valued and how those knowledges are transmitted? Educational self-determination is to be achieved not through separation from dominant political and economic structures and settler-colonial forms of knowledge but through critical engagement with these structures. As Martin Nakata and collaborators argued for Indigenous studies in Australia, “The complex grounds of this ‘Indigenous-Western’ contest make it a difficult task to resolve what is colonial and what is Indigenous, or what ultimately serves Indigenous interests in contemporary knowledge practice” (2012, 2). They suggested that any pedagogy that purports to teach authentic Indigenous knowledge is unwittingly accepting binaries between Western and Indigenous knowledge. The “decolonial goal” of Indigenous education is to understand how domination has shaped colonial knowledge and to critically reassess scholarship in this light.

Indigenous scholars of education are also challenging the presumption that Indigenous knowledge is not relevant to the so-called “modern” economy. Elizabeth Sumida Huaman observed that formal compulsory schooling seems to require individuals to choose either to live as an Indigenous person or to assimilate to the dominant society in order to take up the promise of socioeconomic mobility. She argued, “This binary is illusory as Indigenous peoples have agency, adaptive responses, and,

even among culturally and linguistically unified communities, will employ nuanced and heteroglossic strategies in confronting dominant educational systems” (Sumida Huaman 2020, 262). Writing of three small Indigenous schools in Canada, the United States, and Peru, Sumida Huaman showed how Indigenous teachers and communities have taken up the format of compulsory schooling in a classroom and have used it to center Indigenous forms of knowledge through the “deliberate and routine” building of connection to “places, languages and ceremonies,” with the goal of an “indigenous knowledge sanctuary” instead of assimilation (2020, 264). She documented the ways that teachers in these schools work to convince parents that learning grounded in local languages and lifeways will not prevent their children from flourishing in the broader society, an approach also found in the Kulu Language Institute of Ranongga discussed by McDougall and Zobule (this issue).

Global scholarship on Indigenous education also moves beyond Western/Indigenous dichotomies by focusing on what literary scholar Chadwick Allen dubbed “trans-indigeneity.” This term encourages moving away from forms of comparison that re-center settler-colonial culture in order to draw studies of Indigenous traditions “into different kinds of conversations, and to acknowledge the mobility and multiple interactions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and texts” (Allen 2012, xiv). Vicente Diaz mobilized this concept in his 2019 discussion of a remarkable collaboration between a Chuuk migrant community in Minnesota and the traditional Dakota landholders, a collaboration that has fostered authentic forms of engagement, learning, and transformation. Diaz wrote that the idea of trans-indigeneity “can help us imagine new ways of being indigenous,” and he suggested that the term also describes “deep aboriginal cultural belongings to specific places while also permitting wide lateral reach across time and space, albeit in ways that do not lose familiar and signature indigenous belongings and accountabilities to place, to site, and cultural specificity” (2019, 2).

Indigenous-led work is emerging most prominently from settler-colonial nations that have been the site of Indigenous resurgence movements. Many of the insights are relevant to postcolonial nations of the southwestern Pacific, where colonialism transformed but did not shatter Indigenous knowledges to the extent that they did in settler states. Writing about Pacific education in the early 2000s, Kabini Sanga and John Niroa observed that “in spite of decades of educational development, Pacific peoples have not owned the formal education process but have instead viewed it as

alien and imposed from outside. . . . Pacific peoples have failed to develop clearly articulated visions for their educational and developmental pathways” (2004, 15). Even as many Pacific peoples see schooling as foreign, it is clear that local teachers, communities, and students bring distinctive values and aspirations into the classrooms they inhabit. And, like their counterparts around the world, Pacific leaders have worked to articulate visions for education that go beyond the narrowly defined colonial goal of producing an Indigenous elite or contemporary neoliberal orthodoxies that see education as only for employment.

EDUCATION FOR WHAT OR FOR WHOM?

It is not just in the Pacific, or in other colonial or postcolonial contexts, that policy makers and scholars have questioned the purpose of education. In the late 1800s in the United States, curriculum reformers debated whether education should prepare students under humanist traditions, meet children at each developmental stage, provide them with skills for industry, or create citizens who would contribute to society (Kliebard 2004). More recently, Gert Biesta suggested that education generally accomplishes three functions: the “qualification, socialisation and subjectification” of students—that students should attain skills and knowledge to “do something” while being socialized into “social, cultural, and political ‘orders’” and also learning independence (2009, 39–40). Within the Pacific, through discipline and rote learning, colonial education systems introduced students to Western-influenced models of learning and value systems that had little connection to their daily lives (Boutilier 1992; Thomas 1993). Not wanting to simply adopt these colonial systems, in the early stages of global decolonization in the post–World War II era, many politicians and planners thought deeply about what they wanted schooling to look like.

Francis Bugotu, “the best-educated Solomon Islander in the 1960s and 1970s” and a key educational planner at the time of Solomon Islands independence (Moore 2013), along with fellow members of the Educational Policy Review Committee, wrote that Solomon Islanders viewed the education system as “an alien system which had been imposed here and which is unsuited to the needs of the people of the islands” (Educational Policy Review Committee 1973, 1). In overseeing a review of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate’s education system, Bugotu observed that many parents perceived education as a guarantee that their children would

have jobs. Realizing that the two were not necessarily correlated because there were not enough jobs, he and his fellow committee members argued that education should not be “measured in purely economic terms” but should be concerned with “the development of the whole man” (Educational Policy Review Committee 1973, 30). In the proposal for a new structure for education in Solomon Islands, the committee suggested that education should be restructured to provide students with more training in practical and technical subjects that could be used in villages (Educational Policy Review Committee 1973, 34). Although steps were taken in Solomon Islands to integrate more practical training into schools in order to educate the wider public, the academic track held more status. The first generation of scholars found prestigious jobs in government sectors. Other students who sought paid employment were able to find public service jobs as teachers and nurses. The generations of students who have followed have assumed that they will also be able to find public sector employment, but with education becoming more widely available and more students graduating from school, these jobs are increasingly scarce.

Throughout the Pacific and in many other developing nations, formal schooling is considered to be “a way out of poverty and destitution” (Tikly 2004, 192). Despite the realization that the education system can widen the divide between the elite and the rest of the population and alienate students, “many parents and children continue to hold out hope for a better future through education” (Tikly 2001, 162). Parents send their children to school for the chance of obtaining social and economic advancement (Demerath 2000; Fife 1994; Flinn 1992; Hicks 2017; Jourdan 2008). Since space is limited, many students are pushed out of secondary schooling because they do not pass their exams (Evans 2016), which leaves them as “politically and economically disenfranchised citizens” (Jourdan 2013, 275), unsure of their future options. Further, those who finish formal education often have certificates with little practical value.

The conundrum of Pacific students today resembles the “diploma disease” described more than forty years ago by Ronald Dore (1976). Dore suggested that the “late development effect” occurs in countries that begin the “modernisation process” later in world history. These countries rely heavily on “bureaucratic recruitment practices” for employment and as a result experience “qualification inflation” (Dore 1997, 28). This, in turn, creates a societal diploma disease: as more students obtain a particular credential required for employment, the standard increases so that even higher credentials are required. For this reason, even those who receive

good exam marks are not guaranteed jobs, leading to high unemployment rates, which has a particularly stark manifestation in the southwestern Pacific. Although Dore's diploma disease has been a risk since independence, the idea persists that if students do well in school and pass their exams, they will have access to prestigious jobs, as has happened with the generations before them. However, as Munro, Parker, and Baransano observe, the problem is not simply a matter of supply and demand but also of cultivated social expectations about what kind of work is desirable (this issue, 364–365).

This begs the question: What is the purpose of education? Or, building on the work of Biesta (2009, 36), what is education *effective* for, and for whom is it effective? Revisiting his own earlier work on diploma disease, Dore outlined three motives for education: “learning for its own sake, learning to do a job, and learning to get a job” (1997, 26). He argued that if learning is pursued just to get a job, it is a waste of resources. Because of the focus on passing examinations to attain a certificate and find a job, much of schooling in the southwestern Pacific could be classified as “learning to get a job.” Although acquiring quality education in order to attain a job is the goal of most students, in reality many students follow nonlinear pathways in and out of formal and informal schooling, sometimes leading to well-paid jobs and sometimes leading them elsewhere, a phenomenon Munro, Parker, and Baransano call “diploma disruption” (this issue, 365). In their analysis of West Papuan educational journeys, they demonstrate that success in education and success in employment are neither correlated nor sequential. In the context of Solomon Islands, McDougall and Zobule show how some students who have left the formal schooling system find new opportunities and educational growth through vernacular language education, giving them a new sense of purpose (this issue, 413).

In an attempt to create a nonacademic track for students, many countries established Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), which aims to provide students with practical skills to use in their home communities. Although students at these schools learn skills that can lead to paid labor, such as mechanics, carpentry, agriculture, and hospitality, they often view their completion certificates as a pathway back into the formal education system (Maebuta 2008). Another, newer pathway discussed by Aidan Craney is participation in entrepreneurship programs, which are intended to give students, no matter their level of educational attainment, the knowledge needed to run their own businesses (this issue, 349–350). However, as Craney argues, neither TVET nor entrepreneurial

programs are a panacea for unemployment, since the international organizations who promote and fund the programs often do not contextualize them to reflect local knowledges, pedagogies, and social values (this issue, 352).

In the southwestern Pacific, the colonial legacy continues to influence education through the reliance on international donors and their vision for education. In the 1993 *Comparative Education* special issue on education in the South Pacific, P H Luteru and G R Teasdale suggested that Pacific Island countries created development plans and accepted aid without evaluating whether the aid fit their educational needs. Likewise, the donor countries contributed aid on the basis of their own national priorities, which did not necessarily align with those of Pacific Island nations (Luteru and Teasdale 1993). Nearly thirty years later, much of the southwestern Pacific is still dependent on aid to support local development goals, resulting in funding for programs designed by outsiders that do not always suit local contexts. Multinational development organizations consider education to be “one of the most powerful instruments known for reducing poverty and inequality and for laying the basis for sustained economic growth” (Mundy and Verger 2015, 13). As a result, education is constructed as a gift from outsiders to support development, instead of being viewed as something that has become deeply rooted in the lives of Pacific Islanders.

The drive to increase access to education throughout the Pacific is connected to global initiatives such as UNESCO’s Education for All, which is based on a view of education as a “fundamental human right” for all children (UNESCO 2000, 8; Mundy and Verger 2015). This global initiative has contributed to an expansion of schools and wider access to education across the Pacific, especially at the primary level. Arguably, though, this limited the capacity for Indigenous research and educational development, which created a dependency on multinational organizations for educational resources and planning (Tikly 2004). For example, in Solomon Islands, there are literacy and education projects funded by development organizations from Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, and Japan, all of which provide literacy resources and teacher training to local schools, but each of which has its own model of how literacy should be implemented.

Although strongly influenced by outside organizations, Pacific Islanders do not just let these practices determine their future; instead, there is a desire to “engage in productive dialogue with these global designs” in order to align them to the local context (Sobhani 2016, 485). In her

analysis of education in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu in relation to the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations, Alexandra McCormick wrote that Pacific countries see education as key for development but do not define education as merely formal schooling. Instead, education is learning that is “relevant to employment and life opportunities for citizens” at national, regional, and global levels (McCormick 2014, 181). This statement reveals the tension Pacific Islanders still face as they endeavor to develop schooling that is relevant in multiple contexts for various purposes. In the Pacific, schooling has become integral to and deeply embedded in daily life, but the need to determine the goals of schooling still remains.

The expansion of education as a result of Education for All is an opportunity for countries in the region not only to reconsider the purposes of education, but also, echoing Biesta, to ask whether it is effective and for whom. Despite the precarity of the link between education and work, finding paid labor remains necessary for Pacific Islanders in the growing cash-based economy. As such, education remains the pathway students pursue in order to reach this goal, even amid uncertainty. Bugotu and his fellow committee members suggested that “education is concerned with living, rather than with the narrower concept of making a living” (Educational Policy Review Committee 1973, 30). Through presenting the lived experiences of students and teachers, the articles in this issue show the complexities of school-to-work pathways while questioning the premise that schooling is solely for formal employment. Although schooling journeys are fraught and nonlinear, these studies show that schooling is highly valued in the southwestern Pacific and something that students and their parents continue to choose in hopes of a better future.

EDUCATION FOR RELATIONSHIPS

The articles in this special issue do not stop at analyses of the link between schooling and the formal labor market. They also delve into the learning process itself, taking for granted the notion that meaningful learning occurs in a broader social context (Lave 1996). Schooling has come to be essential in processes through which individuals in the southwestern Pacific make and maintain their relationships to others. Because relationships are so integral to schooling, schooling journeys do not begin in kindergarten and proceed neatly through to university; sometimes these journeys never begin, or they pause and restart or stop entirely when new circumstances

and relationships come to the fore. The entanglement of schooling and social relationships is also evident in the ways that teachers use classrooms to instruct students about proper ethical conduct in wider society.

The interests of the extended family have long governed young people's experiences of education. For instance, historically, on Malaita in Solomon Islands, families would not send all of their children to school. Some children were kept from schooling in order to learn Indigenous knowledge and become leaders of their kin groups as adults (Watson-Gegeo, Gegeo, and Fito'o 2018). Similarly, Mandak people of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, mobilized to arrange school fees in ways that adhered to Indigenous principles of exchange—a child's success in education was understood to be the success of the whole clan (Sykes 1996, 111). Family interests have also been a particular barrier to the participation of girls in schooling. As one example, on Buka Island in Bougainville, the long distances required to travel to attend school prevented girls from attending, as did the prioritization of boys' education and the expectation that girls should help their mothers in their families' gardens (Mowbray 2014, 191–196). And for their part, the young people who have gone off to school have done so in order to fulfill their moral obligations to their families (Lee and Craney 2019, 16).

Nevertheless, parents and elders often fear that sending their children to school will sever the strong ties children have with them (Educational Policy Review Committee 1973; Falgout 1992; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992). Before independence in Solomon Islands, Bugotu wrote: "I pray God that my fears are unfounded but I feel strongly that the dramatic and abrupt realization of prestige and power in high places of politics and education has caused the creation of a native elite instilled with false confidence and a 'know it best' attitude, mysteriously caged behind alien ideas, values, goals and visions" (1975, 79; see also Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992, 21–22). Since then, formal education has become an even greater presence in the lives of Melanesians. On the surface at least, there is now more scope than ever for schooling to instill the "know it best" attitude Bugotu worried about.

Some contemporary elites do treat the village with a "know it best" attitude, which they often justify with moral judgments about their less-well-educated relatives (Cox 2021). Whereas these educated elites credit themselves with an openness to new experiences and ideas, they are prone to depicting their village kin as keepers of traditional values and culture. As Barbara Andersen observed in relation to nursing students, they may

strive to respect local culture while at the same time blame it for failures of modern systems like the health system (2018). Moreover, elites may pursue the best available educational opportunities for their own children (Gewertz and Errington 1999, 29) and invest less heavily in the children of extended family. In Solomon Islands, this leads to regular complaints that parliamentarians and public officers intervene on behalf of only their closest family in the allocation of government scholarships for tertiary study (Dorovolomo and Maebuta 2014, 148; Nanau 2015, 529).

Although education is clearly playing a crucial role in the emergence of social class in the region, many educated people feel a deep ambivalence about embracing the life of an urban, educated citizen (Golub 2014, 170–176). Thus, many go to great lengths to maintain their connections to home and work humbly for the people there. Zobule’s Kulu Language Institute is a notable example (McDougall and Zobule, this issue). So too are the many educated people in lower tiers of the public and private sector who rely on their connections to home for survival. Many secondary-school teachers in Solomon Islands, such as those who participated in Oakeshott’s research, may wish to prioritize the needs of their own nuclear families, but they typically imagine spending their retirements in their home villages. Some teachers prepare by asking village-based relatives to build houses for them—a situation that motivates teachers to attend diligently to their obligations to kin. With low salaries and unreliable delivery of pay, teachers have an array of AOBs (any other businesses) to raise money for their contributions to life in home villages, including material contributions to major events, and the payment of relatives’ school fees. They also use the money to look after the relatives who inevitably come to stay with them at the schools where they are posted. The AOBs teachers pursue can cause regular interruptions to the operations of the school, but they demonstrate to students that professionals in formal institutional contexts must also prioritize relationships with kin and home.

Given the persistent fear of alienation from village life through schooling, and the importance of relationships to the majority of educated people, perhaps it is unsurprising that educational planners and policy makers in Solomon Islands are actively deliberating strategies for introducing values from home into formal schooling (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2013). Out of these deliberations, “wantokism” and “tok stori” have emerged as key terms in Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning (see Fito’o 2019; Sanga and others 2020). The former is a pan-Melanesian term referring to the people in a person’s networks of affinity and social sup-

port, which can include anyone from close family members to any Pacific Islanders, depending on the context (Brigg 2009; Schram 2015). The latter term refers to a Melanesian style of dialogue that has varied counterparts throughout Oceania. When applied in the context of teaching and learning, both require teachers and students to respect and understand their connections to others. Additionally, recently reformed social studies textbooks in Solomon Islands teach that Indigeneity is the source of the respect for relationships that students must have if they are to resolve disputes with each other peacefully (Oakeshott, this issue, 396).

In addition to the educational planners and curriculum developers, classroom teachers are likewise taking opportunities to share values from home with their students. Not all of their innovations concern relationships specifically; the Kulu Language Institute, for example, teaches an Indigenous understanding of reading (McDougall and Zobule, this issue). Often, though, teachers do focus on relationships. An example comes from Oakeshott's discussion of how a Solomon Islands social studies teacher used newly reformed social studies textbooks in a way that allowed students to honor their relationships to their peers and host community (this issue, 401–402). This focus on relationships extends to classrooms in the most prominent tertiary institution for students in the southwestern Pacific, a point that is evident in Rosarine Rafai, Jiokapeci Qalo-Qiolevu, and Maca Radua-Stephens's reflections on their pedagogy at the University of the South Pacific (USP) (this issue). The emphasis teachers put on relationships in the classroom seems particularly important in light of the life histories Munro, Parker, and Baransano recount (this issue), which show that sometimes it is kin connections rather than formal qualifications that lead to paid work.

As is the case all around the world, experiences of schooling in the southwestern Pacific have been profoundly shaped by gender relationships. For generations, parents have preferred to educate their sons over their daughters, but the recent expansion of education has increased educational opportunities for girls and women. Moreover, schools are important sites for the transformation of attitudes about gender relationships. For instance, a gender equity program called "Equal Playing Field," which operates in several Port Moresby primary schools, aims to foster gender equity through "respectful relationships" (Spark and Macintyre, forthcoming). The program has not just been a success in the classroom and on the playground; female students and teachers have even reimagined their relationships outside of school and attempted to enact changes to

abusive and potentially dangerous relationships at home. Similarly, a relationships-centered approach to student absenteeism in Lae has helped mitigate the effects of the grossly inadequate on-the-ground services to support women and young people affected by family and sexual violence (Forsyth and others 2019). The approach relies on teachers, who have been trained as counselors, to focus on the students' networks of social support, although the need to know and understand their students' family relationships places a heavy load on these teachers.

As schooling has become an increasingly significant part of social and family life in the southwestern Pacific, it has featured ever more prominently in how people make and maintain their relationships. Although embarking on a journey through schooling might be done on behalf of a student's extended family, being away from home becomes a risk to the very relationships that facilitated the journey. Although the shoddy promise of paid work keeps students' relationships salient throughout—and can even lead to an early exit from—schooling, elders, parents, teachers, and students have nevertheless found ways to embed the significance of relationships in formal schooling. In doing so, they have actively worked to counteract well-founded fears that formal education will leave young people disconnected from the knowledge of their elders and ancestors. Further, moving beyond the important relationship between educated people and their kin in the village, the emphasis on respectful relationships has also made schools the settings for important lessons about ethical relations between men and women.

OVERVIEW OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The contributors to this special issue seek to understand the persistent promise of schooling from the perspective of the people of the southwestern Pacific. We do not, however, aim to provide a representative overview of the region. Studies from Vanuatu and New Caledonia would surely contribute valuable perspectives (see Sanga and others 2004; Stastny 2018). Although scholars of Papua New Guinea have been involved in the work leading up to this special issue, none of the articles included here focus on the largest country of the region. Instead, the geographical anchor of this issue is Solomon Islands: two articles focus on Solomon Islands and one on both Solomon Islands and Fiji. The collection also includes a paper from Papua Province of Indonesia, a site often excluded from discussions of Melanesia. Despite the striking differences in political situations between

the independent nations of Solomon Islands and Fiji on the one hand and Papua Province on the other, there are notable similarities in the ways that schooling is woven through the life histories of individuals and families.

The four research articles in this special issue take up two related themes. The first theme concerns the fraught relationship between schooling and work. Contributors ask: Why do people continue to invest so much in formal schooling when well-paid jobs in the formal sector are so difficult to secure? What role does schooling play in increasingly mobile and precarious lives? The second theme concerns the nature of classroom learning itself: How do teachers create spaces where students may critically reflect on their own experiences? How do they forge productive relationships with one another and with their communities? How do they make the content taught within the classroom relevant to the world beyond it?

In the first article, Aidan Craney takes up a long-standing concern of educational planners in the Pacific: an apparent disconnection between education systems and job opportunities. Writing of Fiji and Solomon Islands, Craney observes that high youth underemployment rates coexist with labor shortages in skilled trades (338). TVET programs have long sought to address this disjuncture, but few young people pursue the vocational education that might equip them for such jobs, instead preferring academic education. The latest solution to this mismatch between schooling and employment is the proliferation of entrepreneurship programs. Craney argues that these programs are driven almost entirely by donor interests and concerns and evince a blind faith in the power of the free market to drive economic growth and poverty reduction. Because entrepreneurship programs are not grounded in local realities, Fijian and Solomon Islander youth tend not to engage deeply with them (Craney, this issue, 338–339). Craney highlights how the attention given by donors to entrepreneurialism shifts attention away from the fundamental questions educational planners have long been asking about the goals of their education systems and detracts from the critical thinking they have already undertaken.

In Papua Province, formal education does not necessarily translate into paid employment either. If it did, the Port Numbay people living near Jayapura would be among the most prosperous people of the province. Instead, despite having been intensely engaged in education since the Dutch colonial era and enjoying literacy rates nearing 100 percent, they are among the most marginal of all Papuans. To understand this situation, Munro, Parker, and Baransano critically engage with Dore's formulation

of the “diploma disease” (1976), using the term “diploma disruption” to describe both the constantly shifting meanings attributed to education and the divergent paths an individual may take on the schooling journey (this issue, 365). These dynamics emerge clearly in Jayapura’s “project” economy, which is marked by outsider-funded, short-term, and narrowly focused interventions that are driven by an Indonesian government seeking to modernize a province whose inhabitants are stereotyped as backward. While Indonesian occupation is certainly a different context for schooling journeys compared to the rest of the southwestern Pacific, the life histories Munro, Parker, and Baransano recount nevertheless show that the enduring enthusiasm for education that is seen throughout the region is far more than simply a desire for paid work. Instead, schooling is an important part of how Papuan young people “become human”—that is, how they become effective and respected members of their communities.

The next two articles take up our second major theme by focusing on what happens within classrooms. In his research about the role of schooling in Solomon Islands’ post-civil-conflict recovery, Oakeshott found that both students and teachers refused to talk about the so-called Tensions with each other but were nevertheless comfortable learning and teaching about it in classroom settings. This observation pushed him to consider the meaning of classroom knowledge, which, historically, has been valuable for little more than passing examinations and progressing through the tiers of the education system. In the classroom sessions Oakeshott observed, when focusing on the conflict, teachers and students avoided contentious discussions and protected relationships between students, teachers, and community members who had been on different sides of the conflict by staying very close to the material contained in social studies textbook lessons about the conflict (this issue, 398–399). While teaching from the textbook is a strategy that might be critiqued as merely rote learning that fails to engage students, Oakeshott instead interprets it as a thoughtful form of critical pedagogy that prioritizes the relationships in which students and teachers are embedded.

Remaining in Solomon Islands, the next article moves from elite, church-run secondary schools to an informal, community-supported vernacular language school, the Kulu Language Institute (hereafter Kulu), founded by coauthor Zobule. As he and McDougall explain, Kulu began with Zobule’s realization that many people of Ranongga Island struggled to read the New Testament that he had translated into Luqa, one of the two Austronesian languages spoken on Ranongga. Over twenty

years, Kulu has attracted thousands of Ranonggans and even people from other islands who speak languages other than Luqa. On its Ranongga campus, Kulu offers four courses in the grammar of Luqa, each with its own textbook. In these texts, Zobule has developed both an Indigenous understanding of what it means to read and a vernacular metalanguage for describing Luqa language. Crowded Kulu classrooms are not markedly different from other classrooms in Solomon Islands, but nowhere else in the country can students undertake such an in-depth study of their own language in their own language. The article focuses on the remarkable enthusiasm with which young Ranonggans are embracing this intellectual challenge.

The final contribution to this issue is a dialogue piece based on a conversation among Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens, who teach Pacific studies at the Oceania Centre of the University of the South Pacific. The Oceania Centre is best known as a hub for artistic expression that breaks the mold of standard classrooms and academic hierarchies. Yet, like Oakeshott's and McDougall and Zobule's articles, this piece centers squarely on a standard classroom form within a massive compulsory class taken online by thousands of USP students all around the region. Describing how their own personal schooling journeys inform their relationships with students, Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stevens spotlight how they transform this potentially alienating space into one where students from diverse backgrounds can feel that they belong. The class is oriented around Teresia Teaiwa's well-known metaphor that likens the classroom to a canoe ("vaka" in many languages of the Pacific) (2005); however, Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stevens recognize that many students in the contemporary Pacific do not come from "canoe cultures," so they strive to draw such students into the "vaka crew" without causing them to feel unmoored from the lands from which they have come. The sense of community they create is essential in making students feel safe to take part in difficult conversations about what it means to be a Pacific Islander today.

This dialogue piece reminds us that generations of Pacific Islander thinkers, along with scholars from other parts of the world, have grappled with questions that remain relevant: What sort of schooling will anchor young people in their communities and also give them skills to travel far from home? What will empower them to undertake meaningful work that will benefit themselves, their families, their communities, their islands, and their nations? We hope that this collection recaptures a sense of the prom-

ise of education—a promise that is too often buried in narrow understandings of schooling as a pathway to formal employment or economic growth and assumptions that schooling is a foreign imposition. The articles and dialogue collected here demonstrate that schooling is integral to life in the southwestern Pacific and is transforming the lives of Pacific Islanders as they make schooling their own.

* * *

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Note

1 West Papua is the conventional name for the entire western half of the island of New Guinea. This landmass is administratively divided by the Indonesian state into West Papua Province and Papua Province. Research discussed by Munro, Parker, and Baransano in this issue took place in Jayapura, the capital city of Papua Province.

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Abstract

“Schooling journeys” is more than a metaphor in the southwestern Pacific. Especially in rural areas, many children travel hours each day or live away from home for months at a time in order to step into a classroom. Young people embark on these precarious journeys, and their families make sacrifices to support them, because schooling promises a better life. For decades, policy makers and educators have worried that this promise is misleading because there are not enough jobs in the formal economy to employ all graduates. Anthropologists have critiqued formal education as part of a colonial structure that devalues Indigenous knowledge, alienates young people from home, and creates unrealistic expectations of modernist lives. Yet, as we begin the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is hard to deny that schooling is a profoundly local project throughout the region. In this article, we outline distinctive features of formal education in the southwestern Pacific and suggest that questions about who controls education are more important than questions about whether knowledge is Western or Indigenous. Building on long-standing discussions about the relative importance of academic and practical training in the Pacific, we argue that schooling is about much more than paid employment—it is also a site where relationships are established, affirmed, and transformed. Along with the other contributors to this special issue, we suggest a new approach to schooling that sees it not as a foreign imposition but as an integral part of life.

KEYWORDS: education, Indigenous knowledge, relationships, employment, Solomon Islands, Papua Province, Fiji