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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

The challenges of education and the motivations for Solomon Islands youth to do well in school

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Rachel Dorlene Emerine Hicks

Committee in charge:

Professor Suzanne Brenner, Chair
Professor Alan Daly
Professor Joseph Hankins
Professor John Haviland
Professor Geoffrey White

2024

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University of California San Diego

2024

DEDICATION

For all the young people in Solomon Islands

and

For my daughters.

No matter the journeys on which you travel,

May you always remember the importance of home and family.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACOM	Anglican Church of Melanesia
BSIP	British Solomon Islands Protectorate
CHS	Community High School
CRC	Christian Revival Church
DFL	Distance & Flexible Learning
IAs	internal assessments
IFM	Isatabu Freedom Movement
IPG	Isabel Provincial Government
IPYF	Isabel Provincial Youth Forum
KGVI	King George VI National Secondary School
L1	First language
L2	Second language
MEF	Malaita Eagle Force
MEHRD	Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development
MP	Melanesian Pidgins
NEAP	National Education Action Plan
OBM	Outboard motorboat
PILNA	Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RSIPF	Royal Solomon Islands Police Force

RTC	Rural Training Centre
SBA	standard based assessments
SBD	Solomon Islands British Dollar
SIBC	Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation
SICA	Solomon Islands Christian Association
SINU	Solomon Islands National University
SISTA	Solomons Islands Standardized Test for Achievement
SITAG	Solomon Islands Translation Advisory Group
SSEC	South Seas Evangelical Church
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
USP	University of South Pacific

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In Solomon Islands, every speech begins with a series of acknowledgements, so it only seems fitting to begin this dissertation with acknowledgement of the many people who supported me along this journey.

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Chapter 5 was originally published as a standalone article. Hicks, Rachel Emerine. (2022). Performing Difference, Longing for ‘Home’: Claiming ethnic identities to build national unity among urban Solomon Islands youth. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 33:117-132. I have removed parts that were repetitive to other parts of the dissertation and elaborated on some elements I did not have space for in the article. I have also added additional photographs and clarified my argument in a few places.

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PUBLICATIONS

- 2024 Hicks, Rachel Emerine, and Ninna Villavicencio Miranda. Voicing Contradictions: Photo-elicitation as an Ethnographic Method in Youth-Centered Research. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 13(2).
- 2024 Hartung, Felicitas and **Rachel Emerine Hicks**. Teaching History with AI: Cultivating Transferable Skills in AI-Enhanced Teaching. *Agora* 59 (2). History Teachers' Association of Victoria.
- 2024 Book Review of *Youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands: Livelihoods, Leadership and Civic Engagement* by Aidan Craney. *Pacific Affairs* 97 (1).
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The challenges of education and the motivations for Solomon Islands youth to do well in school

by

Rachel Emerine Hicks

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor Suzanne Brenner, Chair

In this dissertation, I explore the educational experiences and opportunities of youth, ages 15-30, in Solomon Islands. Based on research at two secondary schools in Solomon Islands and the communities surrounding them, this project examines the challenges young people face when pursuing secondary schooling and the cultural values that motivate them to continue in spite of those challenges. I analyze how the experiences that students gain in secondary schools influence

their identities as they intersect with the skills, values, and knowledge that are needed once they complete school. Through this narrative, I ask what drives students to keep going when the odds are against them? To answer this question, I explore the people, places, and things youth use to ground themselves and keep moving forward.

This project is based on seventeen months of ethnographic research in Honiara, the capital city of Solomon Islands, and Buala, the provincial headquarters in Isabel province. Drawing on data collected through participant observation, interviews, surveys, photo elicitation, and social network analysis, I seek to highlight the voices of young people and share their stories. I describe the obstacles to educational success that young people face such as overcrowded schools, exam-based education, and learning in a foreign language. I explore the tensions youth face as they attempt to maintain *kastom* practices but are also drawn to new behaviors and practices through education and a rapidly globalizing world. The ethnographic narrative throughout the dissertation presents a picture of youth who are balancing cultural practices and connections to home while developing modern identities through education, friendships, and connections with the outside world. Despite these challenges, I argue that cultural values and community relationships motivate young people to “*skul gud*” (do well in school) so they can one day contribute to the kin who supported them. Connections to their Indigenous “home,” relationships with family, and commitments to *kastom* values are key in developing a personal identity and are motivations for educational success.

Chapter 1 Introduction: Theoretical Background and Research Methodology

It was a rainy afternoon, as were most days in Buala, Isabel province. I sat at a wooden desk in a concrete classroom with three Form 5 boys, using various items to stop the wind from blowing away the photographs we were discussing. This was the first year Form 5 (Grade 10) was taught at this community high school. The classroom had been built right before the school year started and the school was waiting on funding and time to finish the classrooms. For this reason, there were still no glass louvers in the windows and there was no door in the frame, allowing the wind to freely move through the classroom and across our pictures. School had ended earlier that afternoon, and I asked this group to stay after school to discuss the photos they had taken as part of the photo elicitation project I was doing at the school. For the past 55 minutes we had discussed various topics their photographs revealed – the resources provided by the land and sea around them, the family who supported them, the fun they had at nearby islands, development changes that were occurring, the churches they attended, and their aims after schooling.

As we munched on some ngali nuts and oranges I brought to share, I asked them in the lingua franca Solomon Islands Pijin,¹ “What is the most important thing about life here? Maybe in your photos or something that you did not take a photo of. What is the most important thing in your life?”²

¹ My questions and their responses were all in Solomon Islands Pijin, the lingua franca. However for ease of reading as I start this chapter, I have just provided my English translation of the conversation in the text. To see the Pijin, look at the footnotes. Throughout the rest of the dissertation, I provide the Pijin and English in transcripts within the text.

² Original: “Watnao **most** impoten samting abaot laef lo hia. **Maybe** samting wea hem insaet lo piksa or **maybe** yu no save tekem piksa lo hem. Watnao **most** impoten samting fo yufala abaot laef?”

Wade answered, “Life here, especially these days parents start at the bottom. Parents and our family want us to ‘*skul gud*’ (do well in school). So attending school is very important for us to have a job. We must have a job to help our families. This is very big in our families, so it is big in our thinking. So a very important thing for us is school. Very important. I think it is the most [important] these days, school.”³

The other two boys agreed. Then Seth expanded, “School and church are really important because when you go to school you must pray to God to help you with your studies.”⁴ After briefly discussing the churches they all attended, Wade added, “one other important thing is for us to keep our ‘*kastom*⁵’ and culture. We must keep it.”⁶

In this brief interaction, these young men highlighted elements of life that young people in Solomon Islands expressed to me again and again as being important: school, family, church, *kastom*, and finding a job. Similarly, a few days earlier when I sat down with a group of young women to discuss their photo projects, they said that most important thing in their lives was to “Pray with effort, work with effort, study with effort” (Pijin: *Prea had. Waka had. Stadi had.*). They told me if they did these things, it would help them do well in school and to find a job one day. Unfortunately, for these young people and others like them in Solomon Islands, doing well

³ Original: “Olsem laef blo mifa olsem. **Especially these days** olsem parens stat from botom nao ya. Parens an everi famili olsem ot laek fo yu skul gud nao. So **attending** skul hem impoten tumas lo laef blo mifa fo garem **job**. Olsem. Fo garem waka den helpem famili. Hem nao **big** tumas lo famili blo mifa. olsem. **Big** tumas lo tingting blo mifa. **So** impoten tumas lo mifa tu wanfala skul (JM: hmmm agreeing). Barava impoten tumas. Ating hem **the most these days** skul.”

⁴ Original: “skul an **church** olsem barava impoten bikos mita taem go skul mas go prea wetem big man helpem yu lelebet lo stadi blo yu.”

⁵ *Kastom* is a Pijin word often glossed as “tradition,” “custom,” or “cultural practices;” however, as I explain in Section 1.1.2 below, *kastom* is more than just that. *Kastom* encompasses the cultural practices of a group as well as their religious, political, and social structures (Keesing 1989; White 1993). It is also dynamic, incorporating elements of the past with the present to shape the future (Akin 2013; McDougall 2016).

⁶ Original: “wanfala samting hem impoten tumas lo mifala fo kipim nao **kastom** an **culture**. (RH: yeah). Mifa mas kipim.”

in school and finding a job is a struggle. Yet the desire to give back to their families motivated them to stay in school as long as possible.

In this dissertation, I seek to show what is important to youth in Solomon Islands – the values they hold, the aspirations that drive them, and the connections they hold close. In Solomon Islands, a Pacific Islands nation in the southwest Pacific Ocean with over 730,956 people, 249,831 of whom are youth between ages 15-34⁷ (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 7), there is a “youth bulge” creating a “moral panic” among leaders and development organizations who often consider youth a problem that needs to be solved (Evans 2022; Lee and Craney 2019). This youth bulge has led to high dropout rates from school and high unemployment rates (Evans 2016), leaving youth as “disenfranchised citizens” unsure of their future options (Jourdan 2013, 275). This disenfranchisement is heightened as over 72 percent of the population lives in rural areas (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 27) without access to jobs and the technological advancements that many young people have become accustomed to while in school. This pulls young people to urban areas to seek employment, but many find even fewer opportunities for work in towns than in their rural homes (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 35). Even as young people participate in circular migration between home and urban areas, home remains an important place of connection, identity, and support (Chapman and Prothero 1985; Lindstrom and Jourdan 2017). Young people value home because it is where they have ties to land, connection to ancestors, and claims to an Indigenous identity (Gegeo 1998; Hau’ofa 1994; Whiteley 2015), even if they have

⁷ This is the age of “youth” in Solomon Islands according to the National Youth Policy; however, as Craney (2022) identifies, the definition of youth is also reliant on social recognition as such, as I explain below.

grown up in Honiara. Adults I spoke with constantly complained about the “influences”⁸ introduced through migration and modernization that were affecting youth, things like alcohol, sex, and drugs. They see youth as disrespecting elders, by wearing inappropriate clothes, not participating in community activities, and getting into trouble. But missing in these conversations is the voice of youth. What do they care about? What are their hopes and dreams? Why do they continue in school despite the dismal opportunities for employment? What happens to the youth who are abandoned by the school system? Or for those who “*skul gud*” but still find themselves without employment – what are the hopes, motivations, and values of these students?

In their evaluation of literature written about Pacific youth, Helen Lee and Aidan Craney (2019, 22) suggest that most of the academic and development-oriented literature on youth focuses on young people as problems or occasionally highlights their activism and “success in elite sports.” In focusing on these topics, they say that understanding the lived “experience of those youth—their everyday lives, their aspirations and the obstacles that they encounter” has been overlooked in the literature (Lee and Craney 2019, 23). This dissertation provides a glimpse into the lived experiences of youth missing from much literature. Through photo elicitation, interviews, social network analysis, and observations of youth in and out of school, I show a sampling of lives of young people in Solomon Islands, highlighting their aspirations, the challenges they face, and the values that drive them.

This dissertation highlights the voices of youth and shares their experiences in the hope of suggesting changes that could improve the livelihoods and opportunities for youth. Much of the data for this dissertation comes from interviews and observations with youth who were in their final stages of secondary school. My participants were young people in Honiara, the capital

⁸ “Influences” is a word adopted from English used by youth and adults to talk about the negative influences that outside forces have introduced, such as alcohol, sex, and drugs.

city of the Solomons, and Buala, the peri-urban provincial headquarters of Isabel province.

Through our interactions, I learned about what students find important, what motivates them, and why. I also learned about the challenges they face and what enables some youth to overcome these obstacles. Additionally, I spent time with young people who left school, discussing the difficulties they faced during and after leaving school and how this shaped their values and experiences.

In this dissertation, I demonstrate that although youth face obstacles and challenges in education, they are driven to do well in school so that they can find work and support their families. I analyze the structural issues youth encounter throughout their schooling journey, such as the language of education, exam-centric learning, and financial support. Through this, I argue that a connection to home, both the place and the relationships therein, is what keeps students going amidst the struggles they face in school. I show that youth with strong connections to home and strong social networks have more opportunities to do well in school and find jobs. For those who leave school without work, this connection to home is a safety net and a place to return. The connections youth maintain with home, even when they spend years away, and their relationships with others, ground youth and gives them a sense of belonging, identity, value, and purpose. By highlighting the voices and experiences of youth, I present the complex ways that youth create identities and form social networks that value both local practices and global advancement.



Figure 1.1 Map of Solomon Islands⁹

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework and research methodology that grounded my dissertation fieldwork. I begin by introducing the theoretical background as a foundation to the research questions I asked and the methodologies I used. After introducing my research questions and field sites, I discuss the research methodologies I used. I end the chapter with a brief layout of the overall dissertation.

⁹ I want to give a special thanks to Mario Borrero who helped me format and edit the maps in this chapter.

1.1 Theoretical Background

Interwoven throughout this dissertation is a discussion of education, identity, cultural values, and relationships. My research began with questions about education – what drove youth to pursue education when the likelihood of them finding a well-paid job was limited? And what happened to the young people who left schooling without a guaranteed job or the ability to pursue further education? As I began this research, I located myself theoretically in the literature on education and ethnographically in secondary school contexts. As I interacted with students, I found that one of the key values of youth in Honiara and Isabel was their ethnic identity and connection to home. The connection to “*hom*” (home) or “*ples*” (place of origin)¹⁰, as they say in the lingua franca Solomon Islands Pijin, was important because of the relationships it implied – the connections to a past, ancestry, and cultural values, but also to the kin who supported them in their educational pursuits. Students who did well in school had a web of relationships and people supporting them financially and emotionally. This led me to other literature on cultural values and identity, particularly *kastom* in Melanesia.

This section introduces the key theoretical underpinnings that guided my research questions and analysis of data. As groundwork to the importance of identity and cultural values woven throughout the dissertation, I begin by introducing some of the literature written on identity and cultural values in the Pacific. Following this, I also elaborate on the Melanesian idea of *kastom* and its importance throughout this dissertation. Then I provide a brief introduction to the forces that shape education in the Pacific, which I dive into in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3. Within each chapter of the dissertation, I build on this theoretical foundation through ethnographic narrative and analysis.

¹⁰ In this context, “*ples*” means the place of origin or home village where someone, which for urban youth is determined by the lineage of their parents.

1.1.1 Identity and Cultural Values

My dissertation contributes to the understanding of how education not only equips students with skills, but also influences personal identity development and cultural values. I consider identity to be an ongoing conception that changes over time and in different circumstances. Identity can be claimed in many ways such as through the way someone speaks (Woolard 2016), the clothes they wear (Mills 1999), or as I show in this dissertation, by maintaining connections to home and kin. As scholars have shown, identities can be multiple and fluid (some examples include Anh et al. 2012; Besnier 2011; Chapman 1991; Lindstrom 2011; White 2001). Within Solomon Islands, in rural areas identity often forms in relation to the land people live on and the connections to their ancestors (Whiteley 2015), while in urban areas, it manifests around an “ethnic” identity tied to one’s home, or the land from which their family originates (McDougall 2017). Eric Hirsch (2007, 233) suggests that similar “*ples*-based” (place-based) identities in Papua New Guinea (PNG) create a “possession” of where someone is from and the culture therein, distinguishing people from other groups. Geoffrey White (2001) notes that the idea of “ethnicity” common in modern nation-states does not accurately align with the multicultural, multilingual communities who make up Melanesia.¹¹ He says that since colonization, collective and national identities have formed not only around “descent, language, or place,” but more importantly, “the sense of being indigenous or ‘native’,” which is displayed through “‘tradition’ and ‘custom’” (White 2001, 152). Although the idea of ethnicity is slightly different, the use of an ethnic identity to describe someone’s *ples* (place), home, or language of

¹¹ White (2001, 150) explains how the idea of ethnicity descends from industrialized states where ethnic identity is connected to a minority status. Unlike modern nation-states where ethnicity is associated with “marginality,” within Melanesia “proliferation of linguistic and regional differences” makes it difficult for there to be a dominant cultural group. Nonetheless, as I suggest in Chapter 5, since the Tension connections to ethnicity as determined by one’s island of origin have become more common.

origin has become common in Solomon Islands. As I show in Chapter 5, claiming this home or place-based identity through kastom practices and tradition is key to establishing oneself within the national narrative of unity in diversity, particularly within the multiethnic milieu of Honiara.

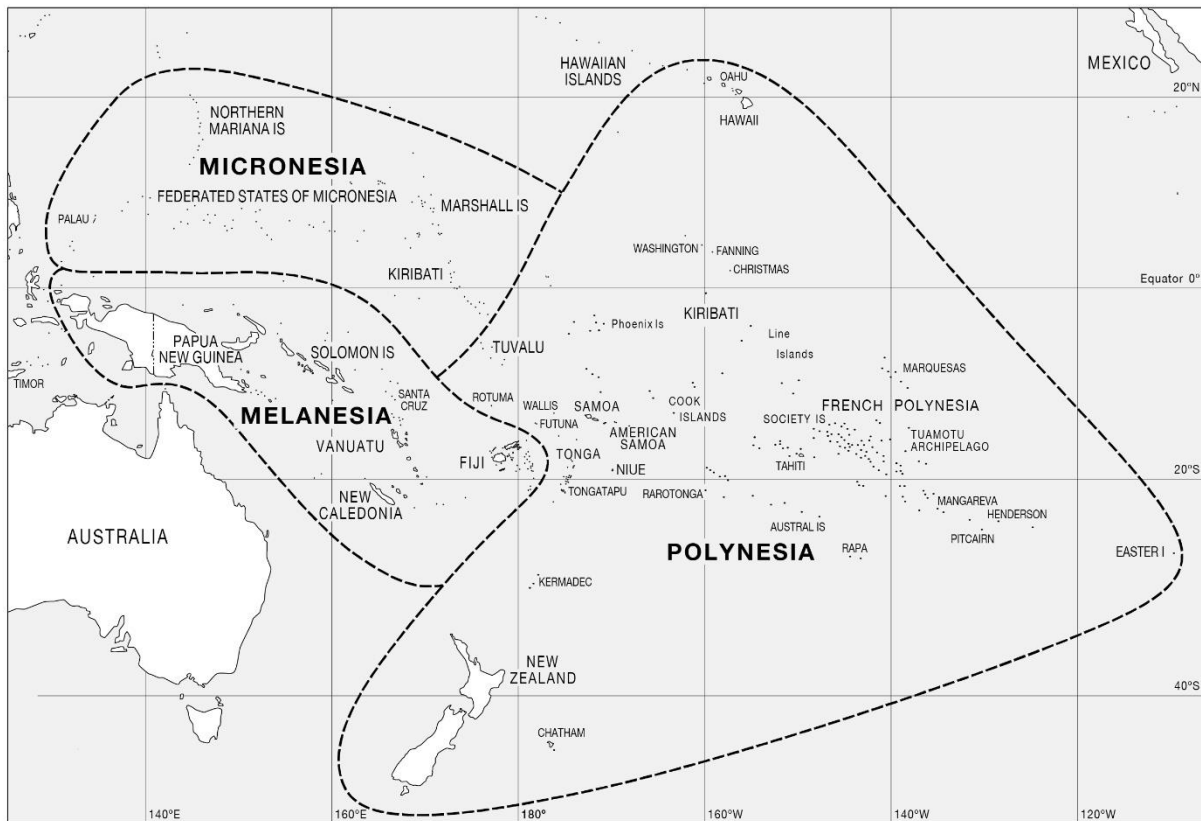


Figure 1.2 Map of Oceania highlighting Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia¹²

In the wider Pacific, identity forms around connections to the islands, countries, or regions of the Pacific one is from, such as Polynesia, Melanesia, or Micronesia. In the early days of exploration and colonialism, cartographers divided Oceania into three groups: Polynesia,

¹² Map from <https://www.mapsland.com/maps/oceania/french-polynesia/large-political-map-of-micronesia-melanesia-and-polynesia> Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 License.

Melanesia, and Micronesia. Polynesia extends from Hawaii in the north, to Easter Island in the east, and New Zealand in the south. West Papua and Papua New Guinea are on the Western side of Melanesia, with the Solomon Islands to the east, and New Caledonia to the South. Micronesia includes many small islands and atolls stretching north of the Solomons. Polynesia and Micronesia were named after their geography (Polynesia, “many islands,” and Micronesia, “small islands.”). However, Melanesians were identified along racial lines as the “black islands,” labeling Melanesians as “inferior” to Europeans and stereotyping them against other Pacific Islanders. As such, there have been critiques and debates around the use of these labels (Kabutaulaka 2015). However, as Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (2015, 126) points out, the terms have also been appropriated by Pacific Islanders to “frame their identities and relationships among themselves and with others.” Specifically, Melanesia has become a term used to highlight the similarities among the islands in the southwest Pacific, which is why I use it throughout this dissertation.

In his classic piece “Our Sea of Islands,” Epeli Hau’ofa (1994) encourages Pacific Islanders to see themselves as living in a sea of islands, as opposed to small islands in a vast sea, prioritizing the relationships and connectedness of all the people of Oceania. Similarly, Emalani Case (2021) emphasizes the importance of connection with ancestors and other islanders across Oceania no matter how distant. However, because of divisions and stigmas of various groups of people within Oceania, particularly of Melanesians such as Solomon Islanders, this pan-Oceanic identity that Hau’ofa dreamed of has not been fully realized (Kabutaulaka 2015). Kabutaulaka (2015, 111) shows that despite this stigma, Melanesians are reclaiming the term Melanesia and “using it in positive, empowering, and progressive ways to mobilize, redefine, and re-present themselves,” which has created a “pan-Melanesian identity (or identities) that embraces and

celebrates the subregion's ethno-linguistic and cultural diversities." In the second half of this dissertation, I show how the celebration of these diversities is displayed through cultural values, community connections, and kastom practices.

Chapman and Prothero (1985) propose that in the Pacific, as in much of the developing world, movement and circulation between home and other places has always been an important part of Pacific Islanders' culture, identity, and ways of life. As such, Chapman (1991, 288) describes the identities and various connections maintained by Pacific Islanders as "an active dialogue" and a "dynamic and open-ended process" where people do not see themselves as solely belonging to the place they reside or the place they are from, nor are they "modern or explicitly traditional." Instead, they are connected to multiple places, people, and values, which become "a sociospatial extension of the 'home' community" (Chapman and Prothero 1985, 10). Similarly, White (2000, 179) suggests that stories of life are about movement, and the routes that individuals follow "become idioms for identity." In Melanesia, these stories of movement and the identities they create are brought into focus through the rural to urban migration and connections to home.

As Solomon Islanders move between home and other locales, home and the relationships therein, become a grounding place and shape their identity. Identity in Solomon Islands is established through one's connection to their "home," the place where they or their parents are from (Jourdan 2017). Most people in Melanesia, including Solomon Islands, are community and family oriented, with families living near one another and helping to take care of each other's children and sharing resources. Whiteley (2015, 81) describes how for West Gao families in Isabel, life centers around the sharing of food, which is one of the ways that communities achieve "togetherness." For urban migrants in the Solomons and PNG, attending the same

church denomination as their home community and observing religious rituals together in town deliberately creates these connections when away from home (Donner 2002; Ryan 1993; and my own observations). In much of Melanesia, the sharing of goods between home and town is a way for people to not only maintain connections but become emplaced in multiple places and relationships (see Feinberg 2002; Lindstrom 2011 among others).

As the numbers of migrants to Honiara have increased since independence, there is a continual navigation between maintaining connections with people at home and navigating the modern influences of the urban area. Understanding the push-pull dynamics of urban migration was a key area of study in the 1980s-1990s (Lindstrom and Jourdan 2017). Authors such as Christine Jourdan (1995a) discussed how young people in Honiara were adopting new lifestyles, hobbies, and ways of dress and talk that were creating a distinct urban identity. At the same time, the existence of “*masta liu*,” young people who lack jobs and wander aimlessly around town, was considered problematic.¹³ Writing about middle-class urbanites in the 1990s, Rachael Gooberman-Hill (1999) suggested that urbanites were trying to distance themselves from *kastom* practices and rural kin in order to create a cosmopolitan “*moden*” (modern) identity. However, during the Tension¹⁴ in the early 2000s the tenuous connections many of these urbanites had with home made it difficult for them to return when they were forced to leave Honiara (McDougall 2017). As result, maintaining connections to one’s ancestral home was brought to the forefront.

In Chapter 5, I argue that maintaining an ethnic identity and connections to home remains an important part of being urban (see also Hicks 2022). For young people, this means finding

¹³ Jourdan (1995a, 220) says “*liu*” comes from the Malaitan word that means “to wander around aimlessly.” She says that *masta liu* have been identified as young men, though there are females, who are “drifting in and out of jobs, in and out of hope, [and] they are very often on the verge of delinquency” (Jourdan 1995:202). See also Evans (2022).

¹⁴ The Tension was a conflict that occurred between 1998-2003 between Malaita and Guadalcanal provinces. I give a brief explanation of the Tension and its connections to my dissertation in Chapter 2.

ways to stay connected with home, even if they have never lived there, while pursuing the modern conveniences and upward mobility available in Honiara. In his description of “The Melanesian Way,” Bernard Narokobi, a key writer of the Papua New Guinea constitution, suggested that Melanesians were able to adapt the best parts of modern influences while remaining “authentically Papua New Guinean” (Golub 2014, 166). Similarly, youth in Honiara appreciate the modern conveniences such as internet and electricity and the lax rules around dress code, but they still value their cultural practices that make them authentically Solomon Islander, such as kastom dance, kastom clothes and jewelry, food from their home islands, and relationships with kin. For youth in Solomon Islands, these cultural values help them maintain connections to home, no matter where they live.

In my examination of values among young people in the Solomons, I consider values in the “sociological sense” – the “conceptions of what is ultimately good, proper, or desirable in human life” (Graeber 2001, 1). Building on the work of Dumont (1986), Joel Robbins (2004; 2007) suggests that cultures have different levels of values which organize elements of life, and the type of value determines how much it influences their lives. He describes “paramount values” as the “aspect of a culture that forcefully structures the relations between the elements that make it up,” while the less dominant values will only be important in “limited, carefully defined contexts” (Robbins 2004, 290). Robbins gives the example of individualism as the paramount value in Western cultures and “relationalism” as the paramount value in Melanesian cultures.

The focus on what Robbins calls relationalism comes from the work of Marilyn Strathern and her idea of relationality. Instead of examining the opposition between individual and society as a unit of analysis, as many researchers were studying at the time, Strathern suggests that

analysis should focus on “‘relationality’ as the foundational basis of Melanesian sociality and ‘dividuality’ as the basis of Melanesian personhood” (McDougall 2009, 6). Strathern (1988, 13) posits Melanesians to be “dividual” persons who are made up of the “plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them.” In this sense, a person is a “social microcosm” of all their relationships and exchanges (Strathern 1988, 13) and a “product of the gifts, contributions, or detachments of others” (Mosko 2010, 218). Through the exchange and circulation of “both corporeal substances and valuables” the many “aspects of a composite self are externalized and objectified,” creating a dividual person (Jolly 2016, 347). Kirkpatrick and White (1985, 11) suggest that the implications of understanding personhood as more than just an individual has implications for understanding the dynamics of “the family, the community, and even the land.” In Chapters 6 and 7, I examine the relationships that young people consider important, especially as they pursue schooling at home and in the city. Although schooling introduces young people to the Western value of individualism, it is the embedded relationships that comprise their personhood, which keeps them grounded and motivates them to do well in school.

The idea of relationality and individualism in Melanesia has been discussed extensively through the study of Melanesian Christianity. In his study of the Christian conversion of Urapmin in Papua New Guinea, Robbins (2004, 292) shows how the Urapmin face a contradiction and tension between the traditional importance of relationships and the individualism introduced through Christianity. Christianity places the onus for salvation on the individual, but Urapmin’s decisions are influenced by the relationships they are embedded in. As a result, salvation among the Urapmin often happens at the level of family or community since relationism (as opposed to individualism or holism) is their paramount value. Building on Robbins’ analysis, Debra McDougall (2009, 7) suggests that relationality and individuality are

both important parts of Melanesian tradition and that Christianity creates “new possibilities for constituting both individuals and collectivities.” Through her example of Ranoggan Christians in the Western province of Solomon Islands, she shows that “certain institutional and economic conditions,” such as a connection to a global religious community, enable Melanesians to disentangle themselves from relationships to kin and land through engaging with these new forms of individuality and collectivity (McDougall 2009, 3).

Within the context of Isabel, the church and schools encourage the values of relationality and individuality. The Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM) is the primary church of Isabel province and as such, Isabel has a connection to the global Anglican Communion. Like the Seventh Day Adventist Ranoggans, young Isabellians are encouraged to pursue upward mobility through education and jobs in town, but they are also expected to remain connected to home and the church. Maintaining this connection to home through communal celebrations of religious holidays and *kastom* events in Honiara, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, is a way for Isabellians to navigate the traditional value of relationality while pursuing individual advancement. In this dissertation, I examine how differing value systems – such as the individuality introduced through education and Christianity and the community orientation and relationality that is deeply-rooted in Pacific cultures – influence, enrich, and collide with each other, and in so doing, how they affect the opportunities and challenges that youth face.¹⁵

Throughout Melanesia, this community orientation manifests itself in the idea of a “*wantok*,” meaning someone from the same language group (literally, one talk), but more importantly it is about the relationships and ways people take care of one another (Kabutaulaka 2015). The word *wantok* arose in the colonial era when Pacific Islanders were taken to

¹⁵ For examples of differing value systems in Pacific education, see Dakuidreketi (2008)’s discussion of Indigenous Fijians and Wendel (2007)’s discussion of a secondary school in Micronesia.

plantations in Australia, Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia for work and formed relationships of support with others from their home countries. However, the essence behind the idea of *wantok* has been integral to “Melanesian societies since time immemorial” (Nanau 2011, 32).

Reciprocity and looking after one another is also key in *wantok* relationships (Brigg 2009; Kabutaulaka 2015; Nanau 2011), which for Honiara-based Solomon Islanders often comes with obligations to help pay school fees and take care of family members who are away from home. *Wantoks* can be on the level of kin or language, but can also extend to people from the same island or even region of the world when in an international context, expanding the pool of *wantoks* as “one moves further away from local contexts” (Brigg 2009, 153).

The *wantok* system is both a social practice connecting urban and rural kin with support as well as a “discourse people use to analyze their own practices” and relationships (Schram 2015, 15–16). On the discourse level, scholars and locals have blamed the corruption of politicians, education, and society on the *wantok* system because people with power, position, or money show favoritism to their family and *wantoks* (Fukuyama 2008).¹⁶ At the same time, these scholars have also identified the *wantok* system as a way to strengthen society and establish a national identity (Brigg 2009; Kabutaulaka 2015; Nanau 2011; Schram 2015). *Wantok* relationships “resemble kinship,” creating relationships of sameness and support within diverse urban areas (Schram 2015, 17). In addition to *wantoks*, urban dwellers build reciprocal kin-like relationships with people in their communities. Fiona Hukula (2017, 162) describes these relationships in Port Moresby, PNG as based on “reciprocal sharing” and “place-based connections such as *wanlotu* (one church), *wanskul* (school mate), and *wanstrit* (neighbours).”

¹⁶ I explain some of the ways the *wantok* system has been blamed for a corruption of education in Chapter 3.

Similarly, as I explain in Chapter 7, young people in Honiara rely on support from their neighbors, church members, and schoolmates.

Throughout this dissertation, I show how connections to home and a strong social network are essential support systems and grounding points for youth identity as they pursue education. Those without these connections struggle to pay school fees and find opportunities after education. Among the cultural values these community connections foster is the maintenance of *kastom*, which as I explain in the next section, is key to claiming an ethnic identity and connection to one's home.

1.1.2 *Kastom* in Melanesia

One of the key manifestations of cultural values in Melanesia is known as “*kastom*.” Within Solomon Islands, *kastom* is essential to the identity, practices, and cultural heritage of Solomon Islanders. Just as identities are multiple, the way *kastom* is enacted also has multiple forms (Lindstrom and White 1993). *Kastom* encompasses the cultural practices of a group, such as their rituals, arts, and dress, as well as their religious, political, and social structures and processes (Keesing 1989; White 1993). The idea of *kastom* is used broadly across Melanesia. Although Solomon Islanders speak of *kastom* as something that all of them share, its manifestations vary depending on province and community (Akin 2013; Moore 2015).

British colonialists and early anthropologists conflated the idea of *kastom* with custom and culture (Akin 2013; Jolly 1992; Lindstrom 2008). British colonialists saw “custom,” as a tradition that was “ahistorical, static, and to some degree unchangeable” that existed before European influences, while the Melanesian idea of *kastom*, is something “dynamic, flexible, and rapidly changing” (Akin 2013, 7). Initially, outsiders considered *kastom* to be something from

the past that was tied to pre-Christian darkness (Lindstrom 2008, 166). Over time, the understanding of kastom shifted to a dynamic “body of beliefs, orientations and practices” that invites “perceptions of continuity, stability and shared identity,” but can also be manipulated and contested (Tonkinson 2000, 170 cited in Lindstrom 2008). As David Akin (2013) describes for the Kwaio of Malaita in Solomon Islands, kastom is something that does not have to come from the past, but instead, often incorporates new ideas, rules, and structures. Similarly, Allen (2013, 17) says kastom in the Solomons “has taken on specific historical, political, and place-based meanings and is frequently invoked in ways that emphasize change and adaptation, as well as continuity with the past.” Kastom for Solomon Islanders reflects traditions of the past but incorporates it into modern practices. In this sense, it has always been a transformation of tradition in response to new influences.

Within the Solomons, kastom emphasizes the local way of doing something. For the Kwaio, kastom represents anything they have “claimed authority” over, which includes local government rule as opposed to “European rule,” but extends to nearly every element of life (Akin 2013, 7). Similarly, Allen (2013) suggests that kastom includes “an ideology of resistance to perceived external domination and exploitation” as seen in its manifestations during Maasina Rule in Malaita and the conflict between Malaitans and in the Indigenous people of Guadalcanal known as the Tension.¹⁷ Solomon Islanders more widely “describe something as kastom when they want to emphasize that it is grounded in local, rather than foreign, ways of doing things” (McDougall 2016, 37). Yet the idea of local does not exclude the adaptation to current ideas and beliefs. Akin (2004, 302) writes that “kastom and culture are highly interactive, each continuously shaping the other over time.”

¹⁷ For information on Maasina Rule see Akin 2013. Allen 2013 explains the Tension in depth. I explain the Tension and its connections to my dissertation in Chapter 2.

One of the ways kastom and culture have shaped each other is through the integration of Christianity and kastom practices. There have been longstanding discussions within the anthropology of Christianity about the ways kastom and Christianity are opposed to or shape one another (Robbins 2007). Akin (2004, 315) explains how the Mountain Kwaio have codified their kastom rules to make themselves distinct from modernity and Christianity, but in doing so, they have created a “dynamic process that has generated new rules with new meanings” and an array of unintended consequences to their social structure and interactions. In Vanuatu, Christian clergy helped shift the local view of kastom from something opposed to Christianity to something that “comes from God” (Lindstrom 2008, 167). For many Solomon Islanders, Christianity and kastom are “inextricably linked” with elements of kastom developing in response to, because of, and intertwining with Christian beliefs (Allen 2013, 17; McDougall and Kere 2011; Timmer 2008; White 1991). Because nearly all of Isabel belongs to the Anglican Church of Melanesia, religion, kastom, and ethnic identity are uniquely intertwined within Isabel province. As I explain in Chapter 6, in Isabel the church is one of the biggest proponents of maintaining kastom values as seen in their integration of kastom dance into holy day celebrations and youth rallies.

Christianity has also shaped the relationships between men and women as it has melded with kastom values. Margaret Jolly (1997, 157) calls Christianity “an earlier and ongoing process of Melanesian modernism” that has shifted the relationships of men and women in the domestic sphere, sometimes diminishing women’s role in the household to focus on being a good wife and mother. Yet, through Christianity, Melanesian women first learned about women’s “improvement and enlightenment” so when they encounter international human rights projects that seek to reshape marriage and family life, they often align well with Christian values and are

taken up with Christian women's groups (Jolly 1997, 157–58). At times, rights for women and respect for Christian and kastom values comes into conflict with one another. One example of this conflict is women wearing “trousers” (shorts or pants) instead of skirts. In Vanuatu women wearing trousers is a controversial subject engaging with discourses of modernity, kastom, Christianity, gender equality and human rights (Brimacombe 2016; Cummings 2008). Chapter 6 of this dissertation discusses how wearing trousers manifests itself in a discourse amongst elders and leaders about the loss of kastom values because women, especially young women, are exerting their independence from men through what they wear.

When speaking to Solomon Islanders, many elders use kastom to contrast the past to the present, noting the ways tradition and cultural values are changing. As such, there is an urgency among elders, church leaders, and the local government to teach youth about their history and cultural values before they are lost. These are seen through government and church sponsored youth rallies and events to promote cultural practices and knowledge in the Solomons.¹⁸ Niko Besnier (2011, xiv) argues that the forces of “history, tradition, and locality” and “the present, modernity, and the global” create “modern anxieties” for Pacific Islanders as these forces influence one another. However, many anthropologists and Melanesians have shown that kastom is not static and change is not something to be feared. As McDougall (2016, 13) describes, “idioms of kastom shape discussions of continuities with the past and possibilities for the future.” Instead of a dichotomy between a reified past and the present, kastom and new ideas influence and transform one another, in the process connecting the past to the present (Akin

¹⁸ For example, while in Isabel, I was invited to attend a youth rally co-sponsored by the ACOM Diocese of Ysabel and the Isabel Provincial government (IPG). During this time, elders discussed lineages and what kinds of interactions were considered taboo. Youth also performed kastom dances and dramas about cultural practices alongside religious songs and skits. Similarly, the Isabel Provincial Youth Forum (IPYF), a Facebook group run by Isabellians, puts on a cultural festival every other year in Honiara to teach youth about cultural practices. This event is funded through private donations and funds from IPG. I discuss the performances at these and other community events in Chapters 5 and 6.

2013; White 1993). Donner (1993, 551) describes kastom for Sikaiana in the Solomons as “a mirror” through which highlighting the “differences of the past” allows people to reflect on “the cultural practices of the present.” In describing the experience of Pacific youth, Lee and Craney (2019, 12) say that anxieties, such as those described by Besnier (2011), cause elders to think that youth will “reject ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ for the perceived benefits of global modernity.” However, Akin (2004, 300) suggests that anxieties of modernity cause people to “elaborate – rather than abandon or simply reify” their traditions, emphasizing the malleability of kastom.

In Chapter 6, I show how, through their photo project and the hours they spent learning kastom dances for performances, Isabellian youth showed me that kastom was something they valued, wanted to learn, and wanted to pass on to future generations. This desire to preserve kastom may have been something they learned from government and church rhetoric, but it was also more than that; it was something they enjoyed learning. Their understanding of kastom was dynamic, intertwining elements of the new with things of the past. In this way, they are encompassing Bernard Narokobi’s idea of “The Melanesian Way” that is “grounded in Indigenous cultural forms of island Melanesia” but also engages and welcomes foreign influences (Bashkow 2020, 189–90).

Kastom and Western-influenced practices often intertwine, transforming both local practices and modern influences (White 1993, 492). Gooberman-Hill (1999, 56) suggests that the hybridization of modern and kastom practices in Honiara “operates in a dialectic with maintenance of ethnicity.” She argues that this hybridization is a way for urban Solomon Islanders to distance themselves from home and kastom (Gooberman-Hill 1999, 48). However, as I show in Chapter 5, there has been a shift in more recent years among youth in Honiara who now seek to claim a provincial identity through kastom practices, such as dance, to ground

themselves in a “home” community and claim a unique ethnic identity amidst the multiethnic surroundings of Honiara. As they claim authentic local identities tied to their home province, they also intermix their cultural practices with urban influences, transforming their kastom practices and creating a unique form of urban identity. These kastom practices ground youth in a sense of local identity and belonging, which gives them purpose and a community to rely on as they face the struggles of schooling and the challenge of finding employment once they leave school.

1.1.3 Education in the Pacific

In addition to understanding the cultural values and identities young people consider important, this dissertation explores the experiences young people encounter during secondary schooling and in the years that follow leaving school. During my research, I sought to understand what happened to students when schooling goals such as academic advancement, tertiary degrees, and high-paying jobs did not match lived social reality. Although access for schooling has improved for some people, such as young women as I explain in the next chapter, the opportunities for jobs after schooling remain dismal. Yet young people continue to pursue education because of the hopes of a well-paid job where they can give back to their family. In the chapters that follow, I introduce the historical context of education in the Solomons (Chapter 2) and examine some of the obstacles young people encounter while pursuing education (Chapter 3 and 4). In this section, I elaborate on some of the structural conditions that shape the educational system in Solomon Islands and influence the aims young people pursue.

One such factor is the Western-derived forms of education integral to the schooling system and curricula in Solomon Islands. With the declaration of education as “a fundamental

human right” (UNESCO 2000, 8), Western-influenced models of education have spread to many postcolonial countries, creating a dependency on multinational organizations for curriculum and resources (Mundy and Verger 2015; Samoff 2003; Tikly 2004). Luteru and Teasdale (1993) suggest that countries in the Pacific accepted aid that shaped education to the donor priorities instead of the needs of the communities receiving aid (see also Coxon and Munce 2008). Solomon Islands is one such country. Initially, Christian missionaries created mission schools, which, in many cases, the colonial government later took over, secularizing curricula. These institutions brought with them Western-influenced values (Boutilier 1992; Crossley and Tikly 2004) that were at odds with traditional knowledge (K. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992).¹⁹

In the over 40 years since independence, multinational organizations have sought to create a curriculum for the Solomons that values the rich cultural history while preparing students for a globalizing world, but these priorities do not always fit with the lived realities of students. These global agendas often disregard Indigenous and “Oceanic cultural knowledge, skills, and values as worthy of inclusion in academic study” (Thaman 2003, 8). Additionally, they do not align with traditional ways of learning or fit with preexisting sociocultural values, marginalizing students, diminishing traditional knowledge, and changing the social status of villagers (Burton 2012; Falgout 1992; Luteru and Teasdale 1993; K. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992). As a result, when school leavers (students who leave before completing secondary schooling) or graduates do not secure employment, they face the shame of returning to their villages without practical skills or the ability to contribute financially to their families (Jourdan 2013). Some of them have gained the academic knowledge prioritized in schools but have no

¹⁹ I expand on the history of missionization and education in Solomon Islands and its effects on education in Chapter 2.

place to apply these skills, while others left because they struggled to learn the subjects taught in school.

Another structural condition shaping education in the Solomons is the Western-influenced value of economic advancement and individualism. With the spread of globalization and neoliberalism, outside forces such as the World Bank have altered the structure of educational systems by providing resources and suggesting policies that focus on global designs and creating global citizens as a way out of poverty (Mundy and Verger 2015; Sobhani 2016; Tikly 2004). The idea of poverty is itself a concept embedded in a cash economy whereas Solomon Islands remains a subsistence economy with deep relational forms of support. Although Solomon Islands is listed among the least developed countries and even though Solomon Islanders are often short on money for school fees, because of subsistence farming and the sharing of resources among relatives and communities, Solomon Islanders do not face the effects of poverty such as starvation and homelessness as experienced in other countries. However, the cash economy is becoming increasingly important for Solomon Islanders to pay school fees and buy modern goods to which they have become accustomed. When sending students to school, parents often approach school pragmatically, sending some of their children to school while keeping others home to help around the house or learn traditional knowledge (Demerath 2000; Oakeshott 2021b; Sykes 2001; K. A. Watson-Gegeo, Gegeo, and Fito'o 2018). Parents and students expressed to me many times that the reason they must do well in school was to find a good job and so they could one day give back financially to their family, highlighting the goal of social and economic advancement, but also relationality.

Educational and economic change have created the idea of the “possessive individual” who is in control of themselves and owes “nothing to society” (Sykes 2007, 213), yet even as

students pursue individual aims, relationships remain important (Oakeshott 2021a; McDougall 2009). Although opinions vary, some Pacific Islanders no longer view schooling as only a Western imposition; instead, they consider it an integral part of family and community life (Hicks, McDougall, and Oakeshott 2021). At the same time, they have their eye on the job they hope will come from their formal educational qualifications even when their future options are uncertain and prospects for employment are bleak (Flinn 1992; Scaglione 2015; Munro, Parker, and Baransano 2021). My dissertation explores what motivates students amidst uncertainty and how youth maintain connections to their cultural and family values even as they pursue individualized education and aims, emphasizing the relationality so key to Melanesian personhood.

As they grapple with integrating local and global knowledge into education, scholars in the Pacific have asked for decades if education is effective and what purposes it serves (Bugotu, Solomon Islands, and Educational Policy Review Committee 1973; Maebuta 2008). Since the late 1800s, educators and education scholars in the United States have similarly debated how education can best equip students for life (Biesta 2009; Dore 1997; Kliebard 2004). This dissertation contributes to conversations on the functions of education by analyzing what students are learning and how this relates to the opportunities they anticipate after schooling. Alexandra McCormick (2014, 181) suggests that although Pacific countries see education as key for development, education is more than just formal schooling, it is learning “for employment and life opportunities.” For this reason, Indigenous scholars call for a deeper understanding of Indigenous knowledge and social practices so that schooling incorporates the cultural values of students while encouraging them to critically examine existing power structures and engage in dialogue with others (Gegeo 1998; Teaiwa 2017; Thaman 2003; Wesley-Smith 2016). Bernard

Narokobi considered education not to be a way out of the village, but a “two-way road of exchange” that enabled a creative integration of “foreign ways” into a “distinctive Melanesian form of modernity,” which was central to his idea of “The Melanesian Way” (Bashkow 2020, 215–17). This dissertation illuminates the tenuous relationships between what students learn in school, the skills they need for global and local advancement, and the ways their educational experiences transform their cultural values, identities, and community relationships. At the same time, it shows how cultural values, identity, and community connections shape the experiences and opportunities that young people have during and after schooling.

A final structural factor shaping education in the Solomons is the large number of young people seeking educational opportunities and jobs without an economy to support them. With over 60 percent of the population throughout the Solomon Islands and 54 percent of the population in Honiara under the age of 24 (Evans 2016), the Solomon Islands has a “youth bulge.” A youth bulge is when over 20 percent of a total population is between 15-24 and has been linked to security concerns and “an increased risk of civil unrest” (Lee and Craney 2019, 4). Many youth have migrated to Honiara in search of jobs or to attend school; unfortunately, many of them do not find jobs or finish schooling, yet they remain in Honiara. In the 2016 population policy, the Solomon Islands government recognized this increasing rural to urban migration and stated that they are seeking ways to provide more job training and better education as well as to create a potential for growth and work in villages (Coordination 2016); however, most of these goals have not yet been realized. One of the “new pathways” the government has pursued is entrepreneurship programs designed to train youth, no matter their level of education, to run their own businesses (Hicks, McDougall, and Oakeshott 2021, 315). However, as Craney (2021, 352) discusses, these are not a “panacea” for unemployment because many times the international

organizations who fund the programs do not contextualize the projects to “reflect local social and cultural needs and practices.” Despite the youth bulge in much of the Pacific, Lee and Craney (2019, 6) argue that focusing on youth as a problem “overlooks the resilience of young people.” One of the goals of this dissertation is to share the stories of youth and the resilience and drive they show despite the problems they face.

Much of education policy focuses on the opportunities that education brings to developing nations, but often ignores the effects that education and the pursuit of upward mobility have on the students and their communities of origin, especially when aspirations do not align with actual circumstances. To examine these effects, my dissertation seeks to understand how the knowledge and experiences that students gain in secondary school intersect—or fail to intersect—with the skills, knowledge, and values needed after secondary school.

1.2 Prior Research & Research Questions

In 2006, for my M.A. in Anthropology at California State University, Long Beach, I conducted two months of research on the island of Santa Cruz in Temotu Province of Solomon Islands. I explored the causes of language shift for Engdewu, the smallest language on the island. One of my findings was that Engdewu speakers blamed schooling for the introduction of Solomon Islands Pijin, which was replacing their Indigenous language in the village. Additionally, I learned that students could only attend school in the village through Grade 3; after that, they traveled to another village or left the island to continue their schooling (Emerine 2009). While in the village, I noticed that individuals who spent time in the city claimed a more national or urban identity through speaking more Pijin, associating with other “urbanites,” and visibly displaying Western goods in their homes (Hicks 2017). These findings made me question

what skills and knowledge students were learning in school, especially when they left their homes and lived in a place with another dominant language and other kastom practices. Although I was unaware at the time, Solomon Islanders had also been asking these same questions about the purposes of schooling in the run-up to national independence (Bugotu, Solomon Islands, and Educational Policy Review Committee 1973) and have continued to ask these questions in the decades that followed (Maebuta 2008).

Building on these ideas, I returned to Solomon Islands during July and August 2017 to conduct pilot research for my dissertation fieldwork and to learn more about the training that students receive in secondary schools. While there I visited schools in Honiara and in rural communities, comparing how the type and location of schools influenced students' academic success. I observed classrooms, noting the topics taught and students' interactions with each other. I had conversations with principals and teachers regarding their perspectives on student success or failure. Additionally, I met with employees in the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) to discuss current education policies and plans, so that my research would be relevant to the current educational context in Solomon Islands. Principals at various schools and staff in the Ministry of Education agreed with my initial hypothesis that there is a disconnect between what students learn in schools and the skills and knowledge needed for life in the Solomons. At the time of independence when Solomon Islanders were becoming empowered to run their own government (and also criticize the colonial institutions they were inheriting), Bugotu et al. (1973) noted that the Solomon Islands government needed to determine the purposes of education in order to create quality education. Yet, over 40 years later, my conversations put into clear focus the urgent need that still exists for research on youth and education, given that no one is systematically studying this disjuncture.

These conversations and interactions guided the development of my dissertation fieldwork, which took place in 2018 and 2019. From the beginning, I wanted my research findings to be useful to Solomon Islanders, which is why I sought feedback on my research topic from teachers and government officials in 2017. As a white woman from a university in the United States, I was often placed in positions of authority and honor during fieldwork. I recognize this positionality opened doors to conversations and research opportunities that others may not have had access to. However, throughout the research I tried to connect back to the people I was working with to share initial findings and to understand their perspectives. By using methods such as photo elicitation with youth (described below), I opened the space for youth to guide the topics we discussed, attempting to reduce the power differential and situate my data collection in their lived experiences.

Since my goal was to conduct research useful to Solomon Islanders, throughout the research process I was sensitive to the directions my research was taking me. These research questions were a starting place for my research, but my conversations and interactions took me in new directions. During my data collection, I sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1. How do students balance the Western-influenced values and skills learned in school with the practical skills and cultural knowledge needed for life in the Solomons?

RQ2. How do the opportunities and challenges that students face during schooling influence their cultural values, identities, and aspirations for social mobility, especially when options after schooling are uncertain?

Through answering these questions, my dissertation explores the practical skills and cultural values that students learn in school and how these align and conflict with the training needed to enter the job market and remain connected to their home communities. This

contributes to ongoing debates about role of education for skills training and knowledge development in the Pacific and elsewhere (such as Avalos 1993; Boutilier 1992; Bugotu, Solomon Islands, and Educational Policy Review Committee 1973; Craney 2021; Maebuta 2011). In this dissertation, I question why some students leave school feeling disconnected and unsure of their futures, while others are equipped with the skills they need for upward mobility. This leads me to explore in depth the obstacles youth face in secondary schooling (Chapter 3) and the challenges with learning English, the language of education (Chapter 4). Even when future opportunities are uncertain, Solomon Islands families continue to prioritize education for their children. Thus, my dissertation considers the cultural and community values that motivate students to pursue education and how these educational experiences transform the identities and aspirations of youth (Chapters 5-7).

1.3 Research Sites and Participants

My previous research experiences provided a foundation for the fifteen months of research I conducted in Solomon Islands between September 2018 and November 2019. I split my time between Honiara, the urban multiethnic capital of Solomon Islands, and Buala, the peri-urban provincial headquarters of Isabel province, an island approximately forty miles north of Honiara accessible by boat or plane. Seventy-two percent of Solomon Islanders live in rural communities as subsistence farmers (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 27), a majority that is reflected throughout much of Melanesia. By comparing an urban area to a peri-urban community that still relies on gardens and local resources for sustenance, I gained a broad perspective of how an urban and more rural context of schooling shaped the knowledge students attained and the opportunities they encountered, which helped to answer my first research

question. Initially my project sought to understand the circular migration between rural and urban communities (Bennett 2015; Chapman and Prothero 1985; Chapman 1991), especially for youth in schooling. However, as I explain below, I found that most young people attending Ridge Community High School (Ridge CHS),²⁰ where I began my research in Honiara, had grown up in Honiara instead of migrating there for schooling, shifting my research to being a comparison of an urban and a rural/peri-urban locale.

To answer my second research question, I sought to understand what drove the desire for social mobility, especially when this often took young people away from their home communities. Alex Golub (2014, 162) suggests that in the minds of Papua New Guineans there is a dichotomy between the urban and rural with the former being a place of modernity and “deculturation” and the latter a place of tradition and cultural values. Similarly, David Oakeshott (2021a, 198) notes that students’ at his research sites in Solomon Islands and Bougainville, PNG considered the village to be a site of “authentic cultural knowledge,” but there was also an “ambivalence about rural life” when considering future aspirations which would take students to urban areas. I noticed a similar dichotomy and ambivalence in the discussions I had with Solomon Islanders. For this reason, in my research design it was important to gain the perspectives of young people in both urban and semi-rural locales to understand the ways education and a connection to home affected cultural values and opportunities after education.

My target population was youth, both those in school and those who had dropped out. What defines someone as a youth is not a clear-cut category in Oceania. The Solomon Islands

²⁰ The name of the school in Honiara and the students’ names at both schools have been changed to protect anonymity according to IRB approval. However, I have kept the original name of the school in Isabel because for anyone familiar to the Solomons and particularly the Isabel context, renaming it would be a sham since there is only one community high school near Buala. For this reason, I tried to remove identifiable details in other ways such as blurring photos and generalizing some details and place names.

National Youth Policy 2017-2030 classifies anyone between the ages of 15-34 as youth (Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs 2017). However, the definition of who is a youth is also based on social recognition and status as a youth. Aidan Craney (2022, 15) suggests that young people transition from being “youth” when they take on “adult responsibilities and characteristics – marriage, having children, employment and/or positions of authority.” In my research, my participants’ categorization of youth varied. Some young people were introduced to me as youth even though they were past the age of 34 if they were still unmarried, had no children, or were still in school. Similarly, many of the young mothers I met were classified as youth because they had not been officially married and relied heavily on their extended kin for support both financially and to raise their children.

In both Honiara and Buala, I began my research at a local community high school and then got to know the surrounding community, building on connections at the school. I focused my research on Form 3 (Grade 9) and Form 5 (Grade 11) students,²¹ ages 16-19, since at the end of the school year students in these grades took exams that determined whether they could continue in schooling or if they were forced out of education. I concentrated on students in the years right before big transitions to get a sense of their aspirations, opportunities, and plans for an uncertain future. I was based at community high schools as opposed to boarding or elite secondary schools²² to gain a better understanding of the average young person in Solomon Islands who does not have the connections, finances, or academic training to attend elite schools. As such, this study provides a wider perspective of the educational experiences of youth than the

²¹ Most schools in the Solomons use British labeling system where Grade is used in primary education and Form is used to designate secondary levels of education. Many schools are slowly transitioning to using just Year to denote the level, but in conversations, my participants referred to their level by the Form label. I move between both labeling systems throughout the dissertation. My research was mainly among Form 5/Grade 11 students, but I also did some research with Form 3/Grade 9 and Form 6/Grade 12.

²² I explain the exam system and the difference between community high schools and elite secondary schools in Chapters 2 and 3.

work of other scholars, such as David Oakeshott (2021a), whose research among young people took place at elite boarding schools.

As a woman, most of my interlocutors were young women. In the Solomons, there are traditional gender norms and rules that make it difficult for cross-gender interactions. For this reason, I felt most comfortable talking with other females and was able to develop closer relationships with them. When I interacted with males, I made sure it was always in a public location and if it was semi-private, I invited my husband to come with me, which often shifted the dynamics of our conversation. As a result, there are only a few young men in my research and most of them were students or teachers at the schools. Specifically missing from my study of youth in Honiara are “*masta liu*,” because as a female I felt uncomfortable and unsafe approaching groups of young men on my own. Similarly, Dan Evans (2022) had challenges interacting with females when studying youth and *masta liu* in Honiara. For this reason, my dissertation provides a good companion to his thesis centered around young men in Honiara. The Buala community was more close-knit, so I was able to approach a few young men I knew through family connections for interviews and conversations without feeling unsafe. Some of these young men were described to me as “*liu*” or more commonly “*kasol*” – youth who had left school and did not have specific jobs or aims; instead, they did odd jobs throughout the week to earn money for cigarettes, betel nut, and alcohol. In the past, the use of “*liu*” was reserved for Honiara where youth went to look for work but struggled to find jobs. The use of “*liu*” in Buala connotes a shift to Buala as an urban or peri-urban environment as well as an expansion of how the term can be used. Despite a little more interaction with young men, most of my interlocutors in Isabel were still young women.

Although most of my interlocutors were young people, teachers at both schools were my initial entrance points to the classrooms and their students. At each school, I began my research with informal conversations in the staff room. I tried to understand who the teachers were, the subjects they taught, and the challenges they faced in teaching. I spent time with teachers from all subject matters but found myself drawn more frequently into conversations with English teachers. As a native English speaker, sometimes these teachers would ask me for advice or to teach a brief lesson. Other times my interest in languages and past research on Pijin drew me into conversations on these topics. In Chapter 4 on Pijin and English, I dive into analysis of interviews with three English teachers at the two schools. I also conducted interviews with other subject teachers, but their voices only make it into the dissertation in a few instances.

1.3.1 Honiara

Honiara is a small city, often called “*taon*” (town), with houses sprawling into the nearby ridges and valleys. In 2019, there were 720,956 people living in the Solomons, 129,569 of whom lived within the 22km² area of Honiara (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 8). Because there is not much land on which to grow food and because most of the nearby waterways are polluted, living in Honiara is expensive. As residents described it, one must buy everything in Honiara – food, water, electricity, rent, transportation, and other supplies – which is a major shift from rural subsistence villages where a network of family and community relations and sharing of resources is key for economic survival. As I will expand on throughout this dissertation, a network of support is still essential for urban residents, but it is more centered on financial resources.



Figure 1.3 Map of Honiara area

My initial research proposal set out to explore the experiences of school leavers, young people who had dropped out of school instead of continuing to the next level. Upon beginning fieldwork, I realized it was hard to identify school leavers and build trust with interlocutors without a community or place to conduct research. In Honiara, for financial and safety reasons, I was living in a compound with other expatriates. As a result, I found a nearby community school to be my “site” of research. This meant that the youth I initially met were all current students in school and most had grown up in Honiara, which was not what I initially had expected. A few youth had moved to Honiara for schooling or because of their parents’ jobs, but most had been there for many years, only occasionally returning “home” for holidays. This shifted my research from school leavers and people who had migrated for schooling, to the experiences of youth more broadly no matter where they were from.

From September to December 2018, I was based at Ridge Community High School, a day school in Honiara. I chose this school because it was within walking distance from my

residence in Honiara and in 2017 the principal had invited me to conduct research there when I returned for fieldwork. Ridge CHS had a primary school with Kindergarten through Grade 6 and a secondary school with Form 1 (Grade 7) through Form 6 (Grade 12). Each grade level had two streams of students with anywhere from 30-80 (or more) students in each stream. Because most of the youth were long-term residents of Honiara, they learned Pijin as a first language. Some of them had knowledge of their parents' languages, but if they were youth from mixed marriages, they felt the most comfortable speaking Pijin.²³

Ridge CHS was not considered a prestigious school; it was established as a school for the students in the nearby neighborhoods, though as I mention in Chapter 3, some people traveled across town to reach the school. Many families had immigrated to Honiara for work so the students at the school called many different provinces "home." Based on my observations in the community and stories from students, the neighborhood surrounding the school was a mix of low or lower-middle class. This was evident in the houses made mostly from timber with corrugated iron roofs, but with kitchens and other smaller dwellings occasionally made from palm fronds and bush materials. There was also a large betel nut²⁴ market at the bottom of the driveway to the school, which was a draw for *masta liu* and young people who hung around smoking, drinking, gambling, and chewing betel nut.

Because of the difference of the academic calendar in the Northern vs. Southern Hemispheres, when I began my fieldwork in September 2018 it was the end of the Solomon Islands school year, which runs from January to December. The classes were wrapping up their

²³ My 2017 article explains this phenomenon of "*haf hafs*" and why there is a shift from reciprocal multilingualism to replacive bi- or mono- lingualism (Hicks 2017).

²⁴ Betel nut is the nut of the areca tree chewed by most Solomon Islanders. When combined with the leaf, bean, or bark from the betel vine and lime powder from coral or shells, there is a slight "psychoactive effect" that is addictive, calming, and reduces hunger (Pratt 2014, 103–4). It is shared during traditional exchanges, but also chewed multiple times a day by individuals.

topics for the year and beginning to prepare for the upcoming exams in November. I began my research by getting to know the teachers at the school and asked for invitations to observe their teaching. After sitting in on classes, I got to know the students and slowly built relationships to ask them for interviews and to join my photo elicitation project. I mainly conducted research with Form 5 students, but also did a few observations and interviews with Form 3 and Form 6 students. I did not teach any formal English lessons at this school, but I spent time during the lunch break and after school helping students in Form 3 and Form 5 improve their writing and prepare for the upcoming exams. I added Form 6 to my research in late October when I realized that these students were facing similarly uncertain futures as Form 5 students. Since I remained in Solomon Islands for another year after this research period, I was able to follow up with a few students from September 2019 to November 2019 to have a sense of their opportunities after schooling.

Although most of my research in Honiara was based at Ridge CHS, I joined various community events that gave me a broader picture of youth in Honiara. A lot of young people in Honiara are in secondary or tertiary education, but there are others seeking employment or taking care of extended family, as well as *masta liu* and other young people who spent their days doing odd jobs, chewing betel nut and talking, and occasionally getting into trouble. Since there was no central youth gathering place in Honiara, to meet youth outside of Ridge CHS I visited multiple churches and community groups. I also attended International Literacy Day and International Youth Week activities organized by local youth and community organizations, where I had casual conversations with young people. Additionally, I attended the Grereo Festival, an event honoring the cultural practices of Isabel, organized by the Isabel Provincial Youth Forum. This event gave me a chance to have brief conversations with youth from all around Isabel as well as

learn more about the cultural practices of Isabel. The data collected from these events and interactions guided the more in-depth conversations I had with the young people who became key participants and grounded my findings in a broader youth context.

My final months of research, September through early-November 2019, were spent in Honiara following up with students from Ridge CHS and meeting young people from Isabel who were based in Honiara. I interviewed multiple young people from Isabel who were living in Honiara, many of whom were there for tertiary education or work, though some were staying with extended family looking for jobs. I also shared preliminary findings at two invited talks – one at the Ministry of Education and one at SINU, the Solomon Islands National University. Since returning from the field, I have maintained connections with some of my interlocutors in both Honiara and Buala through Facebook Messenger, which has allowed me to follow up with questions and understand their life trajectories over the past five years.

1.3.2 Buala

When I moved to Isabel in 2019, I became part of the local community. I rented a house in the village and my neighbors were people who had lived in Isabel most of their lives. Since there was no central gathering place for youth, I decided once again to conduct research at the local school. This provided a comparison of students who had grown up in Honiara and students who had grown up in Isabel.

Buala feels like a small town or large village with small stores, a hospital, police station, school, churches, and administrative offices. It is classified as urban in the 2019 Census based on its “administrative function only,” not its “population size, economic differentiation or population density” (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 29 & 31). In 2019, Isabel

province had a population of 31,420 people with 1,342 people living in the urban Buala area and 2,027 living in the rural parts of Buala ward.²⁵ Given that Buala is a matrilineal and matrilocal society, most people in Buala are related in some way, so the community is very interconnected. Unlike Honiara, residents described Buala as “free” – water flowed freely from rivers and rain tanks, food could be found in gardens and the lagoon, and residents could walk anywhere they needed to go. Since it is peri-urban, residents still were able to buy things from stores and pay for electricity, but they were not solely reliant on money to survive. Many families engaged in subsistence activities such as fishing and farming to provide for their families and earn money, so even though young people perceived items as “free” in Buala, they still required hard labor from extended family members, which embedded individuals in relationships of reciprocity.

From January 2019 to August 2019, I lived in Buala village, spent time at the local day school, Jejevo Community High School (Jejevo CHS),²⁶ and joined the community for events. Buala is more urban than the rest of Isabel province; however, compared to Honiara there was still a lack of employment opportunities, fewer stores, poorer roads, and lower quality healthcare. The Buala area could be divided into three subsections: Jejevo in the east, which included the Anglican headquarters for the province, a community of houses, and Jejevo school. In the middle was Buala town or Buala station as some people called it, where the provincial headquarters,

²⁵ The numbers in the census are a bit confusing to me and Buala residents. There is no statement of where “urban” ends and “rural” begins. As I mention in text, the demarcation of urban is based on the existence of administrative function in Buala station. In a discussion I raised on the Buala Connection Facebook group, my interlocutors thought Jejevo and Buala station were part of the urban Buala count of 1,342. However, the numbers for the rural Buala count (2,027) were too large for Buala village alone. They thought Buala village had around 700-900 people, which might also be part of the 1,342 listed in the urban area. This would mean there are 2,037 additional people in the rural parts of Buala ward, but this also seems like a large estimate. When the two numbers are added together, there were 3,379 people in Buala area on census night in 2019, but it is unclear which villages were included in this count. Additionally, with a floating population for school and work this number shifts throughout the year.

²⁶ For the school in Honiara, I use a pseudonym to protect the identity of teachers and students, but since there is only one community high school near Buala, using a pseudonym would be a sham for anyone familiar with the area. For this reason, I have chosen to use the real name of the school, but I do my best to protect the identities of students and teachers through generalizing details and using pseudonyms for names.

police station, market, hospital, wharf, a few stores, and the only restaurant were located. This blurred into Buala village, where I lived, a peri-urban village that sprawled west from Buala station. Residents estimated that Buala village has between 700-900 people, organized into hamlets by family line.



Figure 1.4 Map of Buala area

Buala village is on the coast of Maringe Lagoon and stretches up the hillside into the nearby gardens. The village included many houses close together organized by matrilineal kin

groups, some of which shared outdoor kitchens. There was also an Anglican church, a kindy,²⁷ and many small family-run stores selling items like soap, canned goods, and rice. There was a small sports area for soccer, volleyball and children's play, and three covered concrete areas, one used for all the church events and another which was the "*lokol club*" (local/bush club)²⁸ for dancing and fundraising events on Friday nights. I attended the local Anglican church most Sundays, joined community events, danced at the *lokol club*, and was welcomed into the extended family whom anthropologist Geoffrey White had worked with decades ago. The village area had houses made from a mix of traditional materials such as palm fronds and modern materials such as timber and corrugated iron roofs. Many people still used outside kitchens for cooking and outside taps for showering. However, a few houses (like the one I rented) had indoor plumbing, refrigerators, and other appliances. Because we were close to Buala town, we had access to electricity and propane tanks, but internet and phone service were still limited and dependent on weather and satellite communication. Although an adult from each household usually worked somewhere in the Buala area, most people spent their time sitting outside their houses, engaging in *stori*,²⁹ chewing betel nut, playing phone games, watching children, and marketing small items like betel nut, cigarettes, bread, and fish and chips.

Jejevo CHS was a smaller school than Ridge CHS. It had a primary school with Kindergarten through Grade 6 and secondary school with classes from Form 1 (Grade 7) through Form 5 (Grade 11). The school had recently added secondary classes, so the students I worked

²⁷ School for preschool and kindergarten aged children.

²⁸ *Lokol* translates to local but is usually used to describe an unsophisticated person from a rural area. In this case it was used to describe an unsophisticated club, which was an outdoor, covered concrete pad where they would set up speakers and music for dancing.

²⁹ *Stori*, from the English word "story," is a Solomon Islands Pijin word used for both informal talking and formal discussions. Sanga et. al. (2020) explain how *tok stori* is an Indigenous form of conversation like *talanoa* in parts of Polynesia and yarning in Australia. When telling someone to come sit down and talk about anything, people would often say, "*bae yumi stori*" (let's talk). Sometimes these were informal conversations and sometimes they explored deeper topics like *tok stori*.

with in Form 5 were the first class of Form 5 students to go through the school. Like Ridge CHS, I began by getting to know the teachers and asking to observe their classes. From there, I chose to mainly spend time with the Form 5 students, though I spent some time with Form 3 as well. The English teacher asked me to teach short English lessons to both Form 3 and Form 5 students and I offered to read essays for the students to improve their grammar and spelling. At Jejevo CHS, only Form 5 students joined the photo project and some of these students also did additional social network interviews.

The students at Jejevo CHS all lived in villages within an hour's walk of Jejevo, many in Buala, but some lived in Tithiro and other villages to the East. Most had grown up somewhere in Isabel, but a few had moved to the area because their parents worked for the local government offices. All the students spoke Cheke Holo, the local vernacular language³⁰, as a first or second language, but they all also knew Pijin because they had learned it through schooling and other contexts or spoke it with their families.

As I became more comfortable in the village and people got to know me through informal interactions, I was also able to interview youth and community members who were not in school. This gave me a glimpse into the opportunities and challenges youth faced once they left school. Some of these youth had dropped out of school early, some had returned home after secondary school or university because they could not find jobs, and others chose to come home where life was “easy” and “free.” Although these young people had pursued education and jobs to different degrees, it was not a source of social division, a point I will elaborate on throughout the dissertation. Instead, these young people enjoyed spending time at each other's houses, sitting around betel nut stands, and helping each other with chores. I joined these young people

³⁰ “Vernacular” or “mother tongue” are the terms used by the Ministry of Education to classify Indigenous languages in Solomon Islands.

for volleyball and Zumba in the evening, danced with them at the *lokol* club during fundraising events on the weekend, learned the kastom *sa'ale olo*³¹ dance with them to perform at church celebrations, and hung out with them outside their houses or at local betel nut stands.

Additionally, to ground my research in the broader Buala community, I conducted interviews and had casual conversations with parents of youth and community and church leaders. My goal in these conversations was to understand the perspective they had of young people in their community and the challenges they believed young people faced. These conversations shaped my research questions and opened doors to conversations with youth I had not met at school.

Because Buala is the provincial center of Isabel province, movement in and out of the village from other islands via boat is relatively easy and frequent. The most affordable option was to pay for passage on one of the ships that brought supplies to and from Honiara, stopping at different ports of call around Isabel, which almost always included Buala. Various ships travelled to and from Isabel once or twice a week. Depending on the seas and wind it was an eight-to-twelve-hour ship ride between Honiara and Isabel and most ships went overnight so people slept in the chairs inside the ship. For those with money, there was a small plane that travelled between Honiara and Fera, the island just across the lagoon from Buala, two or three times a week. Since Fera had a grass airfield, the flight was often cancelled when there was too much rain. Additionally, those with connections to government employees could sometimes catch a ride on a police boat or a special charter, but this was less frequent. Finally, it was possible to travel from Honiara to Buala on a small outboard motor (OBM) boat, but this took lots of petrol, which was expensive, and the ride took about five hours and was quite bumpy at

³¹ *Sa'ale olo* is a kastom dance of Isabel involving a three-count beat, quick footwork, and a dancing stick for women.

times. When traveling to and from Honiara, my husband and I usually took a ship or a plane, but our first trip to Isabel in 2018 was by OBM because both the plane flight and ships had been cancelled many times because of weather and we had a short period of time to go and come back from Isabel.

People who live in other villages in Isabel Province also travelled to Buala regularly for money, supplies, and medical care. Because of the mountainous terrain and regular erosion from rain, there was no road that connected all of Isabel. There was a poorly maintained dirt road that connected Buala to the villages to the west and was frequented by a market truck ridden by students who live at the nearby boarding school or women coming to sell produce in the market. Everyone else comes to and from Buala either on foot or by OBM. The only bank office on the island was in Buala so teachers and other government employees from around Isabel made trips every fortnight to Buala to receive their pay. When they came, they bought the supplies they needed from the nearby shops. There were small health clinics managed by nurses throughout the island, but the only hospital was in Buala. People regularly came to Buala to see the doctor who worked from the hospital two times a week, to attain prescriptions, and for prenatal care and delivery. This frequent movement in and out of Buala from Honiara and other villages is part of the reason Buala has become peri-urban. Despite being peri-urban, it maintains many aspects of village life such as a close-knit community, shared resources, and leadership by local chiefs.

1.4 Research Methods

When I began this research, I only had a slight acquaintance with Pacific Indigenous scholars. For this reason, my research design followed Western methodologies and theories as opposed to being grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing. However, while in the Solomons

and as I have sorted through and analyzed the data, I was introduced to Indigenous scholars who continue to inform the way I conduct research, analyze my data, and share my findings.

In the Pacific, relationships are highly valued and are an important part of engaging in research. Melani Anae (2019, 1) writes of “*teu la va*,” the Samoan Indigenous idea, which “means to value, nurture, and care for (*teu*) the secular/sacred and social/spiritual spaces (*va*) of all relationships.” Focusing on relationships in research places Pacific peoples at the center of all interactions. Beginning my research by consulting with locals and building connections facilitated my way into my research sites and aligns with the importance of relationships in Pacific research. During my 2017 preliminary fieldwork, I met with teachers and officials in the Ministry of Education to determine a project that was relevant to the local communities. When I returned in 2018, I began by visiting schools and getting to know teachers and students before diving into actual research methods. Participant observation and casual conversations in classrooms, the teacher workroom, and with students during their lunch breaks and after class helped me establish relationships where students and teachers could get to know me, and I them. Once I invited people to do interviews, I followed the Indigenous practice of “*tok stori*” or “*talanoa*,” which is based on relationality and forefronts dialogue and mutual listening and learning, instead of the researcher guiding the whole interaction (Sanga et al. 2020). This style of interviewing, which I elaborate on below, follows the standard ethnographic practice of unstructured or semi-structured interviews, which focus on a particular topic, but allow the participants to guide the direction of the conversation (Bernard 2011).

1.4.1 Participant Observation and Surveys

During my fieldwork, I engaged in participant observation, which included attending

classes, school breaks, assemblies, graduation, and staff meetings at the schools. While in Buala, my observations were much broader and encompassed community meetings, church events, holidays, community celebrations, and daily life like playing sports, enjoying tea, and sitting around talking with community members. Additionally, I had the opportunity to attend the Grereo Festival in Honiara, an event organized by Isabel youth to remember the cultural practices and dances of Isabel. Local priests and community leaders also invited me to attend and speak at a youth rally sponsored by the Anglican church in a village near Buala. At both the schools and within the communities I was occasionally asked to give lessons or brief presentations and speeches, which I always did as a small way to give back to the communities. During participant observations and interviews I jotted down brief notes in a notebook and later typed them as more comprehensive fieldnotes. Participant observation and fieldnotes allowed me to triangulate the data collected through interviews and make my own inferences about what was occurring.

Part of my participant observation included attending church and cultural events. While in Buala, I learned a lot about the Anglican Church of Melanesia, which is central to community interactions.³² I celebrated church holy days like Saint's Day celebrations, Easter, and "Binaboli" the coming of Christianity, as well as attending weddings and other community events. I mention these events throughout the dissertation, but most of this data has not been incorporated into the final version of the dissertation. More important than just collecting data, through attending these events and the weekly Holy Communion services, I became a part of the

³² I am a Protestant Christian, but prior to my time in Solomon Islands, I did not regularly attend an Anglican church. However, my positionality as a Christian and a married woman did allow me to attend these services and events more freely and built a level of trust and respect with community leaders. I carefully navigated this so that attending the weekly prayer services made me part of the larger community but did not exclude me from meeting youth who did not attend church regularly. For this reason, engaging in *stori* outside people's houses, joining sports, and dancing on Friday nights became important sites of research to get to know young people.

community. I took the time to value what the local people valued, which helped build trust and establish relationships.

An additional research method I used was brief qualitative surveys. At both schools, I completed qualitative surveys with the students in Form 3, Form 5, and Form 6 to get a general overview of the student population. I asked questions about their school history, home of origin, languages they spoke, and aims after schooling (see Appendix A for samples of questions). I also tried to attain a larger understanding of the cultural values of Isabel youth through a brief survey at the Grereo Festival in Honiara, a youth rally on Isabel, and on Facebook with people who are part of the Isabel Provincial Youth Forum. This data helped develop and guide my research questions while in the field.

1.4.2 Interviews and Social Network Analysis

As mentioned above, I used open-ended interview practices as they more closely aligned with Melanesian *tok stori*. *Tok stori* is a form of conversation reflective of the oral traditions of Melanesia where a problem is raised, and people reflect on and dialogue about the problem together. *Tok stori* creates a dialogue where “listening and speaking are expected to be balanced, and through which the expertise of all is valued” (Sanga et al. 2020, 379). In so doing, *tok stori* minimizes the power differential between researcher and participants as both are expected to learn from each other. It emphasizes “mutual understanding developed over time, and involves a relational space that flattens hierarchies” (Sanga et al. 2020, 379), which is why I spent time getting to know students, teachers, and community members before asking them for an interview. When asking for an interview I would ask someone to “*sit daon an stori stori*” (sit down and talk/story). As such, my interviews look more like an extended conversation where I

would raise a question, and the participants would ask me questions about my experience with the topic in the United States and we would reflect together on what this might mean for Solomon Islands or my research question. Unfortunately, when I framed a conversation as an interview, it often became more formalized, but as the participant became more comfortable sharing with me about the topic, the conversation shifted to *tok stori*.

I recruited participants through snowball sampling beginning with students in Grade 9 and 11 at each school. Through open-ended interviews, photo elicitation discussions, and social network analysis, I was able to conduct thirty-five interviews with secondary school students.³³ Additionally, I conducted open-ended interviews with twelve university students, ten youth not in school, thirteen teachers and administrators, and seven community members. The questions that guided my interviews (see Appendix B) helped me understand the motivations and experiences of students as we explored their life histories, educational trajectories, opportunities, aims, and cultural values. My interviews with community members and teachers helped me explore the experiences of youth from different angles and through their life stories, understand the larger societal situation. Spending time understanding the life histories and trajectories of my participants revealed the tensions and intersections of ideals at “cultural border zones” (White 2000, 174), which I used to explore new topics during my interactions with youth.

Youth in Solomon Islands tend to be very timid when talking with adults from other countries, especially if they must speak in English. As a result, I conducted all interviews in the lingua franca Solomon Islands Pijin, which all my interlocutors spoke fluently. Since I am fluent in Pijin, speaking in Pijin opened the door to deeper conversations. When conducting surveys

³³ I worked with a total of thirty-five secondary students. Some did traditional open-ended interviews. Others were involved with photo elicitation or social network interviews. Some of the youth participated in multiple forms of interview.

and asking students to fill out the photo worksheet that was part of the photo elicitation project, I gave them the option to use English or Pijin. Everyone chose to write in English since this was the most common language for writing. When discussing their photos, often youth would read the description first in English and then verbally elaborate on it in Pijin. In Isabel, sometimes there were also side conversations in the local language, Cheke Holo, which they then would translate for me. This “translanguaging” and movement between English, Pijin, and Cheke Holo allowed students to explore topics, tell stories, and make jokes throughout the interviews, which provided deeper insights into their lives that would not have been possible if the conversations were solely in English.

Of the interviews with youth, twelve young women participated in ego-centric social network analysis. Ego-net analysis is a form of social network analysis that is “actor-centered,” where the student (ego) being interviewed is the center of network and the researcher asks them to identify other actors/alters with whom they have important relationships (Mamas, Hartmann Schaelli, and Daly 2019). The egos are asked to list names of people in their lives (name generator) and then place them on their social network. A series of questions are asked (name interpreter) to provide “characteristics of the people in their lives, along with details of the relationship with each one” (Borgatti and Ofem 2010, 28). It has been used successfully in classrooms to understand the “social capital” and relationships of students (Mamas, Hartmann Schaelli, and Daly 2019). Ego-net analysis is useful when studying large populations because it “allows researchers to use probability sampling” which makes the findings more generalizable (Borgatti and Ofem 2010, 28). Because of the value of family and community in the Solomons, social network analysis was a key tool for exploring how relationships impact educational opportunities.

I conducted participatory social network analysis with young women from Isabel (and one from Malaita living in Honiara) to understand the importance of their family and community support. All my participants had attended some schooling or were still in school. Four young women were Form 5 students and one Form 3 at Jejevo CHS. One girl had been in Form 4 at Jejevo CHS the year before but dropped out. Two students were in secondary school in Honiara, one was in Form 6 when I did the social network interview, but she was a Form 5 student I had worked with at Ridge CHS the year before. The other was a Form 2 student at a school in Honiara but was in Isabel on holiday. The other four young women had been or were currently attending classes at university. Two of the current university students were in Buala visiting family on holiday and one of them had a young daughter who lived in Buala while she attended university. The other two young women had finished university and were both looking for work, but lived at home raising their children, one as a single mom and the other in a “bush” marriage.³⁴ Although according to some definitions of youth, having children would have disqualified these young women from being “youth,” they were introduced to me as youth because of their young age and lack of a consistent job.

I used a “participatory visual mapping technique” (Mamas, Hartmann Schaelli, and Daly 2019) where young people were asked to create their own ego networks by writing names on pre-drawn concentric circles. I began with a “name generator” question: Who are the most important people in your life? And asked young people to list them on a piece of paper. After they listed names, I asked them to identify where they fell on the concentric circles. The inner circle consisted of the people most important to them, the middle circle included the people who were important but not as important as the center, and the outer circle were people important but

³⁴ A bush marriage is a term used to describe two people who are living together and often they have children together. However, there has been no legal or religious ceremony to officially “bless” the union.

not as important as the other two. Once they placed people within the circles, I asked a series of “name interpreter” questions: Who was this person? How often do you see them? What do you do together? Why are they important to you? I would follow up with other questions as appropriate to fill in details about my interviewee’s lives and their relationships to the people on their social network maps. After discussing who everyone was, I drew lines connecting those who knew each other. After returning from the field, I transcribed the interviews and then coded them to identify patterns of relationships that were key to youth. The information collected through these interviews informs much of the dissertation, but especially Chapter 7 on relationships.

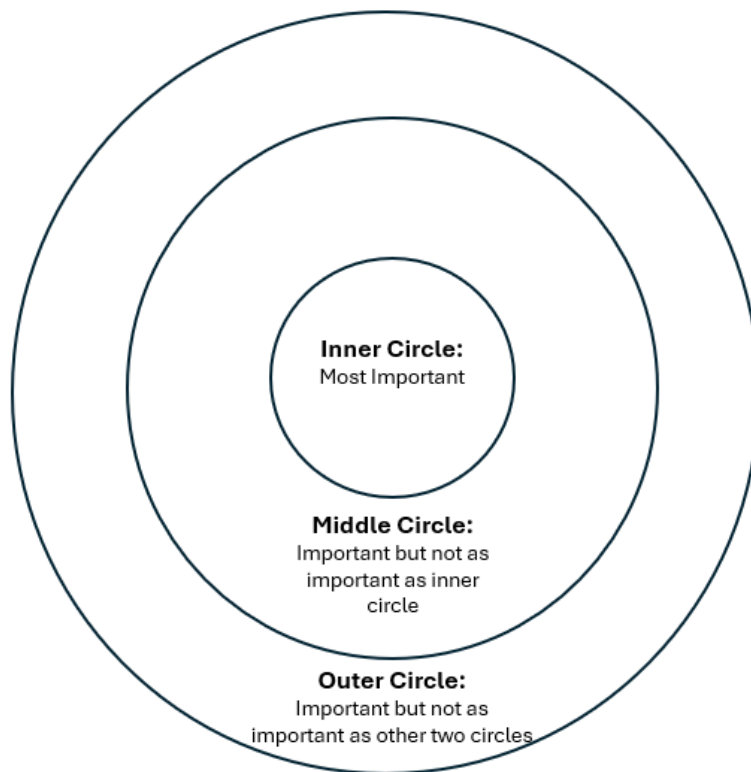


Figure 1.5 Example of concentric circles labeled by students in social network interviews

As I transcribed interviews and fieldnotes, I translated them from Pijin to English. Much of my translation was at the level of idea or thought to get a general sense of what occurred in the interview. However, for the transcriptions included throughout this dissertation, I captured the exact words as accurately as possible. Because my interlocutors regularly mixed English words with Pijin, when possible, I identified English words in my transcriptions using a bold font. When I was uncertain of a definition or spelling, I relied on *Pijin: A trilingual cultural dictionary* (Jourdan and Maebiru 2002) for explanation. At times, I asked my interlocutors for small clarifications via Facebook messenger. However, since I completed my transcriptions and translations upon returning from fieldwork, I was unable to attain specific input from my participants.³⁵ Therefore, any errors in translation and transcription are my own.

After transcribing interviews and fieldnotes, I identified topics and themes related to my research questions by observing repetitions of ideas, phrases, and concepts that I use to code the rest of my data (Bernard and Ryan 2010). Throughout the research I corroborated my initial findings by asking follow-up questions and identifying themes that arose from the research rather than imposing them myself. My coding included topics such as participant demographics including level of school completed; class subjects and skills learned in school; aims and educational goals; cultural values and practices; important relationships; and obstacles in education. After I transcribed and coded in NVivo software,³⁶ I analyzed the data by comparing the responses of various participants. I looked for not only similarities, but also unusual

³⁵ A few times I asked my participants to read something I was working on, but because communication relied on email and Facebook, it was hard to get them to follow up with specific comments. Additionally, the internet connection in Buala is unstable so I have had limited communication with my participants there.

³⁶ I have used multiple versions of the software between 2018 and 2024. Most recently I used NVivo14. See Lumivero (2023) *NVivo* (Version 14) www.lumivero.com

responses that do not fit the general patterns to determine if they are outliers or alternative interpretations that I need to address.

1.4.3 Photo elicitation

Of the thirty-five secondary school students who participated in my research, twenty-nine students also joined the photo elicitation project. Sixteen students joined the project from Ridge CHS, four males and twelve females. Thirteen students participated from Jejevo CHS, three males and ten females. This project asked students to take pictures of the people, places, and things that were important to them and describe them through writing and interviews. The research questions guiding my fieldwork asked about the practical skills and social values that students acquired through education and how these influenced their cultural values, identities, community connections, and aspirations for social mobility, especially with the diminishing opportunities after schooling. Participant observations in the schools and communities allowed me to evaluate the skills and training students received, but values that students learned were harder to observe. Since values and motivations are abstract concepts to discuss in interviews, the photo elicitation project gave me concrete examples I could consider together with the students. The information I learned from this photo project became one of the key parts of my data I analyzed and incorporated into the dissertation. I chose this methodology because similar projects helped youth express themselves and limited the power differential between researchers and participants (Johnson, Pfister, and Vindrola-Padros 2012; Hicks and Villavicencio Miranda 2024; Mikhailovich, Pamphilon, and Chambers 2015a).

The act of giving a camera to youth who lack social status and have a limited voice in the community empowers them (Strack, Magill, and McDonagh 2004) to express how the values and

social networks attained through school and community life contribute to their identities. This, in turn, broadens the significance of this research project.³⁷ Because youth are choosing what they photograph and describing why it is important to them, this methodology gives an intimate glimpse into the community from their perspective. This type of methodology is especially important in educational contexts where, because of my age and status, students often viewed me as a teacher. The photo project enabled the students to reveal parts of their lives and describe their lived experiences beyond the constraints of institutional language and roles (Hicks and Villavicencio Miranda 2024).

As I designed and implemented the photo project, I loosely followed the “visual-narrative elicitation process” used by Wentworth (2017) among Vanuatu women and connected it to more traditional Photovoice methods as described by Wang (1999). When explaining the photo project to the students, I asked students to take pictures of the people, places and things that were important to them, hoping they would capture images of a “typical day in their life” (Johnson, Pfister, and Vindrola-Padros 2012, 170). I intentionally left the prompt vague so that it did not bias them toward taking photos of particular things.

After they took their photos, I asked the students to choose 10-15 photos they wanted to describe and tell me more about. After printing these photos, I asked them to explain on a worksheet who or what was in each photo, where it was taken, and why it was important to them (see Appendix C for example of the worksheet). Once they finished describing the photos, I asked them to participate in individual or group interviews where we would *stori* about the

³⁷ In an article with Villavicencio Miranda, we describe in depth why this was a useful methodology, particularly in educational settings with clear power differentials (Hicks and Villavicencio Miranda 2024). I want to acknowledge that some of the description and analysis of this as a methodology mentioned in this chapter happened in conversation with Villavicencio Miranda.

photos. At Ridge CHS, most of the interviews were one-on-one, but two were in pairs.³⁸ At Jejevo CHS, all the interviews were in groups of three to four people, which allowed for more *tok stori* about the photos. At Jejevo CHS, I also included an activity where the participants organized the photos according to themes and then discussed as a group what these similarities revealed about what they found as important. In both contexts, during our recorded interviews, I incorporated questions about the students' personal lives, cultural values, and school experiences to give context to the photos and explore how these photos might reflect the values they learned at school or from their communities.

After completing the interviews, I identified the topics that students most frequently took photos of or mentioned in interviews, which became codes for analyzing the data. The most frequent topics mentioned by students were friends, family, *kastom*, schooling, church, and the natural environment. I coded friends, family, schooling, and church as such if a student took a picture of or at these places or mentioned them in a description. In Pijin the word *kastom* is used to describe traditional practices and beliefs so this became my code for photos that reflected cultural items. Many students mentioned the beauty of scenery and flowers, gardens to grow food, and the river or ocean for swimming, which I combined and coded as the natural environment.

As I analyzed the photos taken for this project during and post-fieldwork, I recognize that photos are a representation. They are not a “transparent window on the world” but are a “sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness” and must be understood within the historical

³⁸ I had intended to do group interviews at Ridge CHS, but because the photo project wrapped up at the end of the school year, it was hard to find a time where youth could meet in groups. For this reason, I met with my participants whenever they were available. I offered that they could meet in pairs or small groups, but for most it was easier to meet one-on-one. I noticed that the interviews in pairs were more dynamic, so when I conducted the project at Jejevo CHS, I asked to meet with the students in small groups. For a few students, I followed up with additional one-on-one social network interviews.

and cultural context (Mitchell 1984, 504). Even though I provided little direction on what to photograph beyond things that were important to them, as an outside anthropologist students may have had their own conceptualizations of what they thought I wanted them to take pictures of, which biased them to take photos of certain things. For example, as I analyzed the photographs, I noticed some elements of daily life were not captured, especially more “modern” or “secular” practices like dancing at clubs, drinking, and gambling.³⁹ Yet the fact that these photos are a representation chosen by the youth is part of why I found this methodology so revealing and useful throughout my dissertation. Although topics were missing from the photos, the youth chose to highlight things that many adults told me youth did not care about like *kastom* practices, community events, and the environment where they lived. Instead of me as the researcher suggesting youth discuss these topics by asking questions about them, the youth chose which parts of their lives they wanted to capture and describe to me, which made the research method participant led.

Our discussions about the photographs also revealed details that an observer, especially someone like me coming from a vastly different positionality, would not notice from just looking at the photograph or through interviewing alone. As the youth described the images, the meaning developed in relationship to the photographer and viewers and expanded as the pictures were interpreted and described over time, a process which linguistic anthropologists call entextualization (Barker and Nakassis 2020; Nakassis 2019; Silverstein and Urban 1996). Entextualization reveals the social relations, interactions, and contexts that give an image meaning. Analyzing not only the image but how the young people described and interpreted the

³⁹ In Chapter 6, I elaborate on the topics that were excluded, the implications for this, and why the method was useful, nonetheless.

photographs expanded my understanding of what youth found important, even if that was only a representation or segment of the many things they valued in their lives.

1.5 Dissertation Layout

This dissertation is organized into two parts: the first half focuses on the challenges and obstacles that youth face in schooling. The second half explores the lives and cultural values of the youth in Honiara and Isabel. My first research question asked what students were learning in school and how this aligned with local knowledge and practices. In my pursuit of understanding what young people were learning in school, I encountered many obstacles that limited their ability to be successful in school. Chapters 2-4 explain the history of education and the challenges young people face in schooling. It is important to understand the challenges youth face in education to grasp the importance of their homes, relationships, and cultural values when pursuing education and upward mobility. Chapters 5-7 are ethnographic, sharing the stories and experiences of the young participants in my research. These chapters address my second research question by explaining the cultural values, relationships, and identities that young people consider important. Throughout my dissertation, I argue that a connection to home, and the relationships therein, are a grounding place for youth as they pursue educational opportunities. Connections to home shape their identities, motivate them to do well in school, and provide a safety net when youth are unable to attain the opportunities that they thought education would bring.

This chapter, Chapter 1, described the theoretical foundations that grounded my research, introducing key ideas such as identity, kastom, and education. It also introduced my research questions and the methodologies I used to answer these questions.

Chapter 2 provides background to the Solomon Islands context. I provide an overview of the early encounters with outsiders, the colonial history, and the Tension of the early 2000s. As I introduce these historical events, I reflect on the ways they have impacted the current educational structure. I also provide a general overview to the current educational context of Solomon Islands and the opportunities available to youth. This context is necessary to understand the Western-influenced and local values that have shaped the educational structure in the Solomons, as my first research question sought to answer. From there I move into a discussion of the use of English, Pijin, and vernacular languages in Solomon Islands. Because of the linguistic diversity in Solomon Islands, language knowledge is often conflated with identity – knowledge of a vernacular language becomes a marker of ethnicity but also rural connections, while knowledge of English marks someone as an educated urbanite. As such, in this chapter, I reflect on how language dynamics influence opportunities for youth in the Solomons, which is an important part of answering my second research question.

In Chapter 3, I explain the schooling context of Solomon Islands in more depth based on the observations and interviews at the two schools where I conducted research. I reflect on the skills youth learn in school and how this prepares them (or not) for life after schooling. While conducting research at the schools, I noticed multiple structural factors that inhibit student learning. These include, but are not limited to, chronic absenteeism, classroom overcrowding, lack of training in practical skills, language use in schools, and exam-centric education. I show how these challenges are interconnected in what I call a cycle of obstacles to student success. To show the ways youth overcome these challenges, I share the stories of multiple students reflecting on their aims after education and the training they receive to prepare them for this. I also show how education and skill training are a non-linear pathway for youth where they move

in and out of schooling, jobs, and times where they “*stay nomoa*” (hang around without any real purpose)⁴⁰ with family. Through this analysis, I argue that the intersection of these obstacles leads to high dropout rates from school and high unemployment, but despite this, youth continue in school to find a way to overcome them. The findings from this chapter contribute to global conversations about the purposes of education for university preparation and career training.

After looking at educational obstacles broadly in Chapter 3, in Chapter 4 I focus on the topic of English and Pijin use in schools. One of the challenges students and teachers face in school is the language of education. English is the official language of education, but it is a second or third language for the majority of Solomon Islanders. For this reason, Solomon Islands Pijin is spoken in many schools. In Solomon Islands, the languages someone speaks are a marker of ethnolinguistic identity and educational attainment. The ability to speak, read, and write English well affects how well students do on their exams, which determines their opportunity for pursuing higher education and finding a well-paid job. Understanding the way language knowledge affects young people’s identities and opportunities for social mobility is important for answering both research questions. The data in this chapter comes from classroom observations and interviews with three English teachers. I explain the official stance of English immersion education and the unofficial use of Pijin that occurs in the classrooms. I then discuss the language ideologies around the use of Pijin and English and how these influence the languages used at school. Finally, I show how these three teachers overcome some of the challenges of teaching English, particularly by translanguaging with Pijin in the classroom. As such, I argue that translanguaging is a useful tool that teaches students English and builds on their multilingual

⁴⁰ “*Stay nomoa*” was a Pijin phrase often used by youth when I asked them what they would do after schooling. They would tell me if they did not make it to a next level of schooling, could not get a scholarship, or find a job they would “*stay nomoa*,” meaning they would just hang around their house or community and do small marketing of things like betel nut.

repertoires while pushing against the colonial stigma of Pijin. However, because it is done informally, it continues to limit student success in school. These findings contribute to dialogues on linguistic ideology, global and world English(es), and teaching English in international and second language contexts.

Chapter 5 was originally published as an article for *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* in 2022 and has been slightly modified for this dissertation. This chapter centers on Honiara youth and how and why they remain connected to “home” even if they have grown up in the multiethnic capital city. This analysis comes from observations at the schools and other Honiara events, as well as the photo project with Ridge CHS students. In this chapter and the original article, I argue that the “unity in diversity” narrative taught in schools requires students to have a connection to an ethnic identity which is tied to their “home” province, even if they have never lived there. I show how urban youth establish this connection to home through the dances they perform and the kastom jewelry they wear. The idea of home becomes a grounding place for youth who grow up and attend school in urban areas and allows them to claim a unique ethnic identity within the multiethnic urban landscape of Honiara and within the panethnic identity of Solomon Islanders. This chapter informs both research questions by reflecting on the values young people are learning in school and how schooling shapes their identities.

Chapter 6 builds on the idea of home as a grounding place for youth but centers on the experiences of youth in Isabel, particularly as revealed through their photo projects. In this chapter, I illustrate the important connections young people have with land, community, church, and kastom, showing how schooling experiences shape and are shaped by these values, which is key to answering my second research question. I discuss how the land and waterways in Isabel are places that meet the physical needs of young people while also providing opportunities for

fostering relationships. Through examples of church events and cultural festivals, I explain the unique intertwining of religion, community, and kastom so important to life in Isabel. I describe the ways young people value kastom and cultural practices as seen in the hours they spend learning kastom dances. At the same time, I also nuance this discussion by showing how youth are finding ways to combine their kastom values with modern influences as they pursue upward mobility. Through this, I argue that the importance of home reveals an identity for young people that values both kastom and modern influences. This is why connections to home remain a grounding place for youth no matter where life journeys take them.

As the final data analysis chapter, Chapter 7 shows the importance of relationships for success in school and life more broadly. Maintaining connections to home and one's Indigenous identity is important for these relationships to be successful. This chapter reveals which relationships were important to young people and why. Relying on data collected through social network analysis and the photo projects in both Isabel and Honiara, I explain how a dense social network made up of family, friends, and connections to home enables youth to stay in school longer and opens the doors for more opportunities for youth. Without me suggesting they focus on schooling, many students included in their social networks their teachers, the family members who pay their school fees, and friends with whom they study. Through dense social networks with strong ties, youth receive the financial and emotional support they need to do well in school and life. However, not every youth has these relationships, so I explain what happens to youth with these sparser social networks. By comparing the experiences of current students and school dropouts, I demonstrate what happens to youth who do not reach the aims they thought education would provide. This chapter highlights the importance of relationality for young people, in particular the motivation to *skul gud* so that they can give back to the people who supported their

educational journey and in so doing became a part of them.

The dissertation ends with a brief conclusion, Chapter 8, summarizing my overall argument and the potential contributions my research makes. I also provide some brief limitations of the research and suggest other areas for further research.

Chapter 2 Solomon Islands Historical, Ethnographic, and Linguistic Context

To understand the opportunities, challenges, and experiences of youth in Solomon Islands, it is important to understand the context of where they come from. The goal of this chapter is to introduce the history and context of education, language, and youth in Solomon Islands. It provides a foundation for the rest of the dissertation and includes details that will be referenced throughout.

I begin by giving a background to the Solomon Islands broadly, including its colonial history. I then show how this colonial history influences the education system in Solomon Islands and explore some of the challenges and opportunities that youth face. I also provide a brief introduction to Isabel province highlighting the history and context that make it unique. From there I look specifically at the linguistic landscape in the Solomon Islands, its colonial roots, and the influences these languages have on the educational system. I also discuss the domains where English, Pijin, and vernacular languages are spoken. I discuss language because the languages people speak can index an ethnic, urban, or rural identity and have implications for the learning that takes place in schools.

2.1 Solomon Islands Background

The Solomons Islands is an archipelagic nation comprised of six main islands and 900 smaller islands, many of which are uninhabited, extending from Papua New Guinea to Vanuatu (For a map see Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1). There are over 70 Indigenous languages spoken in the Solomons along with English and Solomon Islands Pijin, the lingua franca (Simons and Fennig 2018). As of the 2019 Census, there were 720,956 people living in Solomon Islands. Of these people, there were 199,138 people living in urban areas, 129,569 of whom lived in Honiara. The

census office defines urban areas as the capital and all provincial administrative centers, except Rennell-Bellona. This designation is made based on “administrative function only” as some provincial headquarters are very small (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 29). Isabel province had a population of 31,420 people, with around 3,300 people living in the Buala district (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, xxiii). Throughout this section on Solomon Islands background I will move between an introduction to Solomon Islands history broadly and nuance it with specifics happening in Isabel province.

2.1.1 Early encounters with outsiders

The history of Solomon Islands prior to independence has been well documented by Pacific historians, such as Judith Bennett (1987). I provide here a summary of the early encounters in Solomon Islands among explorers, whalers, and traders, that eventually led to more permanent settlements of missionaries and colonizers. The goal is to provide a backdrop to the various outside influences that have left their mark on the Solomons.

The first recorded encounter between Europeans and Solomon Islanders was in 1568 when the Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendaña came upon the island of Isabel, which he gave the name Santa Ysabel⁴¹ after the patroness of his journey (Bennett 1987, 19; White 1991, 83). Initially the Spaniards were welcomed and incorporated into the networks of existing chiefs on Isabel, but many later encounters with Solomon Islanders ended in armed conflict (White 1991, 84). Further explorers and cartographers mapped the islands in the 1760s. By the end of the eighteenth century, there was frequent trade among Europeans and Solomon Islanders. In the

⁴¹ Santa Ysabel is still the name listed at the Anglican Church of Melanesia diocese, but on government maps the island name is now written as Santa Isabel and the province is Isabel Province. Colloquially, everyone refers to the island and province as Isabel, which is what I do throughout the dissertation.

first half of the nineteenth century, European and American whalers replaced explorers regularly visiting the islands for trade (Bennett 1987, 20–21). In 1846, a group of French Roman Catholic Marist missionaries visited Solomon Islands, but after multiple brothers died of illness or were killed, including Bishop Epalle who was killed on Isabel, the Catholic missionaries left and did not return to the Solomons for fifty years (Bennett 1987, 41; White 1991, 93). Bennett (1987, 44) suggests that before the mid-nineteenth century “it is doubtful that any European” except for the Catholic missionaries was “consciously trying to change Solomon Islanders” beyond sharing new technologies such as iron.

In the mid to late 1800s, as the whaling industry declined, traders began frequenting the Solomon Islands seeking tortoise shell, copra, and other tropical products. Some traders became residents of the islands. Among these traders were labor recruiters who brought Melanesian indentured laborers to Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand to work in the agricultural sectors (Bennett 1987, 46–47). Between 1870 and 1910 around 30,000 Solomon Islanders went to Australia, Fiji, Samoa, or New Caledonia as laborers (Bennett 1987, 86). In the early days, some men were kidnapped or “blackbirded” as it has been called, but by the 1880s many people were volunteering or being volunteered by their communities to work overseas. Often the recruitment methods were deceptive and the labor on the plantations was exploitative and violent (Akin 2013, 14). However, the pay laborers received allowed them to buy many goods, like tobacco and clothes, which were increasingly becoming important to Solomon Islands life. Additionally, Solomon Islands Pijin, which is related to the other Melanesian pidgins (Tok Pisin in PNG and Bislama in Vanuatu), was developed on the plantations and brought back to the Solomons.

A variety of Christian missions established themselves in Solomon Islands in the mid- to late 1800s. In the 1850s the Anglican Melanesian Mission (now the Anglican Church of

Melanesia) became active in Solomon Islands and was the only active missionary body until 1880. The Melanesian mission took some young men to New Zealand for short periods to train them as clergy, but when they returned home, they “forgot most of the little they had learned of Christianity” (Bennett 1987, 91). However, Isabel was one of their most successful mission grounds and became a model for future missions outreach (White 1991; Whiteley 2015). By converting chiefs to Christianity who then recruited their followers, much of Isabel became Christian under the Anglican Melanesian Mission beginning in the 1860s (White 1991, 93). The Roman Catholic Marist missionaries returned to the Solomons in 1898 and settled in Guadalcanal and Makira. Two resident traders invited Methodist missionaries to Roviana lagoon in Western province in 1902. In 1914, the Seventh Day Adventists settled in Viru in Western Province (Bennett 1987, 61–63). These are just a few of the early missionary endeavors active in the country. The names of many of these early missionaries are embedded into the current landscapes through the names of schools, churches, and roads.

Since the early days of missionization, more denominations have entered the Solomons, including the South Seas Evangelical Church (SSEC), Christian Revival Church (CRC), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Christian Fellowship Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Bahai, and many other smaller religious groups. Although most denominations have some presence in multiple provinces, generally the denominations follow geographical lines often reflecting the early missionaries to those provinces: the Methodist Church is dominant in Western and Choiseul Provinces; the Anglican Church is primary in Isabel, Central, and Temotu Provinces; half of Guadalcanal’s Christians are Roman Catholic; and SSEC is the main denomination in Malaita and Rennell Bellona Provinces (Allen 2013, 37–38). Among this, Isabel Province is unique because the entire island belongs to the Anglican Church of Melanesia, creating a unique

intertwining of religion, politics, and community (White 1991). For young people, this makes an unusual alignment of island identity with religious identity that is not common in many of the other provinces.

2.1.2 Colonial history and its effects on education

Colonization and missionization drastically influenced the content and way of learning for children in Solomon Islands. In this section I explain colonial history and the effects that this had on the educational system in the Solomons. With such a geographically and linguistically diverse country, it is hard to generalize what colonization and Christianization looked like for every community. However, to provide context to the dissertation I identify some of the broad effects of colonialism as well as give examples from Isabel Province.

From 1877 to 1893 Solomon Islands were under the “loose jurisdiction of the British high commissioner in Fiji” (Bennett 1987, 104). Because of increasing pressure from Germany, France, and the United States to claim territories in the Pacific and the threat of potentially losing their labor force for plantations in Australia and Fiji, Britain felt a need to officially establish a presence in the Solomons. Great Britain declared the south and central Solomon Islands a protectorate in 1893, but Isabel and Choiseul provinces remained under German sovereignty until 1899. Charles Woodford became the first Resident Commissioner of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP) in 1896 (Bennett 1987, 105). As a protectorate, the islanders were “British protected persons” but did not have any rights as British subjects nor did Britain have any “obligation to govern or develop” the Solomons (Akin 2013, 36). During the colonial period, colonial offices were established in the Solomons with the goal of suppressing the warfare, headhunting, and raiding in hopes of establishing a plantation economy (Akin 2013, 37). Many

local groups tried to resist colonial rule, but by the 1930s the last resistance to British control had been stopped and Great Britain began to focus on establishing “indirect rule.” Indirect rule had been used in African colonies to establish native administration that was “grounded” in “the concept of ‘custom’” (Akin 2013, 50).

Although there were some influences from the colonial government in Isabel, the Melanesian Mission (later the Anglican Church of Melanesia or ACOM) was the main European presence on the island and shaped the history of Isabel in a unique way. In 1908, Santa Ysabel, described by missionaries in the Melanesian Mission as the “‘best district’ in the Mission” had thirty village schools, 1,600 baptized Christians and its own Indigenous clergyman, Hugo Hebala (Hilliard 2013, 176; Whiteley 2015, 29). The Mission was focused on transforming society to reflect Christian values and developing Indigenous clergy. Melanesian catechists trained in Mission schools did most of the evangelical work on the island. Through the conversion of Indigenous “chiefs,” whole villages and families converted to Christianity. The first paramount chief, Monilaws Soga, helped the Mission to establish schools in local village and within three decades (around 1920) the whole of Isabel province was under the Melanesian Mission (White forthcoming). The role of Indigenous leaders in the church and government established an indigenized form of Christianity that was intertwined with kastom practices. The influence of Christianity also decreased warfare and headhunting with very little interference from colonial policing, giving Isabel “the reputation of a peaceful society capable of dealing with its own affairs” (White 1991; forthcoming, 6). Because of the strong presence of the Melanesian Mission and the way local people adopted the beliefs, the British colonial government did not interfere in local matters and did not set up a government station on Isabel until 1918 (Whiteley 2015, 34).

When the colonial government did intervene, it led to fragmentation of the well-established forms of church and Indigenous leadership (White 1991, 207).

Up until the 1940s, the colonial government did not focus on developing the Solomon Islands, especially within the areas of education and medical services (Akin 2013). Education was left to mission schools which had been in the country since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Melanesian Mission expanded its outreach, establishing schools in other provinces (White forthcoming, 7). For the missionaries, schooling was a way to “convert and civilize” the local people through ensuring that converts changed their behavior and were faithful followers of the Bible (Boutilier 1992, 79). During this period, Isabel continued to be recognized as a “model of church-focused development” with 54 villages who had their own “resident teacher” and six Indigenous clergy on the island (White forthcoming, 7).

In the 1930s the government recognized that mission schools were “from an educational point of view... quite inadequate” because they focused on religious teachings instead of practical skills and knowledge (Akin 2013, 151 citing many authors in the 1920s and 1930s). Government reports in the late 1930s and 1940s said that “curricula excluded whole realms of knowledge thought to be unsuitable or dangerous for Melanesians” while others said that many of the Solomon Islanders in mission schools could not read or write (Akin 2013, 151). Because of the demand for more education, the government began establishing schools in the 1940s. There was a constant disagreement between the government and mission schools about the balance of religious and secular education in the curriculum since some missionaries thought secular education distracted from the work of God. The lack of government education also meant that the “government had never cultivated an institutional domain within which to instill colonial ideology,” which opened the door for rebellion against the colonial government by provinces

such as Malaita in later years (Akin 2013, 152). In Isabel, the lack of development spurred the first movements of local empowerment in the 1930s as Indigenous clergy and chiefs came together and organized meetings that came to be known by names such as “Parliament movement,” “Chair and Rule,” or the “Fallowes movement” (White 1991, 198). These meetings discussed the dissatisfaction with the colonial government and petitioned the government for further support and development, especially requests for technical training schools, health services, and a reduction of taxes (Bennett 1987, 261).

Colonial governments had the goal of producing a population that was controlled, assimilated, and able to meet the strategic needs of the colonizing countries (Boutilier 1992, 80). Jourdan (2013, 274) argues that in Solomon Islands and other colonies such as New Caledonia “the purpose of this education system was not so much to form citizens but to form subjects.” 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). Instead of the hands-on learning that happened prior to colonialism, learning shifted to the classroom where students sat for hours listening to lectures and reciting math, spelling, and other lessons (Falgout and Levin 1992; Thomas 1993, 238). Most of these schools prioritized a standardized European curriculum, causing specialized Indigenous knowledge to be lost or devalued (Scaglione 2015, 286; K. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992).

Through Indigenous forms of learning, children in Pacific communities learned skills and gained knowledge through everyday activities such as “observing and participating in family and community life” (Thomas 1993, 234). This has been called an “open” system of instruction where general knowledge of life was open to anyone who wanted to learn it through observation

and emulation (Scaglione 2015, 285). Contrasted to this is “closed” systems of knowledge (Crocombe 2013) where specialized knowledge was held by an elite few and eventually passed down through initiation ceremonies (Thomas 1993).

One example of this Indigenous form of learning were the *fa’amanata’anga* sessions used by the Kwara’ae in Malaita (K. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992). Traditionally, Kwara’ae taught their children critical-thinking and problem-solving skills through *fa’amanata’anga* sessions where elders helped children reason through a problem or question based on the context, incorporating lessons of morality and cultural heritage in the village. This form of learning contrasts with Western-influenced classrooms where learning is teacher-centered and focused on recitation in English. In formal schools, students learned to repeat the right answers and act in proper ways but did not gain the critical-thinking skills that came through *fa’amanata’anga* sessions. Among the Kwara’ae, over time the knowledge gained in school became more valuable because of the doors that it opened for jobs. The shift to attaining knowledge through schooling instead of through *fa’amanata’anga* sessions has limited the role of elders in the community, especially in the transmission of “traditional forms of knowledge and teaching” (K. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992, 20). It also has limited the way students learn valuable life lessons, critical thinking, and skills that cannot be taught in classrooms. In personal communication with Indigenous scholar David Gegeo in 2019, he said that *fa’amanata’anga* sessions no longer happen among the Kwara’ae. Although Western models of schooling have taken the place of some Indigenous forms of learning, Indigenous knowledge is still passed on through many everyday interactions and through special festivals and events, as discussed in Chapter 6.

Solomon Islands⁴² was a protectorate of Great Britain from 1893 until 1978. For most of the Pacific, decolonization began after World War II as European countries faced increased demands for local empowerment and began releasing their control of Pacific states. These demands were fostered by wartime experiences and encouraged by worldwide moves toward decolonization, as supported by the United Nations. As imperial powers began to relinquish their control of colonial states, education shifted from a colonial to a postcolonial system.

Prior to independence, many politicians and educational planners began thinking about what education in Solomon Islands should look like. One of the key planners was Francis Bugotu, “the best-educated Solomon Islander in the 1960s and 1970s” (Moore 2013). In 1969, Bugotu wrote a play for the opening of the new Church of Melanesia cathedral in Honiara. In the play he showed the pulls Solomon Islanders felt between life in the village and the opportunities that education and work in the city brought (Bugotu and Hughes 1969). A few years later, Bugotu conducted a review of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate’s education system. Based on interviews with parents throughout the Solomons, Bugotu wrote that Solomon Islanders considered the education system to be “an alien system which had been imposed here and which is unsuited to the needs of the people of the islands” (Bugotu, Solomon Islands, and Educational Policy Review Committee 1973, 1). He observed that many parents thought education would guarantee jobs for their children. However, recognizing that there were not enough jobs, Bugotu argued that education should not be “measured in purely economic terms” but should be concerned with “the development of the whole man,” reflecting themes also identified in his play (Bugotu, Solomon Islands, and Educational Policy Review Committee

⁴² Many of the ideas in this paragraph and the two that follow were originally published in my 2021 article in *The Contemporary Pacific*, which I co-authored with Debra McDougall & David Oakeshott. I was the main author of this section of the article and have rephrased the points for the dissertation, but I want to acknowledge the shared analysis that was done in that article.

1973, 30; Bugotu and Hughes 1969). Therefore, in the proposal for a new education system, Bugotu and the other committee members “suggested that education should be restructured to provide students with more training in practical and technical subjects that could be used in villages” (Hicks, McDougall, and Oakeshott 2021).

Most educational systems in international contexts developed out of colonial “pedagogies and forms of knowledge” (Tikly 2001), which “bear the hallmarks of the colonial encounter in that they remain elitist, lack relevance to local realities and are often at variance with Indigenous knowledge systems, values and beliefs” (Crossley and Tikly 2004). Under colonial rule, these systems aimed to “socialize the indigenous populations to Western values.” After colonialism ended, the educational systems, especially in the Solomons, “remained largely unchanged,” continuing the colonial legacy (Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 7). Many of the textbooks were written by outsiders and did not consider Indigenous people’s beliefs, values, or ways of learning (Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 6–7). Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo (1992, 22) argue that schooling in the Solomons needs to be “redesign[ed] to integrate local knowledge with the social, political, and scientific knowledge necessary for survival in the international arena.” In this sense, they are arguing that schools should teach both local knowledge for those who will live and work in rural areas, as well as knowledge that allows individuals to engage with global issues. Finding a balance of these two things has been and continues to be a challenge for Solomon Islands educators.

Since the time of Bugotu, the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education has taken steps to integrate practical training into the curriculum (see Chapter 3 for some examples). However, the academic track has always held more status. The first generation of scholars at the time of independence found “prestigious jobs in government sectors” and other students found well-paid

jobs in public service such as teaching and nursing. The following generations assumed they would be able to find similar jobs in the public sector, but as education becomes more accessible and more students graduate, “these jobs are increasingly scarce” (Hicks, McDougall, and Oakeshott 2021, 313). In the 1980s, almost all the students who graduated from National Secondary Schools found formal employment, but by the mid-1990s only about half of them were able to find jobs (Oakeshott and Allen 2015). For my research population, the educated grandparents of the young people in 2018 found formal employment, while many of their parents have struggled to find jobs. Craney (2021, 343) suggests that during this time “rather than supporting students to develop locally relevant technical skills and critical-thinking capabilities, leaders were educated in British ways of thinking and understanding while the general public was prepared as willing workforce candidates.”

Because these educational systems had only provided access to school for a privileged few, the postcolonial governments had “a limited human resource base” on which to build the new government, which continued to widen the gap between the elite and everyone else (Tikly 2001). This gap among the elite who are usually men and everyone else is apparent in Solomon Islands where many of the current government leaders attended the best schools, providing them with access to government positions, while those who attended lower-performing schools work more typical, blue-collar jobs.

At the time of independence, the only places for secondary education were eight National Secondary Schools, of which, “five were located in or around Honiara with none on Malaita,” which drove many people to migrate to Honiara to access educational resources. This mass influx of people to Honiara and the demand for education put the “already inadequate education sector under considerable strain” (Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 4). Honiara became the place that

everyone went for education and to find jobs, leading to the influx of migrants that led to the Tension explained in the next section.

2.1.3 The Tension

One historical event that is still fresh in the minds of many Solomon Islanders is “The Tension,” a conflict which occurred from 1998-2003 between Guadalcanal and Malaita province. It has been summarized and analyzed by many scholars (Allen 2013; 2018; Kabutaulaka 2001; Kwa’ioloa and Burt 2007; Moore 2004 among others), but for the purposes of this dissertation, I will provide a brief overview of the events and explain some of the ways it has affected identities and education, which is relevant to the rest of the dissertation. However, it should be noted that during my research period, the Tension was not a topic of discussion that came up regularly in interviews, conversations, or the classroom unless explicitly part of the curriculum.⁴³

After World War II, the capital of Solomon Islands was moved from Tulagi, Gela in Central Province, which had been the headquarters of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, to Honiara, which led to an influx of migrants from other provinces, particularly Malaita. The original migrants acted as guests and acquired land through appropriate, traditional means, but as the population swelled many squatter settlements formed on the outskirts of Honiara and the residents did not respect the cultural practices of the original landowners (Allen 2013; Oakeshott 2021a). This caused the Indigenous people of Guadalcanal, to be “disgruntled” with the government’s “failure to address developmental issues” and “the presence of settlers from other islands,” particularly Malaitans, on their land (Kabutaulaka 2001, 2). This came to a head in

⁴³ Oakeshott (2021b) also found that students and teachers at prestigious secondary schools in Solomons did not discuss the Tension unless it was explicitly part of the curriculum. Similarly, Evans (2022, 5) found that young men in Honiara did not discuss the Tension though it “shaped their views toward the contemporary Solomon Islands state.”

November 1998, when “a group of indigenous Guadalcanal men attacked Malaita settlements in northwest Guadalcanal, destroyed properties and chased settlers.” Over the following months, the violence escalated as young men on both sides were killed. By June 1999, “at least 50 people had been killed” and over 20,000 people from all provinces, though mostly Malaita, and been forced out of settlements around Honiara (Kabutaulaka 2001, 3). These people, some of whom had spent most of their lives in Honiara, fled to their “home” provinces, relying on tenuous connections to kin and land to welcome them back (McDougall 2017).

Throughout 1999, there were regular confrontations between the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) and the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), a group of Guadalcanal militants. There were many attempts to broker peace throughout 1999 and 2000 using traditional means of conflict resolution (*kastom*) as well as Christian approaches, but they all failed for a variety of reasons, including revenge fighting, fractures among militant groups, and the collapse of the police force (Allen 2013). In early 2000, a group of men claiming to represent the Malaitans who had been displaced joined together and called itself the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). Their goal was to seek compensation for the property destroyed and people killed by IFM as well as represent “Malaitan interests in Honiara” (Kabutaulaka 2001, 3). On June 5, 2000, MEF and some Malaitans in the RSIPF joined together to take over the state armory at the police headquarters and staged a twenty-six-day coup to oust the current legitimate government headed by Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa’alu (Kabutaulaka 2001; see Moore 2004 for detailed description of the coup). Manasseh Sogavare “was subsequently elected under duress” as the leader of the new government (Kabutaulaka 2001, 4). The fighting continued to increase in the months that followed. From June 2000 to July 2003 Solomon Islands “suffered a complete breakdown of its national political and economic system” (Moore 2004, 20). Two prime

ministers, Manasseh Sogavare and Allan Kemakeza, tried to fix the country and restore law and order, but failed.

At the request of the prime minister at the time, Allan Kemakeza, on July 24, 2003, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) came to the Solomons. The army consisted of soldiers and police officers from Australia, New Zealand, and other countries in the Pacific Islands Forum (Moore 2004, 22). In the few weeks after the intervention by RAMSI, almost 2,500 weapons (including machine guns, shotguns, and revolvers) and 300,000 rounds of ammunition were peacefully surrendered from Malaita, Honiara, and Gizo (in Western province) (Moore 2004, 212). Many ex-militants and politicians were arrested over the years that followed (Allen 2013). The RAMSI intervention was described as “the actions of good neighbours to a friend” carefully avoiding any “colonial hangover” (Moore 2004, 212). RAMSI helped maintain peace and restore law and order. By March 2004, many of the troops left Solomon Islands, switching to “a policing rather than a military operation” (Moore 2004, 213). After the country was stable, RAMSI focused on “an ambitious state-building agenda” that included an integration of Australian public servants into government agencies and “the implementation of a neo-liberal economic reform programme.” In 2013, RAMSI began to transition its mission to “bilateral and multilateral development programmes” and finally withdrew completely in July 2017 (Allen 2018, 90), just months before I began fieldwork. In the years since the Tension, even while I was doing fieldwork,⁴⁴ many forms of reconciliation have taken place using Christian, kastom, and state tactics, to restore relationships among the people and clans involved (Oakeshott 2021a).

⁴⁴ I observed a reconciliation ceremony between teachers from Malaita province and Guadalcanal province during the 2018 World Teacher’s Day celebrations in Malaita. Each group presented the other group with gifts such as kumara (sweet potato), pigs, betel nut, and other fresh produce, which were used for a feast that night. The feast was shared with all the teachers present, which included representatives from most of the provinces. Through observing the exchange and sharing the food, we were all embedded in the reconciliation efforts. The goal was to build lasting

Most people agree that RAMSI was tremendous in restoring peace, but there is still some dissatisfaction with their state-building and development efforts (Allen 2018). Australia and New Zealand still have a significant presence in the Solomons through their development programs, financial assistance, volunteer programs, and advisors to the government and other organizations. Since 2019, China has also become a major contributor of development assistance, making Solomon Islands a focus for tensions playing out on a global stage.⁴⁵

Initial news and government reports referred to the Tension as an ethnic conflict. However, many analysts argue that this is an over-simplification of the issues that created the crisis, such as dissatisfaction with the government and disparate access to resources among the local people (see Akin 2013, Allen 2013, and Kabutaulaka 2001). Although the reasons for the Tension are complex and extend beyond ethnicity (Kabutaulaka 2001), boundaries were often drawn around ethnic groups. The Tension highlighted the unequal access to resources and development that had been occurring since the colonial era. “Island based deprivation” (Bennett 1987, 18) meant that some islands had more natural resources to sell, and others relied on labor migration. This resulted in “island-wide and regional identities” that were in competition with one another for the limited resources (Allen 2013, 33; 2018; Scott 2012). Ethnic identities remain important on a national level as seen through the “unity in diversity” narrative emphasized by the government and incorporated into the school curriculum, as well as on an individual level as seen through one’s close connections to “home,” both of which I explore further in Chapter 5.

relationships and account for past wrongs. They did not specifically discuss details of the Tension, but it was understood that this was part of the reconciliation. See Oakeshott (2021a) Chapter 4 for explanation of practices of reconciliation.

⁴⁵ In September 2019, Solomon Islands began accepting financial aid from China, which caused Taiwan to drop its diplomatic ties with the Solomons. Many countries, such as the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand were unhappy with the increasing presence of China in the Solomons and in response increased their development aid to and presence in Solomon Islands. This included the United States officially opening an embassy in the country. In the neo-colonial era, Solomon Islands and other small Pacific nations continue to be pawns on a global stage.

Scholars of Solomon Islands disagree whether the curriculum prior to the Tension created nation-building. Based on the interviews conducted by Oakeshott among teachers and administrators in the education sector, only one person, the current Permanent Secretary of Education, believed that the curriculum “fostered a sense of national identity.” The other people he interviewed said that the curriculum underrepresented minority groups, specifically Polynesians, and emphasized ethnic stereotypes, such as the aggressiveness of Malaitans (Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 6). At the time, much of nation-making took place informally outside of the classroom through interactions with peers at boarding schools, singing the national anthem, and children’s play (Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 8). Building on the work from Foster (1997), Oakeshott and Allen (2015, 1) differentiate between nation-building and nation-making. Nation-building is “pursued by political elites, who use state instruments such as education systems, but also public ceremonies and media, to transmit their particular national narrative,” whereas nation-making is “a process of ongoing, organic dialogue” that takes place in many forums among many people over time. The lack of nation-building in the curriculum and the lack of shared identity as a Solomon Islander may have contributed to the Tension. Oakeshott and Allen (2015, 14) show that since the Tension there have been revisions in the curriculum and improved access to education, which may become “stepping-stones to national consciousness.” In Chapter 5 I show how a shared identity as Solomon Islanders is now emphasized in schools through the unity in diversity narrative, which is a part of classroom discussions and celebrations. Similarly, Oakeshott (2025) argues that even though there was not explicit nation-building in the classrooms he observed, nation-making regularly occurred outside of the classroom through unity in diversity at school events and gatherings, which were more important to the formation of a national consciousness than classroom learning.

The Tension also affected the education system financially. During the height of the Tension because of an overall financial decline, funding from the central government, the source of educational funding post WWII, was disrupted and even disappeared. As a result, many teachers were paid irregularly, the infrastructure of schools deteriorated, and teachers were not given funds for basic supplies (Maebuta 2011). This unequal access to resources, which I expand on in Chapter 3, continues especially among rural schools (Jeremy Dorovolomo 2008; Oakeshott and Allen 2015). During the Tension, all schools were affected, but schools on Malaita and Guadalcanal experienced greater consequences. Many schools were shut down because of fears of violence and the schools on Malaita became overcrowded with the many students who fled Honiara. The presence of RAMSI helped restore peace and reopen schools as well as attracted financial donors to reengage with education (Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 8). However, as I explain in Chapter 3, there is still a lack of resources and unequal access to education throughout the Solomons.

2.1.4 Isabel Province history and social context

As explained in my introductory chapter, my dissertation research was split between the capital city of Honiara in Guadalcanal Province and Buala, the small provincial headquarters of Isabel Province. For that reason, I present here a brief introduction to Isabel society, particularly the parts of Isabel history, sociality, and cultural practices that are important to the arguments I present throughout the rest of this dissertation. One of the key arguments of this dissertation is the importance of home for young people in the Solomons as seen through their identities, *kastom* practices, and community relationships. For this reason, it is important to understand what home in Isabel looks like. In Honiara, some of my research participants were from Isabel,

but many came from other provinces such as Malaita. Although much of the description of rural society in Isabel is similar throughout the Solomons, there are aspects of Isabel society that make it unique, as I explain below.

Isabel province is known as the longest island in the Solomons and as one of the least densely populated islands. According to the 2019 Census, there were 31,420 people living in the 4,136 km² land area of Isabel province. This results in Isabel having a population density of approximately 7.6 people per square kilometer, making it the second least densely populated province. As a comparison, Honiara, the most densely populated urban area has a population density of 5,916 people per square kilometer while Malaita, the province with the largest population, has a population density of 41 people per square kilometer (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 13). Most villages in Isabel are situated on the coast with gardens in the nearby mountains. At the time of Christian conversion, many small villages migrated to coastal areas and formed large coastal villages centered around a local church (White 1991, 104). The living quarters in many of the coastal villages, such as Buala and Gao, are built close together with family members of the same lineage living near one another and sometimes sharing an outdoor kitchen (Whiteley 2015).

Throughout the Solomons lineages can be matrilineal, patrilineal, or bilateral depending on one's place of origin. Isabel is a matrilineal society where clan membership and the right to land is passed through the mother. In Maringe district (where Buala is located) along with the neighboring Gao district, lineage is traced through three exogamous clans or *kokholo* "literally 'type' or 'kind,' connoting common origins or substance" (White 1991, 33; Whiteley 2017). These clans come from "a set of founding apical ancestors" with whom all members of a *kokholo* share an origin "in a particular belly/womb of a founding ancestress" (Whiteley 2015, 178).

Through *kokholo*, “identity is received from the mother at birth,” remains the same throughout life, and continues after death (Whiteley 2017, 78). These *kokholo* could be described as a matrilineal, but as Johanna Whiteley (2017, 78) states, the “purely sociological definition” of a matrilineal does not “capture the complex relational architecture” in *kokholo* identities. Within each clan, individuals belong to particular matrilineages (*thi’a* meaning belly in Cheke Holo), which “signify their uterine origins” (White 1991, 33; Whiteley 2015, 178). Contrastingly, genealogical segments coming from male relatives are sometimes called “*grege lehe*” meaning “dead branches” in Cheke Holo and as such, “are customarily pruned from oral and written genealogies” (White 1991, 33). As Chapter 7 will show, nearly every family member that the young people from Buala mentioned as important in their social network analyses or interviews came from their mother’s lineage. Since Buala is matrilineal, young people were surrounded by their mother’s kin, but it also highlights the importance of matrilineal relationships for support.

Throughout the Solomons, and the greater Pacific, connections to land are important for economic, social, political, religious, and ancestral reasons. In the Solomons, “home” consists of Indigenous communities with longstanding ties to ancestral lands and waterways. As stated previously, in Isabel “rights to live, work and garden on land” are determined by matrilineal descent (Whiteley 2017, 80). In situations where a family is living on land belonging to the father’s matrilineage, there is a feast in Maringe area called *fangamu taego* (feeding the caregiver) where the mother and her children give “gifts to the father of their household to acknowledge the care” he has given them. In return, he may “choose to transfer use rights” to land or the products that grow on the land to his children (Whiteley 2017, 77). In addition to feasts to transfer land rights, building houses and being buried on plots of land ensure that land and the crops growing on it are transferred to one’s descendants. Although land is plentiful in

Isabel compared to more densely populated islands in the Solomons, conflicts over the ownership of land and sea have increased as the natural resources have become commodified, particularly through mining and logging. Since 2010 there have been a series of cultural workshops supported by the Isabel Council of Chiefs, the IPG government, the church, and international NGOs to foster awareness of traditional artifacts, family histories, land ownership, and conservation (White forthcoming, 15). These efforts reflect the importance of land, kastom, and religion for the people of Isabel, themes which young people in Isabel identified in their photo project described in Chapter 6.

Rural society in the Solomons, and throughout Melanesia, relies on a subsistence economy of gardening and fishing. Most people in Isabel rely on the subsistence economy. Families have gardens on lineage-owned land where they grow produce such as sweet potato, cassava, taro, ginger, beans, coconuts, betel nut, and a variety of fruits and green leafy vegetables. They also catch a variety of types of fish and dig for mollusks in the nearby reefs, islands, and lagoons. Not only are the rights to land passed through women in Isabel society, but women are the gardeners and producers of food. Men, though not exclusively, tend to be the fishers providing fish to eat and sell. All the items grown or caught provide food for the family, but are also used in exchanges and feasts, which are an important part of community life and maintaining relationships (Whiteley 2017). These relationships and exchanges come with expectations of reciprocity, which strengthens social networks and motivates students to do well in school, as I explain throughout the dissertation. Because there is still a favorable ratio of people to land in Isabel, there are still abundant resources for the subsistence economy, which is not the case in Honiara, Malaita, and other more densely populated provinces. As I will explain throughout the dissertation, the abundance of resources in Isabel, compared to Honiara where

residents must buy everything, is one of the reasons young people consider food to be “free” at home.

Although the subsistence economy remains important, rural communities are also increasingly becoming interconnected with global capitalism. This is evident in Buala where most families rely on a combination of subsistence and cash economies. Buala (including Jejevo) is unique because it is both an agglomeration of landowning villages and the multiethnic administrative center for the Anglican Church of Melanesia and the Isabel Provincial Government (White 2015). Those with long ancestral ties to land in the villages rely on subsistence farming while also selling crops to those who live in the administrative center and do not have land to grow crops or time to engage in subsistence activities. The parents of the young people I interviewed survived through a combination of the subsistence economy and occasional paid labor. Because of the proximity to the administrative centers, more adults in Buala have paid jobs than in other more rural communities throughout Isabel. However, women remain the main providers for the family. Families sell items they grow or catch for cash, which they use to pay school fees and buy the modern conveniences they have become used to like electricity, petrol, and canned and packaged foods.

Unlike the other provinces in Solomon Islands, Isabel is dominated by one church, the Anglican Church of Melanesia which works closely with the government and local chiefs. At the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, the Melanesian Mission (which eventually became the Anglican Church of Melanesia), was the dominant force in the Christianization of Isabel Province (White 1991; 2015). This led to a “coordination (or negotiation) between the church, state, and local political leaders” throughout the twentieth century, which was formalized in 2004 with the establishment of the “Tripod” (White 2015, 75).

The Tripod is a coordinated leadership effort between the Church of Melanesia (ACOM), the Isabel Provincial Government (IPG), and the Isabel Council of Chiefs to “cooperate in matters of social and economic importance to the island” (White 2015, 75). Because of this close connection, *kastom* practices in Isabel are intertwined in government and religious sponsored events, such as the cultural festivals I discuss in Chapter 6. The first of such events was a cultural festival in 2005, which helped establish an island-wide identity as *Isabellian* (White 2015, 72), an identity which continues to be cemented and shaped today through *kastom* and religious practices, as I elaborate on in Chapters 5 and 6. While I was in Isabel, the church and government often worked closely together, but it was less obvious when the Isabel Council of Chiefs was involved. In informal conversations, people mentioned that the Isabel Council of Chiefs received less money than the other two branches, which may have been why it was less active in the planning and implementation of events.

Although the church and provincial government in Isabel place men in most official leadership positions, because of the matrilineal society, women in Isabel occupy positions of influence both within the home and in leadership roles. Susanne Maezama (2016, 53), describes matrilineal leadership as a “mother-based system of leadership” that establishes an “interconnectedness between land and people.” Women are the heads of landowning groups and active in local decision-making (White forthcoming, 16). Mothers were often described to me as taking care of all the needs of the family, providing financial and emotional support for their children. From the early days of the Melanesian Mission, women played a significant role in organizing the church (White forthcoming, 7). Emily Sprott, a missionary to Isabel, founded Mothers’ Union, a ministry of the Anglican Church described in Chapter 6, in Solomon Islands in 1919 and trained the first Melanesian leaders, Clara Susuruku and Rosanna Vaginoda. Since

then, Mothers' Union has spread across the Solomons and continues to be led by local women. They are active in fundraising, organizing island-wide events, leading the women in the village, and praying for families. More recently, Reverend Sister Veronica Vasethe was the first Melanesian woman to be ordained as a priest by the Anglican church in Britain in 2012 (MacMath 2013). Because the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Melanesia does not recognize women as priests, they elected her to serve as the Pacific Provincial of the Community of the Sisters of the Church in Honiara, a position she still held in 2023 (White forthcoming, 15).

Beyond the church, many Isabellian women have set precedents in Solomon Islands by obtaining high positions of leadership. Lilly Oyatina Poznanski from Kia was the first woman in the Solomons elected to a national position when she became a member of the Legislative Council in 1965 and was the only woman during the Protectorate years to attain a high political office. She was also one of the first women sent to study overseas (Moore 2020). When Rhoda Skilabu was elected to the Provincial Assembly in 2006, she said "everyone was watching her" because it was the first time her community and Isabel Province saw "what a woman is capable of when it comes to politics." In 2011 she was re-elected and appointed as the first female Deputy Premier in the Solomons (Sikilabu 2024). Then in 2022 she ran again for office and became the first woman Premier of Isabel Province (Iroga 2022). Although the Isabel Council of Chiefs is mostly comprised of male chiefs, women have been chiefs since pre-colonial times. The role of women as chiefs in Isabel was highlighted when Selina Taloni of Bolitei was selected as head of the Havulei House of Chiefs in 2019. This was the first time a women was chosen to be the Head of one of the regional bodies. Women in Isabel are also active in conservation projects working with non-profit organizations to protect sea turtles and to develop eco-tourism resorts (White forthcoming, 16–17).

These are just a few examples of the leadership roles held by women in Isabel and they set a precedent for young women in Isabel who have opportunities for leadership beyond the household. Susanne Gasepelo Maezama (2016, 52), an Isabellian woman who has served in leadership roles at Solomon Islands National University (SINU), suggested in her dissertation that there is an “unrealised cultural potential for women in matrilineal cultures to take up leadership roles.” As such, my work with young women in Isabel provides a unique perspective around identity issues and career aspirations as students negotiate transitions to adulthood and the various roles they may play as mothers and leaders in the community.

2.2 Linguistic Landscape and Colonial Influences

Melanesia is known as a “hotspot of linguistic diversity” with over 1,500 languages belonging to 20 to 40 language families (Schapper 2020, 480). Of these 1,500 languages, 72 are spoken in Solomon Islands from five different language families. Two of these languages are non-indigenous (English and Chinese), one is a sign language, and one is a creole (Solomon Islands Pijin). The remaining are Indigenous vernacular languages with varying statuses of language vitality, depending on the size and location of the language. The most widely spoken languages are Solomon Islands Pijin, the Indigenous lingua franca, and English, the official language (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2024). This section explores the colonial legacies, the domains of use, and the roles English, Pijin, and vernaculars have in daily life. I introduce the linguistic ideologies that began during the colonial era, and which continue to influence the use of English and Pijin today. Because of the linguistic diversity, I do not dive into details about all the vernaculars, but I note information about the use of Cheke Holo, the vernacular language of Buala area, when relevant. This information is particularly relevant for Chapter 4 where I explain

the relationship between Pijin and English in schools and provide specific examples of how these languages affect learning. It also sets the contexts for many of the interactions I had with Solomon Islanders, including my motivation for using Pijin in my research.

Because of the linguistic diversity throughout Melanesia, language knowledge is often conflated with ethnic identity and educational attainment. In Solomon Islands most young people grow up speaking the Indigenous languages of one or both of their parents as their first language in addition to learning Solomon Islands Pijin. These vernacular languages are one of the markers that shows that someone is from a particular “*ples*,” which is important for establishing an ethnic identity and ties to home. Since many young people in urban areas are growing up with Solomon Islands Pijin as their first language and only a limited knowledge of their parents’ languages, they seek other ways to maintain connections to their ethnic identity such as dance and kastom jewelry as I explain in Chapter 5. Likewise, a knowledge of English shows that someone is well-educated and has spent time in urban areas, creating a gradient between rural areas where people speak more vernacular languages and are less educated and urban areas where people speak more Pijin and English and have more education.

2.2.1 Vernacular languages and the introduction of English

Prior to the colonial era, Solomon Islanders valued “reciprocal multilingualism” where “all vernacular languages occupied an equal position in the linguistic exchange” and neighboring language groups learned each other’s languages to communicate (Jourdan and Angeli 2014a, 270). The Christian mission schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used vernacular languages for “translation, communication, and instruction” to “teach people to read the Bible and train men to serve as teachers or pastors” (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 417). In

the early decades of the Melanesian Mission, missionaries used Mota, a vernacular language from Vanuatu, as a medium of instruction, making it the lingua franca of the area before the Melanesian Pidgins became widespread (Whiteman 1983, 125). As the Melanesian Mission became established in various districts, they adopted one of the local vernacular languages as a lingua franca for the entire island. For example, in Isabel there are eight vernacular languages spoken. The first European missionary became a resident of Bughotu at the southeast end of Santa Isabel Island in 1883 (White 1991, 93). As such, Bughotu, the language spoken in that area, became the language of the Melanesian Mission throughout Isabel. Bughotu words are still embedded in kastom songs such as the “*sa’ale olo*” dance I describe in Chapter 5. It was not until the twenty-first century through the work of Bible translators that prayer books, hymnals, and the Bible were translated into local vernaculars. In the 1970s, Bible translators translated the first hymnals and prayer books into Cheke Holo, the local vernacular of the Maringe populations where Buala is located.

When the British colonial government established government-run schools in the late 1960s, there was a shift from the vernaculars used by the church schools to English-only education (McDougall and Zobule 2021). During the colonial period, “hierarchical multilingualism” was introduced placing English on the top, followed by written vernaculars, unwritten vernaculars and then Pijin. Both unwritten vernacular languages and Pijin were stigmatized as “uncivilized” and “broken” (Jourdan and Angeli 2014a, 270–71).

Since gaining independence in 1978, English remains the official language of the country and is the primary language of education, government transactions, news media, and religious liturgy. Then and now, most Solomon Islanders learn English as a second or third language once they enter school, following the vernacular language(s) of their parents and Solomon Islands

Pijin. At the time of independence, the Solomon Islands government chose English as the official language of education, for all years except the first two, because of the teaching resources they received, as well as a language ideology that marks Pijin as an incomplete language or what Solomon Islanders describe as “broken English” (Jourdan 2013). To reinforce “the legitimacy of English” and to establish an educated elite who would run the country after independence, colonizers worked to “delegitimize” Pijin through giving it “disparaging” labels, speaking a “baby talk” version, and banning Pijin in schools (Jourdan 2018, 80–82). This delegitimization of Pijin continues today through remarks by Solomon Islanders in all walks of life and especially by officials in the ministry of education who consider Pijin to be broken and unsuitable for educational purposes.⁴⁶

Despite its status as an official language, the great majority of Solomon Islanders view English as a technical language without any real connections to everyday life. “English is not at all ‘familiar’ and natural to most Solomon Islanders. Though eminently prestigious socially, English is still perceived as a technical language of education that has no social reality in the every day life of people outside of classrooms or other such formal environments” (Jourdan 2013, 272). Additionally, English is stigmatized as a language used to show off one’s education. Jourdan and Angeli (2014a, 277) give the example of university students who do not want to speak English because their peers will see them as “claiming to be socially superior.” Despite this stigma, English is the language needed for “outward and upward social mobility” because of its global currency (Jourdan and Angeli 2014a, 275). Although most Solomon Islanders do not choose to speak English regularly, as I explain in Chapter 4, it remains the language of

⁴⁶ Chapter 4 will give further examples of the delegitimization of Pijin as a broken language.

comparison and the linguistic ideal – the language that Solomon Islanders strive to speak well, yet never truly claim as their own.

2.2.2 Solomon Islands Pijin

Solomon Islands Pijin is one of the Melanesian Pidgins (along with Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea and Bislama in Vanuatu) that formed on plantations in Queensland and Fiji at the end of the nineteenth century (Jourdan 2013), all of which have vocabulary that is heavily derived from English but follow the grammatical structures of vernacular languages. Pijin was brought back to the Solomons by former laborers prior to colonization and then used by the British to communicate with locals. Jourdan (2018, 84) suggests that “the history of Pijin is marked by contradiction” – the British delegitimized Pijin as a language yet relied on it to communicate, even if they spoke it poorly. Although linguists have sought to standardize Pijin through a Bible translation, dictionary, grammar, and other literacy materials, (for the dictionary see Jourdan and Maebiru 2002; for a grammar see Beimers 2008), the spelling of Pijin varies greatly and because of this Solomon Islanders consider it to be a broken form of English without fixed rules.

For the past two generations, many young people, especially children of mixed marriages or those who live in urban areas, have grown up speaking Pijin as a first language instead of an Indigenous language, giving it the status of a creole according to linguists (Hicks 2017; Jourdan 2018). Since children are now speaking Pijin as a first language, people see it as coming naturally to children. When asking if children should learn Pijin in school, one of Jourdan’s informants replied with “Why go to school to learn Pijin... when you can learn it in the street” (Jourdan 2013, 276). This presents an interesting paradox of Pijin as authentic language because

it is learned “‘naturally’ rather than working to acquire [it]” as well as an “anonymous language” because it is accessible to everyone in the Solomon Islands and belongs “to no-one-in-particular” (Woolard 2016, 24).

Solomon Islanders speak Pijin to anyone with whom they do not share an Indigenous language. Because of the intense linguistic diversity in the Solomons and throughout Melanesia, Solomon Islands Pijin and the other Melanesian pidgins are particularly important for communication. Solomon Islands Pijin is the lingua franca used to communicate between language groups, especially in places like schools where students from many language groups come together. Solomon Islanders recognize Pijin as “part of Solomons’ cultural heritage and national identity,” which gives Pijin a value that the colonial regime denied (Jourdan 2018, 91). In this sense, Pijin is “officially illegitimate” because it was denied legitimacy by the British government and continues to be illegitimized because of the colonial stigma that it is a broken form of English unfit for official business. At the same time, it is “unofficially legitimate” because of its widespread use among Solomon Islanders (Jourdan 2018, 84). Because of the increasing use of Pijin in social media and other forums, Jourdan (2013, 272) suggests that Pijin is becoming the “de facto national language” in Solomon Islands and a language of national identity.

Jourdan (2013) suggests that the focus of Pijin as a language of national identity is in response to an increased desire for national unity since the end of colonialism and the Tension in the early 2000s. During my research in 2008 in Temotu province, my interviewees similarly identified Pijin as a unifying language. One man said Pijin “Hem langguis blong Solomon Aelan. Men langguis blong evriwan Pijin long Solomon.” [*It is the language of the Solomon Islands. The main language of everyone in the Solomons is Pijin*]. Another informant called Pijin the

“popular language” of the Solomons belonging to everyone. “Ating Pijin hemi wanfala popular langguis, toktok blo evriwan lo Solomon.” [*I think Pijin is the one popular language, the language belonging to everyone in the Solomons*]. This perception of Pijin as a language that belongs to everyone and that indexes national identity is contrasted to English, which is viewed as a “language of social inequality” only to be used in formal or governmental settings (Jourdan and Angeli 2014a, 277).

In Solomon Islands, languages index an ethnic identity (Jourdan 2018, 87). All Solomon Islanders, even those who have grown up in Honiara, are from somewhere beyond Honiara and showcase this identity in many ways such as the dances they perform and languages they speak (Hicks 2022 and Chapter 5 of this dissertation). The only non-ethnic local language in the Solomons is Pijin, which Jourdan suggests is one of the reasons it has been successful as a lingua franca; “it exists above ethnic boundaries without being a foreign language” (Jourdan 2018, 88). However, one of the ways Pijin is gaining cultural legitimacy is through the “appropriation of Pijin” as the language of urban Solomon Islanders to mark an urban identity, a process which Jourdan and Angeli (2021) identify as “enlanguagement.” Jourdan and Angeli (2021, 48) define enlanguagement as a “process of development of distinct social and cultural groupings through the appropriation of a language that is already present in the community.”

According to Jourdan and Angeli (2021), Solomon Islanders identify four varieties of Pijin: Urban Pijin associated with young urban speakers, Old Pijin spoken by older urbanites and rural speakers, SIBC Pijin (Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation) used by newscasters who translate English news into Pijin, and SICA Pijin (Solomon Islands Christian Association) which is considered formal and unnatural and only used in Bible translations. Jourdan and Angeli (2021, 50) argue that this differentiation of various kinds of Pijin is “another method for

Honiarans to celebrate difference,” but is also a sign that the “weak normativity might be transforming into something stronger.” Linguistic normativity implies that rules exist which determine the communicative and social functions of a language. The existence of different varieties of Pijin and appropriate ways to speak shows that Pijin has developed a “social meaning” beyond that of just a secondary language. Pijin speakers are “enlanguaging themselves, and enlanguaging Honiara, using Pijin as a medium of distinction from the rural areas but also as a symbol of urban living and mores. The message is clear: Honiara’s language is Pijin, our Pijin, let it be known!” (Jourdan and Angeli 2021, 50). The enlanguaging of Pijin and appropriation of Pijin as a marker of identity shows the importance of Pijin in the everyday life of Solomon Islanders. Pijin began as a language of communication but is now part of Solomon Islands identity.

2.2.3 Comparison of Melanesian Pidgins

Many linguists consider the three Melanesian Pidgins (MP), Solomon Islands Pijin, Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, and Bislama in Vanuatu to be three dialects of the same language (Tryon and Charpentier 2004, 393). In the nineteenth century, all three pidgins had a shared history on the overseas plantations. During the twentieth century, each of the pidgins “underwent a process of differentiation and development” where they adopted lexical items from local vernaculars and the colonial languages present in each country (Tryon and Charpentier 2004, 399). Despite this differentiation, there is still much mutual intelligibility between the three languages.

As described above, the colonial stereotypes of Solomon Islands Pijin have disparaged it in ways that differ from other post-colonial creoles (Jourdan 2018).⁴⁷ In this section, I briefly explain, without diving into the nuance and histories of the various Melanesian Pidgins, how and why the situation with Solomon Islands Pijin is different than Tok Pisin and Bislama. The different ways these Melanesian Pidgins have been taken up, formalized, and legitimized in Vanuatu and PNG have given the MP more status in those countries than in Solomon Islands.

Tok Pisin in PNG was developed into a written language in the early 1900s. In the 1920s Catholic missionaries realized that Tok Pisin was an “independent language” and not “merely broken English,” so they began using it in liturgy (Siegel 2008, 253). By the 1930s, the Catholic, Methodist, and Lutheran missionaries had all published materials in Tok Pisin. During World War II, both the Allied and Axis powers wrote messages on pamphlets in Tok Pisin that they dropped from planes into PNG. When English was introduced as the language of education after the war, Tok Pisin “was already established as a distinct language with its own writing system” (Siegel 2008, 253). Additionally, in the 1950s linguists from Australian National University worked to standardize Tok Pisin as a language distinct from English (Handman 2013). These early uses and the formalization of Tok Pisin were key in establishing it as a national language alongside English and Hiri Motu (an Indigenous language initially used as a lingua franca) in the Constitution. Since then, Tok Pisin has been standardized in textbooks, dictionaries, radio, newspaper, religious, and government publications. It has also been widely used in schools as the language of the early years of education (Siegel 2008, 254). Tryon and Charpentier (2004, 471)

⁴⁷ For examples of language attitudes toward Hawaiian Creole English and Standard English in classrooms, see Sato (1989b). Although it is a relevant comparison situation, in this chapter I focus on Melanesian pidgins because of their shared history.

suggest that because of its unique history and the wide number of people who speak it as a first or second language that Tok Pisin is a “‘superlative’ pidgin” over the other Melanesian pidgins.

Vanuatu is the only country where a Melanesian Pidgin has the status as both a national and an official language. Bislama holds this status alongside two colonial languages, English and French, which are the primary languages of education (Tryon and Charpentier 2004, 401).

Because Vanuatu was colonized by both the French and the British, Bislama served as the main *lingua franca* of the country not only among Melanesians, but between French and English speakers (Tryon and Charpentier 2004, 404). Prior to independence, there was disagreement between the English and French speaking churches about what language should be used, which in turn, led to all the churches agreeing to use Bislama in both written and oral mediums (Tryon and Charpentier 2004, 409). Broadcasting is mainly in Bislama and newspapers are written in all three languages. Like Tok Pisin, Bislama has been standardized in educational and government publications and used in religious services (Siegel 2008, 254). Bislama has also been used in trainings for teachers and the police. In addition, it has been both “the subject of study and a medium of instruction for a second-year level university course at the University of South Pacific” (Siegel 2008, 255). The unique role that Bislama plays as a *lingua franca* between two colonial groups, the use of it in religious services prior to independence, and the status it attained in the constitution gives it more prestige than Pijin in Solomon Islands.

As will be seen in the next section examining the domains of use for English, Pijin and vernacular languages in Solomon Islands, although Pijin is widely spoken for informal uses, it is not recognized in the Constitution as an official or a national language of the country nor is it used for formal communication. Tryon and Charpentier (2004, 471) describe Solomon Islands Pijin as the least documented Melanesian pidgin and the MP with “the lowest prestige” and in

the “least enviable position.” Chapter 4 will also expand on the linguistic ideologies introduced during the colonial era that continue to delegitimize Pijin as a “broken language” unfit for official uses.

2.3 Language Domains of English, Pijin, and vernacular languages

In this section, I expand on the domains where Solomon Islanders speak English, Pijin, and vernacular languages. I focus on five main areas: bureaucracy, media, religious services, interactions, and literacy. Through this analysis I show the ways that English and Pijin share some domains of use and split others. This background sets the stage for further analysis of the linguistic ideologies around each language, which are explored in Chapter 4.

2.3.1 Bureaucracy

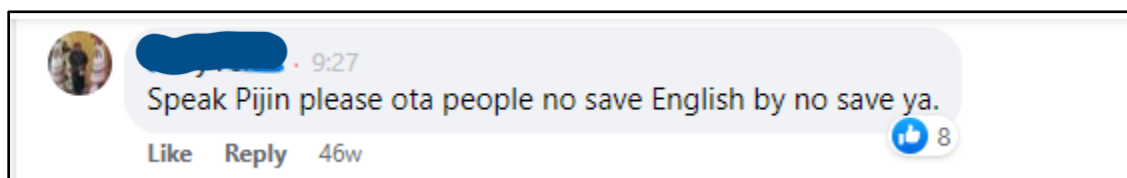


Figure 2.1 Example of Pijin and English on social media. In Pijin it says, “spik Pijin plis ota pipol no save English bae no save ya.” [*Speak Pijin please all the people don’t know English and will not understand.*]

As the official language of Solomon Islands, English is used for official and formal business. All the Prime Minister’s speeches are in English. Since many are now streamed on Facebook, I have been able to watch a few and there are almost always comments written in Pijin

from Solomon Islanders asking the Prime Minister to speak in Pijin like Figure 2.1 written in Pijin with English phonemes.⁴⁸

All formal and bureaucratic paperwork such as applications for government scholarships, permits, visas, and other such documents are always written in English. Solomon Islanders encounter formal paperwork on a regular basis when doing transactions at the bank, applying for jobs, and submitting enquiries to government officials. Likewise, students must use English when submitting their written assignments, taking their end-of-year exams, and applying for university scholarships. If someone is ever disputing a decision, such as their school placement or denial of a scholarship, these complaints must be submitted in English. However, most of the employees at government offices will speak Pijin to explain the situation to customers and will use Pijin when talking to other employees. When I gave presentations at the Ministry of Education and at Solomon Islands National University, I was asked to give it in English. However, I switched to Pijin during some of the question-and-answer time since I was no longer doing the “formal” presentation, and it allowed people to feel more comfortable asking me a question in Pijin.

If someone does not feel competent in their English writing, they will ask someone else to write required documents on their behalf. This is especially common among the older generations who only attended school through primary levels. Many students expressed that their grandparents will often rely on their grandchildren who are still in school to write letters for them in English. Similarly, students who have been to school are often expected to translate when an outsider comes to a rural village. In a conversation with the Form 5 Social Studies teacher at Ridge CHS she said that when she was growing up, she never had confidence in English. When

⁴⁸ Especially on social media, there is a lot of variety in the ways Pijin is written. Pijin also has many cognates with English so words that are pronounced the same in Pijin and English are often spelled with English spellings.

her uncle asked her to talk with some white people visiting her church, she ran and hid because she was intimidated to speak with them.

The school curriculum prepares students for encounters with bureaucratic forms of English. Students had English assignments that required them to write pretend letters to a government official, apply for a fake job, and submit a pretend newspaper editorial. They were also asked to do research papers where they talked with someone working for a ministry or government department about a topic related to their job and then write up their findings in English. These examples show an attempt to prepare students for the bureaucratic interactions where they will be required to use English. When proofreading some of these assignments for students, I noticed many students struggled to understand what they were being asked to do. They struggled to relay what they wanted to say in English, confusing the spelling and grammar with Pijin. I would often ask clarifying questions in Pijin so that they could tell me in Pijin what they wanted to say and then we would work together to write it in English. Even though these assignments were given to prepare students for bureaucratic English, the struggles they have with understanding the structure of English (which I will explain more in Chapters 3 and 4) makes it hard to be fully prepared for these activities.

2.3.2 Media

The three main Solomon Islands newspapers: *Solomon Star*, *Solomon Times*, and *The Island Sun* are all written in English. Likewise, the *Solomon Business Magazine*, which regularly posts news updates on Facebook, is also written in English. The Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, the main radio station which also reports news, writes everything on their website and Facebook page in English. However, they have regular podcasts and news shows where they

speak Pijin. When scrolling through any of the media sources' Facebook pages the main posts are always in English. Many of the comments from readers are also in English, however, some people write in a mix of Pijin and English.

To my knowledge, there are no news sources written fully in vernacular languages or in Pijin. This is a very different situation than in PNG where the *Wantok Niuspepa* has been published in Tok Pisin since before independence. In the Solomons, if someone wants to stay current with local and international happenings, they must have at least a basic understanding of English or listen to the SIBC radio broadcasts in Pijin. In addition to the Solomon Islands-based media, many Solomon Islanders also read other news sources that come across their social media feed. These news sources vary and during the pandemic I noticed a widespread sharing of many “fake news” stories. Solomon Islanders who are competent in English often read or listen to international news sources like the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) or news from the UK like the Guardian. ABC news broadcasts are also regularly shown in the Telekom office (the main local phone company) and other offices with television access.

As access to the internet has improved across the country and more people have smart phones, Facebook has become one of the main tools for communication in Solomon Islands.⁴⁹ The various government ministries and newspapers all have Facebook pages that thousands of people follow to stay up to date with the happenings in the country. On an individual level, Facebook is used by people to communicate with friends and relatives both in the Solomons and abroad, to post life updates and photos, and to share all sorts of other things. Most posts and

⁴⁹ The Coral Sea cable which was installed in 2019 and connected the Solomon Islands to Australia provides faster and cheaper access to the internet making it a communication tool more accessible to the average Solomon Islander. Honiara and the provincial towns in Malaita, Western, and Choiseul provinces have direct access to the domestic undersea cable, while rural areas still depend on satellite for internet access, making it less reliable and less accessible in rural parts of the provinces (“The Solomon Islands Domestic Network (SIDN),” n.d.).

comments on personal Facebook pages are in a mix of English and Pijin. Similarly, in the few private groups I am a part of there is a mix of English, Pijin, and vernacular languages. For example, the posts and comments in the Isabel Provincial Youth Forum are regularly written in a mix of Pijin and English. Since there are multiple languages spoken in Isabel and because many of the Isabellians on the Provincial youth forum are based in Honiara where they speak Pijin, the posts are mainly in Pijin and English. The moderators have specifically asked members to not post in vernacular languages so that everyone from Isabel can understand the posts. However, in the Buala community group made up of Honiara and Buala residents, posts are in a mix of Pijin, English, and Cheke Holo, the vernacular language of the Buala area, since many people are at least functionally bilingual in Cheke Holo and Pijin.

Whenever I message friends in the Solomons I mainly send messages in Pijin, but if I am struggling to express myself in Pijin I will use English. The youth I am in touch with mainly message me in Pijin with occasional English words mixed in, but the teachers I am in contact with message in a mix of Pijin and English. The increasing use of Pijin mixed with English on social media shows the important role the Pijin plays in the lives of youth. The form of Pijin used on Facebook is filled with many abbreviations, hybridizations of words, and mixing of languages, making it a form of Pijin unique from what is spoken in everyday life. It is also another example of how social media users are englanguaging Pijin as a marker of an urban, mostly young, Solomon Islands identity.

2.3.3 Religious Services

Solomon Islands is a mostly Christian nation so almost everyone attends church of some denomination. The Anglican Church of Melanesia is one of the biggest denominations in the

Solomons, but the Catholic church, Seventh Day Adventist, South Seas Evangelical Church, and various other evangelical protestant churches are also active throughout the country. English is the primary language used in the Anglican church because they are part of the Anglican Communion founded in England. *The Book of Common Prayer* was adapted into *A Melanesian English Prayer Book with Hymns* in 1965 and was most recently updated in 1985 (ACOM 1985). This is the prayer book used in all the Anglican churches if they do not have a version of the prayer book translated into their vernacular language.

There are many churches in Honiara and the languages used in church vary by denomination and the attendees. During my time in Honiara, I visited seven different churches at least one time and a few I visited on more occasions. In most of the services, the Bible was read in English, the sermon was given in Pijin or English, and the songs were mostly in English. At the Anglican church, the liturgy, hymns, and Bible readings were in English, the announcements were always in Pijin and depending on the priest giving the sermon it was in English or Pijin, but usually Pijin. At two of the smaller churches I attended which had slightly more charismatic traditions, the music was mostly in English with the occasional song in Tok Pisin (the lingua franca of PNG),⁵⁰ since there is not much worship music written in Solomon Islands Pijin. The sermons at these two churches were in a mix of English and Pijin. One of the churches had a Fijian pastor so he primarily spoke English. At a smaller church that mostly had members from Malaita, the sermon was still in Pijin, but the music was mostly in languages from Malaita.

In Buala, Cheke Holo was the main language used in the Anglican church for the liturgy, hymns, and announcements. There are 15,100 speakers of Cheke Holo, including 1500

⁵⁰ Tok Pisin is not widely spoken in Solomon Islands. Through social media and from those who have spent time in PNG for education, there is beginning to be a mixing of the two languages. However, Tok Pisin and Solomon Islands Pijin still have distinct vocabulary.

monolinguals, throughout central and southeast parts of Santa Isabel Island. According to the *Ethnologue*⁵¹ there are 5,500 people who can read and write in Cheke Holo. Cheke Holo is one of the few languages in which *A Melanesian Prayer Book* and hymnal has been translated into the local language. Additionally, a translation of the full Bible was completed in 2022 (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2024). At the Anglican church, the sermons were also usually in Cheke Holo, but occasionally would include Pijin depending on the priest. However, the Bible was almost always read in slow, monotone English, despite there being a New Testament translation in Cheke Holo. The Anglican church was the main church in Buala, but there was a smaller evangelical church that I visited a couple of times, which used more Pijin in its service.

2.3.4 Around Honiara and other communities

Honiara is full of sounds. The mix of languages as pedestrians bump into each other and mingle, the rumbling of traffic and industrial machines, and the occasional plane makes it a very noisy environment. Because of the noise it can be hard to identify what languages are being spoken on the street. However, the main language I encountered was Pijin. Pijin is the language spoken by storekeepers and market vendors with customers, used to greet others, and what is often broadcasted on megaphones by preachers and others trying to communicate a message. If a Solomon Islander does not know a person or where they are from, they will always begin speaking to one another in Pijin. However, in smaller conversations Solomon Islanders often switch to vernacular language among *wantoks* (people from the same language community) and family members, which keeps conversations private amidst the bustle of town. When a Solomon

⁵¹ *The Ethnologue* is an encyclopedia written by SIL Global of all the known living languages and provides information about the linguistic vitality and where the languages are spoken.

Islander meets an expatriate who does not speak a local language, sometimes the default language is English and sometimes Pijin, but people happily switch to Pijin once they know their interlocutor is fluent in Pijin. Visually, when walking around Honiara, there are mostly signs written in English. However, there are a few billboards and shop signs in Pijin.

In Buala, the linguistic landscape is a little different. In Buala town, the area with the provincial offices, Pijin is regularly spoken because people come from multiple language groups to work in the government offices. In Buala village where I lived, Cheke Holo was the main language of communication since most people were from that area. For community meetings, Cheke Holo was almost always used unless someone came from outside the language community and then it was in Pijin. In conversations with one another, most people spoke Cheke Holo, however some youth and some people who married into the community only spoke Pijin. Pijin was always spoken with me since I only had a very basic understanding of the local language.

During my fieldwork I spent very little time outside of Buala or Honiara, so my knowledge of what happens in more rural locales is limited.⁵² The students at Jejevo CHS spoke a fair amount of Cheke Holo since most of them came from communities where this was their main language. However, as explained below and in Chapters 3 and 4, lessons were given in English and explained in Pijin. All the secondary school students and teachers I worked with were comfortable communicating with me in Pijin.

Some of the youth that grew up in more rural areas had less confidence in English and spoke less Pijin since some rural villages on Isabel rarely speak Pijin. For example, a young girl

⁵² In personal communication with Geoffrey White in 2024, he says that in his experience Cheke Holo is the main language spoken throughout Maringe and Hograno districts with some Pijin spoken by in-married spouses and people who have returned after living in Honiara for a long time.

around six years old who had not been to school who came and lived in a house near me in Buala only spoke Cheke Holo. She would regularly come over to play and I would speak with her in Pijin. Although she could not easily respond, she usually understood me. This fits with the observation that youth from rural communities with strong vernacular language practices learn Pijin and English once they enter school. However, this is shifting. As my previous research in a rural village on Santa Cruz showed, children being raised by parents from two language groups grew up speaking Pijin. Other parents were teaching their children Pijin because they saw very little usefulness for their language, which was only spoken by a few hundred people and was stigmatized as being difficult. Instead, they thought Pijin would help their children do better in school and have more opportunities as they grew up (Hicks 2017).

2.3.5 Literacy

According to the 2019 Census, the literacy rate of people over 15 years old was 82 percent in rural areas and 93 percent in urban areas (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 35). However, it should be noted that for the 2019 Census, literacy ability was self-reported and based on the response to the question: “Can you read and write a simple sentence in one or more of the following languages: English, Pidgin, Local Language, or Other Language?” As the census findings state, this phrasing “captures a basic skill of reading and writing, and not necessarily a more fluent level of literacy” (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 107). The Pacific Community's 2018 Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) revealed a modest increase in English literacy proficiency among Grade 6 students, rising from 67 percent to 70 percent since the 2012 assessment (Pacific Community 2019).

As of 2022, the Solomon Islands Translation Advisory Group (SITAG) and the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) have translated parts of the Bible into over 25 vernacular languages (James Ashley personal communication in 2022). They have also worked to develop basic literacy materials in these languages so people can read and understand the Bible. Despite this, the literacy levels in vernacular languages are still low since vernacular languages are not taught in schools (see Chapter 4 for further explanation of languages in schooling). As shown in the example of the Anglican church in Buala, some congregations regularly use resources such as liturgy and hymns published in their vernacular language, but many languages do not have access to these kinds of resources. The *Ethnologue* estimates there is a 30 to 60 percent literacy rate among those who speak Pijin as a first language and around 50 percent literacy rate among those who speak Pijin as a second language (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2024). SITAG also translated the Bible into Solomon Islands Pijin, and other linguists have sought to standardize Pijin through a dictionary, grammar, and other literacy materials. However, Jourdan and Angeli (2021) suggest that the Pijin Bible is in a form of Pijin that they call “SICA Pijin,” which is considered archaic, formal, and unnatural. This is one of the reasons it is not used much in or out of the church. When I was asked to read Scripture in Buala, I often read from the Pijin Bible, but that was one of the few times I ever heard Pijin read in church services.

Beyond the church context there are very few literacy resources available in vernacular languages or Pijin for educational purposes. MEHRD’s 2010 policy for implementing vernacular languages in education allows for Pijin to be used as a language of instruction in places where there is no dominant language, such as Honiara (MEHRD 2010, 6). However, no curriculum or literacy materials have been developed in Pijin for educational use. In 2013, MEHRD began implementing vernacular education at four primary schools in two different languages – Arosi on

Makira and Sa'a in Malaita. This program engaged the whole community in literacy work, gave students a solid foundation of how their language works, and helped them transition to English (Matzke and Saumore 2017). A report was given to MEHRD in 2019 which showed that vernacular language education improved student learning outcomes in many subjects and did not inhibit their learning of English (MEHRD 2019a). Although the report recommended fully implementing vernacular education, as of 2019, the project had stalled, and literacy materials were still only available for a few grade levels (McDougall and Zobule 2021; SIL International 2013).

The most successful vernacular language project in Solomon Islands is the Kulu Language Institute (called Kulu), which is named for two closely related languages Kubokota and Luqa spoken on the island of Ranongga in Western province. It is unique from other literacy projects because it was established by and is run fully by the people of Ranongga. It operates separately from government-run schools and has its own building completely supported by the local community. The project was developed in 1998 when Dr. Alpheaus G. Zobule, the Luqa Bible translator, realized that Luqa speakers could not read the Luqa New Testament. The goal of the project is “to equip Ranongga people to realize their potential and contribute meaningfully to human living” (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 412 citing the Kulu Language Institute Constitution). It achieves this goal by teaching students how to read in Luqa, but instead of just teaching students to read words, Kulu focuses on the indigenous concept of “tiro.” You “tiro” when “you stand at a higher elevation and look down, searching for something that is hidden or covered. The task is to uncover, identify, and distinguish what you are looking at from all of the other things around it” and eventually pick it up (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 414). Kulu encourages students to “tiro” as they read and interpret texts to understand the meaning behind it.

Kulu was originally “intended for people with minimal schooling,” but over time has attracted people from all walks of life including pastors, teachers, community members, and secondary school students (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 423). The school is open to students of any age and has grown from less than 100 participants a year in the early 2000s to over 500 participants around 2018 (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 422). Through connecting reading to Indigenous concepts, the Kulu Language Institute “counters a widely held perception that reading is foreign and foreigners will always be better at book learning than Solomon Islanders” by making reading accessible and relatable to everyone (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 415). Zobule says one of the most important accomplishments of the institute is “convincing Ranonggans that their language is worth studying” (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 424). This desire to understand the structure of the language continues to draw people from Kubokota, Luqa, and other closely related languages.

The examination of these various domains of use shows the roles shared by English and Pijin. English is used in formal contexts and for official business, such as government transactions, school assignments, and scripture reading. Pijin is used in more informal contexts such as between friends, in the local economy, for announcements, and on social media. The proponents who think English is best for education also follow a similar divide. Political elites who were trained by native English teachers believe English is the best language for education. Although teachers also saw the importance of learning English and had a nostalgia for the days of native English speakers teaching English, they also saw the usefulness of using Pijin when teaching. This divide then extends to the average person who on a daily basis only needs Pijin or a vernacular language to communicate and be an active member of their community.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the background necessary for understanding and situating the data I analyze in the following dissertation chapters. The colonial legacy continues to influence the educational structure, curriculum, and languages used in school. The formal education system introduced Western values, with which young people continue to grapple as they balance these with local values and practices. Throughout the dissertation I will show the effects that colonialism and Western values have on youth in the Solomons, but I will contrast this with the deeper motivations and values that drive students, which are rooted in the values of community and kastom. For 80 percent of young people who live outside of urban areas, primary education begins in their rural communities where Indigenous identities are rooted in well-established concepts of place and ancestry. The next chapter introduces the schooling situation in Solomon Islands and shows how the history of colonialism, English education, the Tension, and neoliberal motivations have influenced the challenges and opportunities youth encounter through education.

Chapter 3 Schooling Journeys and Obstacles to Student Success

It is 8:30 am on a typical weekday morning. The bell just rang for period one. Some students sit in their classrooms reading, copying notes from the day before, playing on their phones, or talking. Other students mill around outside talking with one another and waiting for a teacher to come to the classroom. Other students are yet to arrive to school because they left home late, are stuck in traffic, or stopped at a store or betel nut stand on the way. Although there is a set weekly schedule, the actual schedule is quite fluid. Teachers swap time periods and miss classes; students leave early and arrive late. Outside presentations, staff meetings, community events, and teacher trainings all shift the schedule on a weekly basis.

A typical school day in the Solomon Islands runs somewhere between 8:00 am and 2:00 pm. This includes eight periods with approximately 40 minutes of instruction time for each period and a mid-day break (Maebuta 2008; personal observations). The students from each grade sit in their assigned classrooms and teachers come and go teaching their subjects. Sometimes a teacher begins teaching just as the period is scheduled to start, but often, the teacher shows up late or does not show up at all. This means that for multiple hours students in secondary schools are left unattended, which leads to noisy and uncontrolled learning environments. Often these students are left with tasks such as copying notes from the board, working on assignments, or reviewing for an exam, but the lack of supervision in the classroom also means there is little accountability, and students are free to use the time how they want. As a result of the inconsistent schedules and lack of teacher presence, many students are *les* (unwilling) to stay at school and wait around for a teacher, so they leave, leading to absenteeism among students and teachers.

Absenteeism is only one of the many problems affecting students at secondary schools. When absenteeism is compounded with other structural barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, poor study habits, under-resourced schools, lack of English knowledge, and favoritism in the limited number of scholarships, just to name a few, it brings into question whether schooling alienates students or empowers them for success. This chapter begins by introducing the current educational system in Solomon Islands and the specific schooling context of my research. It then discusses the obstacles that students face in schooling and explains how this limits the learning opportunities. It ends by showing what drives students to continue in schooling despite these obstacles. Through this, I argue that the interaction of the various obstacles students encounter in schooling makes it difficult for them to learn the required content and be prepared for the jobs they desire after graduation. However, despite these obstacles, students are driven to stay in school as long as possible to find jobs to support their families, which leads them down indirect pathways in hopes of finishing a degree and finding well-paid work.

3.1 Educational background and school context

I described the history of education in Solomon Islands in Chapter 2. This section picks up where that one stops, describing the current state of education in Solomon Islands. I introduce some of the international education policies that have shaped the Solomon Islands' education system. From there, I describe the types of schools in the Solomons and the unequal access to education and jobs this creates, especially for rural communities and females. I conclude with a brief description of the schools where I conducted research, but more details of the research

contexts and participants can be found in Chapter 1. I provide this context to show how the obstacles to education and work vary depending on the type of school students attend.

3.1.1 International education policy and its effects on Solomon Islands schools

In the postcolonial era, education systems have switched from being influenced by colonial governments and missionaries to being influenced by “international development discourse” (Craney 2021, 344). Leon Tikly (2004, 173) argues that a “new form of western imperialism” tries to bring “the formerly so-called ‘Second’ and ‘Third worlds’ into a regime of global government” through education, which is central to many development agencies’ “vision of ‘development.’” These agencies 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). Tikly (2004, 188) suggests that the World Bank and similar programs use education to instill values, which have their “roots in western cultures and civilizations” and allows them to be tools of the new imperialism. These “global designs” and “best practices” are shaped around Western educational norms that often marginalize “local histories [and] indigenous voices” (Sobhani 2016, 480). Speaking of development more broadly, for a project to be long lasting, David Gegeo (1998) argues that Indigenous knowledge and the way knowledge is created must be incorporated into the project. Because global policies such as “intercultural education,” which is meant to create an inclusive learning environment (see UNESCO 2010), do not incorporate local perspectives, they can “reinforce [the] ‘otherness’” of already marginalized students (Aikman 2012, 246) and do not always create lasting change.

Organizations such as the United Nations constructed education as “a fundamental

human right,” creating global citizens in every country (UNESCO 2000, 8). UNESCO also declared that primary education for all children was the answer to poverty (Mundy and Verger 2015). These policies expanded educational access, but also created a “dependency” on multinational organizations since low-income countries were not able to determine their “own educational agendas” (Tikly 2004, 189). Developing nations often rely on Western-influenced textbooks, materials and resources from developed countries or multi-national organizations, creating a “Eurocentric kind of education for most of the world’s children,” instead of an educational system that is shaped by the local people (Tikly 2004, 190). During my fieldwork, I learned of literacy and education projects in the Solomons funded by development organizations from New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and Taiwan, all of which provided literacy resources and teacher trainings to local schools.

With the UNESCO declaration in 2000 that education beginning at the primary level was “a fundamental human right” (UNESCO 2000), the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) in Solomon Islands mandated that primary school should be accessible to and attended by all children. MEHRD has the goal that by 2030 there will be free access to and completion of primary school (Kindergarten – Grade 6) through junior secondary school (Grade 7-9) for all young people (MEHRD 2016, 5). Since the Tension, a period of political unrest and violence in the early 2000s (described in Chapter 2), MEHRD has successfully worked to introduce universal education at the primary level so that there are now spaces for all children ages six to twelve to attend school (MEHRD 2016). These changes are improving educational opportunities for young people. Based on the 2019 Census, 56 percent of the population over 15 years of age had completed primary school education compared to 42 percent in 2009 (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, xxx).

Although enrollment continues to improve across all levels of education, access to the next year of schooling gradually decreases as students advance further in education. Many teachers and administrators emphasized to me that education was a pyramid with only the best and brightest, and I would add the wealthiest and most connected, making it to the top because of limited space and resources. In 2019, 90 percent of Grade 6 students transitioned to Form 1 (Grade 7), 75 percent of Form 3 (Grade 9) students transitioned to Form 4 (Grade 10), 59 percent of Form 5 (Grade 11) students moved to Form 6 (Grade 12), and only 12 percent of Form 6 (Grade 12) students moved to Form 7, the university preparation course (MEHRD 2019b, 29). Broken down by gender, in 2019, 46 percent of males and 47 percent of females had completed primary education, 30 percent of males and 27 percent of females had completed secondary education (Forms 1-7), and 9 percent of males and 7 percent of females had completed tertiary education (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, xxx)⁵³. Geographical inequalities in education persist throughout the provinces with fewer young people completing education in rural areas than urban areas. These statistics reveal that there are many more people completing primary school than higher levels of education and greater access to education for young people in urban than rural areas.

3.1.2 Types of schools and unequal access

As of 2022 there were over 1,050 schools in Solomon Islands, which included Early Childhood Education, primary, and secondary schools. Table 3.1 lists the types and numbers of schools as stated in the Ministry of Education (MEHRD)'s 2022 National Education Action Plan

⁵³ Statistical analysis from the Census and other government documents can be hard to track as there is often a conflation of numbers or missing data. I share these statistics to show the general trends not exact statistics.

(MEHRD 2022, 11). Early Childhood Education Centres are like preschools and kindergartens in the US school systems. Primary schools are like elementary schools in the US and include Grades 1-6. Secondary schools or high schools usually include Forms 1-6, equivalent to Grades 7-12 in the US school systems. A few high schools also include Form 7, which is a university preparation course that only a few students attend.

Table 3.1 Schools in Solomon Islands. Statistics are from the MEHRD National Education Action Plan (MEHRD 2022, 11–12)

Type of School	Number of Schools	Notes
Early Childhood Education Centres (preschool and kindergarten)	284	There are likely an additional 280 unregistered centres
Standalone primary schools (Grades 1-6)	510	Standalone means there is not a community high school attached. 131 are non-government
Community high school (Forms 1-7)	243	Most also include a primary school section and some include ECE Centres.
Provincial high school	16	2 are non-government
National high school	10	8 are non-government
Rural Training Centres	50	Offer courses in skill development such as automotive, electrical, plumbing, construction, agribusiness, office administration, tourism and hospitality, and business.
Universities	2	Solomon Islands National University and University of South Pacific

High schools are split into three different types of schools with varying qualities of education: community high schools, provincial high schools, and national high schools. National and provincial secondary schools are managed and funded by the national and provincial governments, respectively. Church-run schools are managed by church denominations and

funded through a combination of church and government money. Community high schools are managed by local education authorities and reliant on provincial funds for education.

National, provincial, and church-run schools, typically functioning as boarding schools, are considered more prestigious and tend to have higher success rates on national exams. Because the first schools established by the colonial regime were in Honiara, the perception that the best schools are on Guadalcanal still lingers in the minds of Solomon Islanders. This is reinforced because some of the best National Secondary Schools and the highest achieving church-run boarding schools are located on Guadalcanal. In a conversation with the deputy principal of King George VI National Secondary School (KGVI) in 2017, he called KGVI the “firstborn son of the government” because of all the extra resources it receives such as computers and new facilities. Similarly, Selwyn College, an Anglican boarding school about an hour outside of Honiara, was one of the first boarding schools and has a history of producing outstanding students. Many current government employees and other urban elite attended these boarding schools (or other prestigious ones), which shapes their perception that these are the best places to get a quality education. Because these schools are prestigious, they limit the number of students that they enroll each year to those they consider to be good students based on morals and academic achievement in the previous years.

Under the Solomon Islands Free Basic Education Policy, there is no tuition in primary or junior secondary schools (Grades 1-9); however, schools generally charge a fee for registration and ask for development contribution to help improve the school. As of January 1, 2024, MEHRD set the maximum amount any school receiving government subsidy can charge (see Table 3.2). They stated that schools can also ask for additional voluntary contributions toward development and other school needs but cannot require parents to pay these or penalize students

whose parents do not pay voluntary fees (MEHRD Press 2024a). Many parents, even those with jobs, struggle to pay the required school fees, relying on extended family for contributions to pay fees.

Table 3.2 MEHRD Maximum Compulsory School Fees Limits from SIG website January 2024 (MEHRD Press 2024)

Education Level	Maximum fee for day student		Maximum fee for boarding students	
	Urban school	Non-urban school	Urban school	Non-urban school
Primary Education (Grades 1-6)	1,200 SBD ⁵⁴ (145 USD)	250 SBD (30 USD)	n/a	n/a
Junior Secondary Education (Forms 1-3/Grades 7-9)	2,000 SBD (241 USD)	800 SBD (96 USD)	4,500 SBD (542 USD)	2,800 (337 USD)
Senior Secondary Education (Forms 4-7/Grades 10-13)	4,000 SBD (482 USD)	3,000 SBD (362 USD)	9,000 SBD (1,084 USD)	7,200 SBD (868 USD)

I did not conduct research at a boarding school, but some of the students I talked to had attended boarding schools in the past so the differences between types of schools was often a topic I asked about in our conversations. Some of the boarding schools are well-funded and prestigious, but others also lack resources. Many students thought that boarding schools were better than day schools because there were designated times and spaces for studying. Since many boarding schools have their own gardens, a few students complained that some boarding schools make them do too much work in the garden or did not have well-balanced meals. Despite this, a few students hoped to transfer to one of the prestigious and well-funded boarding schools in the

⁵⁴ The exchange rate in October 2024 was 1 USD to 8.3 SBD. The USD is rounded to the nearest dollar and based on this conversion.

upcoming years. Tracy (Form 5) started at Ridge CHS in 2018 and said that she did not like it very much. She hoped to attend a boarding school for Form 6 so that she could concentrate more on her studies and have fewer distractions. She said that she also wanted the experience of living away from her parents. In 2019, I talked to Tracy's mom, a teacher at Ridge CHS, who said that Tracy had gone to a boarding school in Makira and seemed to like it.

Community high schools are usually day schools (where students return home each afternoon) that cater to nearby communities. According to the teachers and administrators I met, community high schools typically have higher student enrollment and less funding than national or church-run schools in the Honiara area. However, the funding and support of a school can vary depending on the community support surrounding it. For example, some national and provincial secondary schools in the provinces also struggle with funding and have less community support since the students come from around the Solomons. Both schools where I conducted research were community high schools and could be considered under-resourced even though they are in peri-urban areas. In the early days of independence in the late 1970s, urban schools had better resources and better teachers than rural schools, but as more day schools are opened the resources continue to shift and many community high schools are left underfunded. The Tension caused a financial decline, and many resources were taken away from schools. As a result, many teachers were paid irregularly, the infrastructure of schools deteriorated, and teachers were not given funds for basic supplies such as desks, textbooks, and chalk (Maebuta 2011).

The government created community high schools with the intention of providing vocational training and practical skills to students who did not make it into national secondary schools. However, these schools quickly expanded in the early 2000s “without sufficient

facilities and training” for teaching practical skills (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 418). Although the goal was hands-on learning of practical subjects, many teachers relied on teacher-centered pedagogy such as “chalk and talk,” leaving students without the skills needed for rural livelihoods (Maebuta 2008; McDougall and Zobule 2021; and my own observations). Parents also wanted their children to still have access to academic knowledge so community high schools became a place where a wider number of students could attain secondary certificates (Maebuta 2008). Because of the existence of community high schools almost every young person can now access schooling until at least Form 3 (Grade 9). However, this has come at a cost. Community high schools, particularly in Honiara, tend to be more overcrowded with 60-80 students in one classroom, instead of the Ministry of Education’s mandated 35 students, and tend to receive less funding, lowering the quality of education for these students. As a result, students at community high schools are more likely to perform poorly on exams and to drop out. The connection between overcrowding, the quality of education, and exams will be explained later in Section 3.2 of this chapter.

Financial support continues to be unequally distributed to schools, with Honiara receiving more money than provincial schools. In 2009, Honiara made up 10 percent of student enrollment while the rest of Guadalcanal made up 28 percent of student enrollment; however, Honiara received 38 percent of the national school budget while the provincial areas of Guadalcanal only received 11 percent (Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 9 citing UNICEF 2012).⁵⁵ Over 70 percent of Solomon Islanders live in “rural” communities (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023,

⁵⁵ In personal communication with David Oakeshott, he says that Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) are also used to fund schools, which leads to further inequality of funding. CDFs are an allotment of money given to members of parliament (MP) to support community development and other constituent needs. In conversations with my participants, some people mentioned that MPs occasionally helped with school fees and often influenced which people received scholarships. Most often this was discussed negatively because those with strong connections or *wantok* relationships with their MPs were shown more favoritism than those with weak connections.

27), yet only half of the overall schooling budget goes to schools outside of Guadalcanal (UNICEF 2012). This creates unequal access to quality education that translates into higher quality of education in urban areas. The Solomons Islands Standardized Test for Achievement (SISTA) in 2017, which evaluates literacy and numeracy for Grade 4 and 6 students, showed that students at urban schools outperformed those in rural schools (MEHRD 2019b, 50). Students in urban areas attend schools with more resources and better teachers, while students in rural areas, who often do not have the financial ability to attend urban schools, receive a second-rate education. This emphasizes how “the Solomon Islands school system is very anti-rural” (Jeremy Dorovolomo 2008, 17). Teachers in rural areas do not have access to continuing education without going to urban areas; likewise, many students are drawn to towns where they believe schools are the best.

The uneven access to quality schooling has created and exacerbated social class divisions in Solomon Islands society (K. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992). Rural schools have poorly trained teachers and fewer resources causing more students to fail exams, while children of the urban elite attend public or private schools with ample resources and well-trained teachers. Those who fail exams “return to the village, work on plantations, or seek low-level jobs in town, often with a strong sense of defeat” (K. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992, 20) while those who succeed in school pursue tertiary education and have a better chance at finding well-paid jobs. This contributes to a class division between the urban elite and rural communities. Among the Kwara’ae in Malaita, some students who spend years away from the village feel “alienated or at least uncomfortable in relation to their village of origin” and believe that “formal education has made them superior to uneducated villagers” (K. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992, 20). To address the lack of resources and access to education, Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo (1992, 21)

argue that rural and urban schools need to be made more equivalent so that no matter where a student attends school, they are prepared to make decisions on issues affecting the country.

3.1.3 Gender inequalities for education and work

In addition to unequal access for rural students, young women continue to be marginalized within education. Within Solomon Islands the Education Strategic Framework states that females and males should have equal access to educational opportunities (MEHRD 2016). As the statistics in section 3.1.1 described access to education for females has improved over the years especially in the early years of primary school. However, as students continue in school, males have greater access to educational opportunities. Of the 238,105 people over age five enrolled in schooling, 51.6 percent were males and 48.4 percent were females. As for school attainment of the 46 percent of the population over the age of 12 who had completed primary education, 50.5 percent were males and 49.5 percent were females. The completion rates drop for both genders as young people continue in school. In 2019, 30 percent of males and 27 percent of females had attained secondary education and only 9 percent of males and 7 percent of females had completed tertiary education (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, xxx). In the rural areas of Solomon Islands, young women are less likely to attend school, but as the statistics from the 2019 Census show, even though there are fewer females completing various stages of education, the numbers of males and females enrolled in school are now roughly equal. In the classrooms I observed, there were roughly the same number of females and males in each classroom.

When a family does not have enough money to send all their children to school, they must choose which children will attend formal schooling and which will stay home. As is the

case in many parts of the world, when a family cannot afford to send all their children to school, often young women are chosen to stay home and help with younger siblings and household duties (see Gaetano 2015 for China; Leckie 2016 for Fiji; Ong 1987 for Malaysia among others). Females, especially in rural areas, have fewer opportunities for education beyond primary school because of “various social-economic and cultural constraints” that keep them at home (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 104). Despite policy reforms and education restructuring, because of cultural values females still do not have accessible or equitable access to education (Maezama 2016, 49). However, in my interactions with students at community high schools, gender was not the only factor affecting a decision. Parents chose which children would attend higher levels of education based on the student’s behavior, willingness to attend school, and academic achievement.

Throughout Melanesia since independence, males and females have experienced opportunities for education and work differently. Despite the national constitution promoting gender equality and women’s rights, women continue to be marginalized in government and have historically faced disparities in pay and career opportunities compared to men (Jolly 1997, 155). This disparity between the elite, predominately men, and the general population is particularly apparent in the current workforce. Many of the current government leaders attended the best schools, providing them with access to government positions, while those who attended lower-performing schools work more typical, blue-collar jobs. According to the 2019 Census, there were two men for every woman in paid monetary work, while there were more women than men in the unpaid labor force (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 138). Unpaid labor included the exchange of goods and services without monetary compensation such as housework, caring for family, and subsistence farming. High-skilled jobs, such as business and

medical professionals, and semi-skilled jobs, such as craft and machine operators, were dominated by men; whereas women outnumbered men in low-skilled occupations, such as housework (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 142). Among the various industries for employment in Solomon Islands, men dominate in all areas except education, health and social work, agriculture/forestry/fishing (which includes subsistence farming), and household activities, revealing issues of gender equity in positions available to women (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 145).

The parents of my young participants came from a variety of educational and employment backgrounds. Educational opportunities began increasing for young people in the years leading up to independence in 1978. This means that the grandparents of my participants were school-aged when widespread education was introduced. As such, most of the grandparents attended at least primary school and some attended early secondary school. The parents of young people I worked with had the opportunity for more education, many attending secondary school through Form 5. The Census data from 2009 and 2019 shows the shifts in educational opportunities. In 1986 school enrollment rates were below 40 percent, but by 2009, 84 percent of young people ages 6-15 were enrolled in school (Solomon Islands National Statistical Office 2009, 91). These numbers decreased in 2019 to 64 percent of young people ages 5-15 enrolled in school; however, it is hard to know if this is an actual decrease in enrollment or a result of the undercount that occurred in 2009 (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 101).

I first noticed these generational shifts in education during my MA thesis research in Temotu province in 2009 and observed similar patterns during my dissertation research.⁵⁶ Despite the increased educational opportunities, many of the parents have struggled to find

⁵⁶ I discuss the generational shifts in educational opportunities and language use in Chapter 5 of my MA Thesis (Emerine 2009).

employment. In Honiara, usually at least one parent was employed out of the home and sometimes both parents had jobs. For the young people in Buala, there were similar dynamics. Because of the proximity to the provincial headquarters, often one parent was employed outside the home. However, for many families, their income still relied on subsistence labor and came from selling produce, homemade bread, fish, betel nut, and other small items. The educational backgrounds of parents in both Honiara and Buala were varied with some having done minimal university training, but most completing primary or some secondary school.

3.1.4 The school research sites

As previously described, during my research I was based at two community high schools: Ridge Community High School (Ridge CHS) in Honiara and Jejevo Community High School (Jejevo CHS) outside Buala on the island of Isabel.⁵⁷ After completing my research period at the schools, I continued research in the communities and remained in contact with students and teachers, following up through additional interviews while in the country and connecting over social media once I left the Solomons.⁵⁸

A typical day at both schools involved lots of unsupervised time for students and rote learning. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, students stayed in one classroom and the teachers came to them each period. If there were no teachers in the classroom, students could be found talking (usually in Pijin in Honiara and Cheke Holo in Buala), playing games on their phones, listening to music, or goofing off in or near the classrooms. This relaxed environment made it difficult for students to focus when they wanted to study, write papers, or take notes.

⁵⁷ Ridge CHS is a pseudonym and Jejevo CHS is the real name. See Chapter 1 for an explanation of this decision.

⁵⁸ For further explanation of the schools and larger research context, see Chapter 1.

Classrooms had a chalkboard and desks for the students and little else. Lessons usually included rote, teacher-centered learning: teachers talked in a mix of English and Pijin, students listened and took notes. Some teachers and lessons broke this mold, such as will be shown in Chapter 4 with the English teachers I interviewed, but for the most part a typical lesson follows the pattern described in Table 3.3. Because the process of writing notes and explaining takes a long time, one lesson can take multiple class periods.

Table 3.3 Example of a typical lesson in community high schools

Typical Lesson in Community High Schools
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher passes out or writes notes on the board about the topic, if writing on the board, students copy in their notebooks while teacher writes. 2. Once students finish copying, the teacher reads through the notes out loud in English. 3. After each main point, the teacher explains in Pijin what was just read, sometimes giving additional examples. 4. After the lesson is done, the teacher asks if students have questions. A few students raise their hands, but most students sit quietly. 5. Teacher writes on the board an assignment to do before the next class and asks again for any questions. 6. Teacher leaves the classroom with students often still unclear on what they should take from the lesson.

3.2 Obstacles to student success

While in Solomon Islands, I noticed many obstacles and challenges that youth and teachers faced in Solomon Islands. Some of the challenges I observed are listed in Table 3.4 below. Some issues create and drive the other challenges, making it difficult to understand or attempt to fix one problem without addressing the others. When these obstacles compound, as I will elaborate in the sections that follow, it makes it difficult for students to do well in school.

Table 3.4 List of challenges to students’ educational success

List of challenges to Students’ Educational Success	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher/Student absenteeism • Overcrowded Classrooms • Lack of classroom & laboratory spaces • Lack of Learning Resources • Exam-centric learning • Lack of Teacher Preparation & Training • Pushing In/Ahead (when don’t pass) • Lack of Community Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Problems (such as divorce, pregnancy, taking care of family members, etc.) • Gender inequality • Expensive School Fees • School (in)Accessibility • Lack of accountability • Low literacy & English skills • Low critical thinking skills

Note: items in **bold** in this chart are the six I discuss in the sections that follow.

In this section, I expand on six of these challenges, which I saw as having a major impact on education in Solomon Islands, particularly in the way they intersected and influenced one another. All the challenges listed affect learning, but I am describing these obstacles because they were the ones that I discussed the most with teachers and students. In Chapter 7, I also describe how school fees and family problems affect student learning. In the sections that follow, I begin by describing the focus on exams in schools in Solomon Islands and how this impacted the quality of learning. Because many students failed the exams, I discuss how this led students to push back into schools, which caused overcrowding. This overcrowding meant there were not enough resources for students, which lowered the quality of learning. This in turn led to absenteeism of both students and teachers who were frustrated with the learning context. All these issues meant that students struggled to grasp certain information and concepts in school, not least of which was English. The intersection of these obstacles is what I call the Cycle of Obstacles to Student Success (Figure 3.1). I will explain this cycle further in the last part of this section after describing the various obstacles.

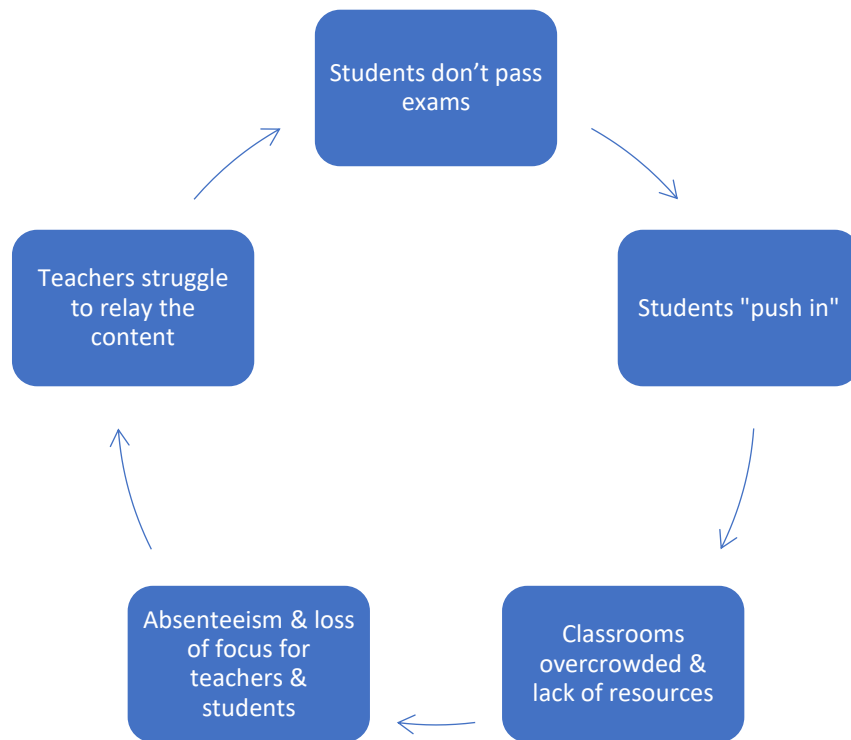


Figure 3.1 Cycle of Obstacles to Student Success

3.2.1 Exam-centric education

Much of the Solomon Islands' educational system centers around exams. Exams are given at the end of Grade 6, Form 3 (Grade 9), Form 5 (Grade 11), and Form 6 (Grade 12). In 2006, around 10,000 students were “pushed out” of school because they failed their exams at Grade 6, Form 3, or Form 5 (Evans 2016). Because of the expansion of educational facilities, the Grade 6 exam no longer determines if a student can continue into secondary school; however, if students do not pass the Form 3 and Form 5 exams, they must leave school or fight for the limited positions in less prestigious schools. The exam at the end of Form 6 (Grade 12) determines if students are prepared to proceed to a university. Passing these exams is important to both students and teachers, because schools are judged based on the number of students who pass (Maebuta 2011).

Writing about schools in the Solomons, Jack Maebuta (2011, 102), states that teachers “spend most of the instructional hours coaching students to pass examinations” instead of teaching them the content they need to learn. Much of class in Form 3, 5, and 6 was spent preparing students with the knowledge they needed for the exams instead of giving students a chance to explore what they are good at and learn things they are interested in. The main exam subjects included Math, Social Studies, Science, and English. According to Jeremy Dorovolomo (2008, 16) a Solomon Islands scholar, since academic success is measured through the “high stake exams” teachers only prioritize teaching the subjects that will be on exams, leaving out other subjects that are essential to students’ overall development, such as physical education and the arts. I similarly observed a focus on exam subjects, including teachers from non-exam subjects giving up their class time so the exam teachers could prepare students. Additionally, neither community high school had the resources for the arts and although physical education was on the timetables, this class was frequently cut when time was needed for other events.

During my observations at the schools, the teachers often reminded students that a particular topic would be on the exam and spent many classes reviewing previous exam materials, focusing on memorization sometimes to the detriment of ensuring students fully understood the concepts and how to apply them. For example, a Science teacher for Form 5 at Ridge CHS was reviewing questions that would be on the exam. He wrote questions on the board in English with multiple choice answers and then asked the students to write down the answer they thought was right. One of the questions included a diagram of wavelengths. When he asked students to raise their hands for which answer they chose, 33 got it right, 18 got it wrong, and 15 did not put any answer. He emphasized that they needed to put something down on their exam or they would get zero points for the question. Instead of explaining why “A” was right or what was

wrong with the other answers, he just said that they had talked about it before and moved on to the next question. In this lesson, the teacher was teaching students strategies for taking the exam instead of assessing students' understanding of course materials.

To combat the focus on academic knowledge tested in exams and give students other skills, MEHRD has incorporated into the curriculum practical skills through “option” courses such as Business, Agriculture, Home Economics, and Industrial Arts/Design Technology. In Forms 1-3 (Grades 7-9), students learned about all the different practical options. The students were supposed to do small projects as a class to learn the skills, but since many schools lacked resources, these subjects were often taught theoretically. However, some teachers such as the Industrial Arts teacher and Agriculture teacher at Jejevo CHS found ways to use existing resources like coconut shells and nearby gardens to teach practical skills. After being introduced to the available “options” students in Forms 4 and 5 (Grades 10 and 11) choose one practical subject to specialize in for both years.

The Ministry of Education has been trying to make changes to fix the focus on exams by creating internal assessments (IAs) and standard based assessments (SBAs) throughout the school year so that all the weight of passing does not just fall on the end of school year exam. IAs and SBAs were smaller projects and papers that students did throughout the year and were intended to track their knowledge development over time. At the end of the year, they were added to their overall exam score. SBAs included assignments in English like a letter about the oil spill described below, experiments during science class, and practical application of knowledge in students' elective courses such as building a wooden box in Industrial Arts and growing “*kabis*” (a green leafy vegetable) in Agriculture. However, in my observations, many of these SBAs were still treated like exams. Students could work on them independently for a few

weeks, but teachers still spent many school hours coaching students on how to do well on the SBAs and meet all the requirements, instead of making sure they understood the concepts these assessments were tracking.

In interviews, some youth expressed to me that practical subjects did not help them after school because they only learned about them theoretically. Although students were meant to do a variety of projects in their option courses to learn the needed skills, most schools lacked the tools or supplies to do any projects outside the projects that were required as part of the SBAs. Those who felt confident in the skills they learned in school, such as building boxes and tables, did not have the tools needed to continue making things to earn income after school. Additionally, because the practical subjects were called “options” the students considered these courses to be less important than other subjects. Emphasizing this belief, the end of the year exam did not test students on these subjects. They were tested on their mastery during the SBAs throughout the school year. As a result, many students focused their time and energy on exam subjects. At Ridge CHS, practical subjects were the courses that stopped meeting during the last month of school so students had more time to prepare for their exam subjects, once again putting the priority on preparing for academic exams rather than mastering topics that would help them beyond school.

I asked in a qualitative survey given to all the students in Form 3, 5, and 6 what would help them prepare for their exam – nearly everyone mentioned they needed to study hard. Students were told by teachers that success in an exam relied on them coming to class and studying hard. This focus on exams encourages students to think of and for themselves and focuses on their personal success, pressuring students to adopt individualism assumed in formal Western education. However, as Chapter 7 discusses, although education prioritizes

individualism, students still rely on community and family relationships for educational success. Many also added that they needed to pray to God for help. Prayer reflected individual and community values since students prayed to God on their own and asked others in their community to pray for them (as discussed in Chapter 6). Similarly, Oakeshott (2021a, 109) notes at the elite schools where he conducted research through sermons and lectures students were encouraged “to consider their personal performance above any other commitments or experiences” while expressing the importance of valuing relationships at the same time. When I asked students individually how they studied, many said they just read their notes from this year and the previous years, and they did the practice exams the teachers gave them. Since students mainly relied on reading and re-reading notes, during our conversations after school I discussed with them some basic study tips such as quizzing themselves through writing things out and quizzing one another when studying together. Many of them had not tried these techniques before.

For many students there was a lot of uncertainty around how to prepare well for their exams since there were so many subjects they needed to know. One student commented to me that her backpack was filled with notebooks from all the things she was studying. As part of the photo project, Julie took a picture of the various notebooks she used to study for the exams (Image 3.1). She wrote in her worksheet description that they are one of the “main important things” to her because it is where she took notes from teachers.

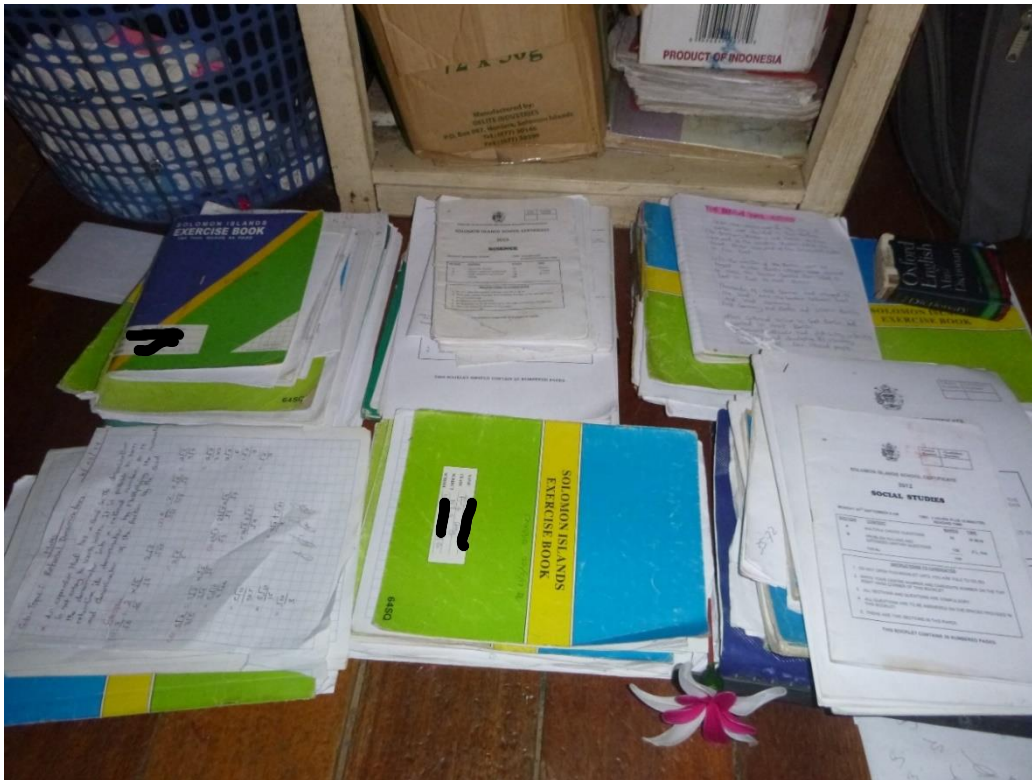


Image 3.1 Notebooks and practice exams for studying. Photo by Julie Form 5 Ridge CHS

A few days before the exam, I talked with Margie, a Form 5 student at Ridge CHS, as she was heading to a friend's house to study. When I asked her how she felt about the exam she said to me in English, "I'm scared. Just kidding. I'm ready" followed by a nervous laugh. When we first met, Margie came and talked to me in very clear English. During breaks, I often found her reading English novels that she checked out from the library. Margie was one of the students who appeared to be the readiest for the exams, yet her joking showed a bit of nervousness. Many students made similar comments to me filled with uncertainty about how they would do on the exam. The students also felt anxious after their exams, as they wondered about their scores and the implications for their education, given the significant role that exams played in their schooling journeys.

3.2.2 Pushed out and pushing in

If students do not pass their exams at the end of Form 3 (Grade 9) and Form 5 (Grade 11), they are “pushed out” of school, a term Solomon Islanders used to describe students who left school before completing their secondary education. Because students and parents saw completing school as necessary for finding employment, many students found ways to return to school despite failing their exams. When students did not pass their exams, many parents approached principals or teachers and asked for placements at the schools, something I call “pushing in.” Depending on the administration, the students may or may not be admitted. At Ridge CHS, the administration charged 500 SBD⁵⁹ in addition to the base school fees for students to transfer in. When I asked the principal about this in our interview, he said that sometimes a parent, community leader, *wantok* (someone from the same language group⁶⁰), or one of his bosses would come to him and ask for space for their student. He often felt obligated to let the student in because he did not want to damage his relationship with that person, especially if they had power over him. Some school leaders also felt bad for students who had not passed because they knew their career options would be very limited, so they admitted them into the school. Despite the increased fees for transferring, many students pushed into community high schools, which caused the class sizes to exceed the maximum number of students. I observed this at community high schools, but in personal communication with David Oakeshott, he said that he also observed this at national and provincial secondary schools, so the issue of pushing in is widespread.

⁵⁹ 500 SBD is equivalent to approximately 60 USD (as of October 2024). The minimum wage in Solomon Islands is 4 SBD an hour, so this is a significant amount of money for most Solomon Islanders (Kekea 2018).

⁶⁰ See Chapter 1 for a more nuanced definition of *wantok*.

Some teachers told me that pushing ahead into the next grade, even if a student did not know the required content, began even before exam years. As early as primary school some parents asked teachers to push their student on to the next grade even when the teacher suggested a student should be held back because they had not met all the goals or standards for the grade. The Career Master⁶¹ at Ridge CHS said that before the Grade 6 exam was eliminated, even if students did not pass their exams, they were pushed on into Form 1 (Grade 7). The change in education policy had opened the door for all students to have space in Form 1, but there was not a way to track if schools were pushing students forward even when they were unprepared for the next level. The Form 3 Science teacher at Ridge CHS told me a similar story of children in rural areas pushing ahead into Form 1 without knowing how to read. Pushing forward in early primary school leads to a poor foundation of literacy and numeracy beginning in primary school and continuing throughout secondary school. One youth I interviewed in Buala said that the reason he dropped out of secondary school was that he did not know how to read or write.

At the time parents asked for placement for their students, 35 students had already been assigned to each classroom, so these additional students led to overcrowded classrooms. Pushing in would not be as bad if the numbers only exceeded 35 by a few, but when they went over 50 or 60 it became impossible for a teacher to meet the students at the required academic level. Students who pushed in were not returning to the previous grade level and re-learning the content they struggled with, they were moving ahead with their classmates and struggling to keep up. Part of this may be because repetition of grades was discouraged by MEHRD. In the

⁶¹ A career master is a teacher who also fills an administrative role like a guidance counselor in US schools. Their job was to help guide students in the next steps of their educational journey whether applying for scholarships, applying to universities, or completing paperwork needed for the next year of secondary schooling.

Performance Assessment Report, MEHRD tracks the percentage of students who repeat a particular school year and says in the report that “international evidence shows limited if any benefits to student learning from repeating a school year” (MEHRD 2019b, 32).

Teachers said that when students push in because they did not place where they wanted, they were often ill-prepared for the next year of school. For example, Zonita, an English teacher at Ridge CHS, explained to me that she had to choose at what level to teach her Form 6 English class. If she chose to slow down and review materials for those who did not pass Form 5, she disadvantaged the students who worked hard to pass. When she ignored those who did not pass and taught at the appropriate level, students became distracted and overwhelmed during lessons. Either way, pushing in brought down the overall level of the class and decreased the content students could learn in a class period, because of overcrowding and a lack of resources as explained in the next section. This increased the disparity between community high schools and prestigious secondary schools that did not allow as many students to push in, which in turn, widened the educational gap and subsequent opportunities for elite and non-elite students.

As of 2005, 40 percent of the nation’s youth were “push outs” because they failed school exams (Evans 2016), leaving them as “politically and economically disenfranchised citizens” unsure of their future options (Jourdan 2013, 275). From 2016-2019, there was significant improvement in dropout rates for students taking the exam at the end of Year 9 (Form 3) and Year 11 (Form 5). According to the Performance Assessment Report published by MEHRD in 2019, of students taking the exam in Form 3, only 9 percent were unplaced, meaning they did not have a spot in a Form 4 class after exams as opposed to 33 percent in 2016. For students entering Form 5, 46 percent were unplaced compared to 63 percent in 2016. However, the placement rate

for students moving from Form 5 to Form 6 (Grade 12) has gotten worse, with 81 percent of students unplaced in 2019 as opposed to only 45 percent in 2016 (MEHRD 2019b, 33).

Despite being pushed out, many students push their way back into schools because they see completing secondary school as key to finding employment, which they consider to be essential if they want to be able to give back to the family who supported them. As education expands and more students receive school completion certificates, it leads to a “diploma disease” where increasingly higher credentials are needed to find employment (Dore 1976). This problem extends beyond just an issue of supply and demand; it is also a result of “social expectations about what kind of work is desirable,” resulting in some people choosing unemployment over demeaning or low-paying jobs (Hicks, McDougall, and Oakeshott 2021, 314; Munro, Parker, and Baransano 2021, 364).

3.2.3 Overcrowding and lack of resources

The Ministry of Education sets enrollment of secondary classes to 35 students. In Honiara community high schools, this number is regularly surpassed. In one of the Form 5 classes at Ridge CHS, there were over 100 registered students, although only 70 showed up regularly for class. The second Form 5 class had over 60 students enrolled. Because of the large enrollment, classrooms do not have enough space for students, so the classes take over auditoriums or laboratories, meaning these spaces can no longer be used for their intended purposes. Jejevo CHS was less crowded with classes ranging in size from 25 to 40 students, but the school still lacked resources for all the students.

Every school I visited in 2017 as well as the two I conducted research at during 2018-2019 mentioned that they lacked the resources to grow their schools as they wanted, whether it

was enough textbooks, updated curriculum, equipment for hands-on learning, or the ability to add more classrooms and other instructional spaces. The lack of resources was especially apparent in rural schools in other provinces and city council schools within Honiara. For example, one principal said to me that since they did not have the equipment or resources to teach students carpentry or home economics, they taught it theoretically via a textbook. In a rural boarding school in Isabel province, the deputy principal said that they only had a few textbooks for every class because the money they received had gone to other necessities and maintenance. The Education officer of this district said that he had given them sufficient resources, but apparently there was a mismanagement or lack of funds occurring. Both Jejevo CHS and Ridge CHS were short on textbooks, curriculum resources, supplies for hands-on learning, and classroom space. In the National Secondary school as well as the church schools I visited, classroom space was tight, but generally they had the resources they needed for student learning.

For teachers, especially new ones, the large class sizes made teaching even more daunting as they struggled to plan lessons without sufficient resources. Teachers often did not have complete curriculum guides and teaching aids, which made planning lessons hard, especially for those in provincial areas without internet. The overcrowding also meant that there were not enough textbooks for each student. Each class was supposed to have a textbook for every student, but at both schools textbooks were missing. At Jejevo CHS, five students regularly shared one textbook. In one of the English classes, there were no books at all so the teacher had to develop all her own materials. The lack of textbooks meant teachers regularly photocopied notes and sections of the books to give to students. However, both schools regularly ran out of ink and paper for making copies. Both schools also lacked libraries, so students did not have a place to find books to read in their own time. The unequal access to resources was one of

the reasons many students move to Honiara in hopes of a better education, but as the example of Ridge CHS shows, not all schools in Honiara were well-resourced.

Overcrowding and lack of resources meant that teachers struggled to teach in a way that reached students and students struggled to learn everything they needed to know. Solomon Islands has been training teachers in student-centered educational methods (such as working in small groups and planning active learning class activities), but when classrooms lacked space and classroom sizes exceeded 60 students, it was difficult for the teacher to provide feedback and move around to the different groups in a 40-minute period. Since class sizes were so large, I observed teachers spending much of the class dealing with classroom management, quieting students, telling them to pay attention, and repeating details from the lesson because other students could not hear. They were also forced to rely on “chalk and talk” (as described above and in the next chapter) where much of the class period was spent copying notes from the board followed by the teacher explaining the notes in Pijin so students could understand, instead of engaging students in learning activities.

When teachers gave students assignments to aid their learning, the teachers were left with piles of exercise books to grade, often spending weekends and late nights at the school. Many teachers spent hours marking papers, sometimes even cancelling classes because they could not get through it all in time. Some teachers admitted to giving fewer assignments because they did not have time to give feedback to all the students. Both cancelling classes and being unable to provide appropriate and timely feedback meant students struggled to grasp some of the required content.

The large numbers also meant that teachers could not provide one-on-one or small group support to all the students when they were working on exercises. A few teachers gave students

time to work on examples and activities in class and walked around to help, but this was often limited to the classes of around 60 students instead of those with 100. More often, teachers gave an assignment or example and then told the students to work on it in their own time and then they returned to the office. Some students would work attentively, but many quickly became distracted by the conversations, music, or the phone games they were playing before the teacher arrived. For accountability and to find out the correct answers, the teacher would go through the exercises with the whole class the next day or the students could come to the office for help. Some students would seek out a teacher in the staff room for help, but most were too timid to seek the assistance they needed. Similarly, students were often timid about asking questions in the large classes when they did not understand something. Often a teacher would end a lesson by asking, “any questions?” The students either sat quietly or responded in a unison of “no.” However, after the teacher left, many students approached one another and occasionally me for guidance on the assignment given.

Overcrowding led to exhausted teachers and bored or frustrated students who were not learning at their level. All this led to chronic absenteeism, which I will discuss in the next section.

3.2.4 Student and teacher absenteeism

One of the challenges I observed during my time at both schools was chronic absenteeism of both teachers and students. As previously mentioned, the large amount of grading meant that at times the teachers skipped teaching to catch up. In addition, teachers had family responsibilities, including taking care of their children, which pulled them away from teaching. The school system does not have a policy for leave or sick day options. Instead of

having substitute teachers, any teacher who was available was asked to fill in while the teacher was gone. This often resulted in students missing out on content while the teacher was absent. When I met Roselyn, an English teacher at Ridge CHS, she was returning from maternity leave. She had given birth two weeks before I met her. She said that she was pressured by the principal to return two weeks after her baby was born because there was no one to cover her classes and her Form 3 English students would not be prepared for their exams. Although she did come back early, she often still missed class because she had no one to watch her newborn while working.

Students were also regularly absent. Sometimes they were late because they missed the bus or did not have money to pay for the bus and had to walk to school. Sometimes they left early because no teachers had come in the morning. Other times family responsibilities, like taking care of sick parents or younger siblings, kept them from coming to school. Large class sizes and pushing in also affected the students. Some students were bored because they were being taught at too low a level. Other students were frustrated because they were constantly behind. Both often led to students missing school and sometimes dropping out.

I noticed during my observations that the more a teacher was absent, the more a student was absent. For example, I was talking with a student in September 2019 during playoffs for the under-20 soccer league. She told me that many teachers were absent because they were watching the soccer game and as a result, many students left school early as well. When talking to another student, he was frustrated that he paid bus fares to get to school but no teachers had come that day. Some Form 6 students said that the biggest problem they had with school was that the teachers did not come, so they were worried that they would not be ready for their exams. Because teachers were absent so often, students said things like “it’s okay if we can skip class. The madam never comes anyway.” Conversely, the more students were absent the less motivated

the teachers were to come. Teachers told me on multiple occasions that they went to class and there were not many students there, so they decided to do the lesson on a different day. This became a cycle that negatively affected what students were learning in school. When students were absent regularly, they got behind on content, so the teacher regularly repeated lessons. When teachers got frustrated that only a few students were in class, they delayed the lesson and put the overall class behind in covering content.

Absenteeism was a topic of multiple staff meetings at Ridge CHS. In October 2019, about one month before the exam, the deputy principal and staff had conversations during two staff meetings about why teachers were not going to classes. Some teachers who did not teach the main exam topics said they were done with their classes and were giving their time to exam teachers. Other teachers complained that these teachers had not relayed their plans to give up class time, so students were just leaving school when no teachers came during the assigned option periods. A few weeks later in the staff meeting, the principal said teachers needed to be in class, because when they did not attend students left class. Some teachers just stayed in the office or came late to school instead of going to teach. He said teachers needed a good reason to be absent because they needed to set a good example for students and prepare them before their exam.

Absenteeism of teachers and students was not just laziness or frustration, often it was caused because of family obligations. Oakeshott (2021a, 117) describes how the teachers at the schools where he conducted research were constantly drawn away from school for “any other business (AOBs)” and obligations to kin at home. This included supporting *wantoks* who came to town, attending events at home, and raising money to send home. Similarly, I observed teachers and students missing school for a variety of reasons including taking care of family

members, selling things to raise extra money, and going home for an important event like a funeral. These reasons for missing school highlight the importance of relationships for people in Solomon Islands. Although education introduced individualized aims, remaining embedded in relationships with home and kin was an important part of sociality and life, as I elaborate on later in this dissertation.

3.2.5 Student struggles with content: English and other subjects

As previously mentioned, students are pushing in and ahead in schooling starting in primary school. This meant that many students were not gaining a strong foundation in literacy, numeracy, and other foundational skills. Every year that a student pushed ahead without meeting the standards needed for that grade, put them further behind in content. Teachers then must choose to teach at the level students should be at or repeat things from previous years, decreasing the overall content they could cover in a course. One of the biggest struggles I encountered among students was confidence in understanding, speaking, and writing in English. The next chapter will dive into specific incidences of Pijin and English in schools and why this happens. In this section, I introduce some of the complications with learning English and how this also affected other subjects and skills students needed to learn.

Although English is the official language of education, Solomon Islands Pijin was regularly used in classes to teach, explain concepts, and ask questions. Students struggled to understand English both in reading and when it was spoken to them. One example of this struggle was reading comprehension. I taught a lesson on reading comprehension to Form 3 students at Jejevo CHS out of a book provided to me by their English teacher. I asked them to summarize in their own words some short paragraphs from a reading about logging. Only a few

students were able to summarize what they read. Most of the students chose sentences from the paragraph and copied them word for word without putting them in their own words. Sometimes these sentences were the main point and sometimes they were unrelated. The questions on the worksheet I gave them about the reading required students to pay attention to details and the context of the passage. One question asked, “how much of the world’s rain forest was left at the time the passage was written?” There were a few different numbers given in the passage for different details. Most students just put for their answer one of the various numbers in the reading instead of paying attention to the detail that it was half of 7.7 million miles, which was clearly stated in the passage. Another question asked students to give a yes or no answer with a reason. For this question, most students just said yes or no without giving a reason. The variations of answers and lack of details showed that students were not understanding all of what they were reading in the passage and were just choosing details they hoped were the right answer.

Students also struggled with writing and structuring essays in clear English. I saw this on every level of their writing. When a student asked me for feedback on an essay, I struggled between proofreading the grammar and spelling or helping with overall structural issues. I spent many hours after school helping students in Form 3 and Form 5 develop essays to prepare them for their exams. We discussed how to write thesis statements, how to support points, how to organize essays, and how to improve their English grammar and sentence structures. Relatedly, many students struggled to write an argumentative essay on a complex issue. They struggled to think of solutions outside what others were already doing. Usually, the example a teacher gave was the topic that every student wrote about instead of developing their own solution. In this sense, students struggled to think outside the box. They saw what others were doing and repeated

what they saw instead of coming up with their own solution. I was told by teachers that even in Form 6 some students could still not write in clear English even though they should be at the top level of secondary school. The lack of understanding and struggle to write essays in English also affected other subjects since they all required assignments to be written in English.

Because of their familiarity with Pijin, students struggled with spelling and phonics in English. As I proofread essays, I saw students would regularly use Pijin pronunciation to spell words. Sometimes this changed the meaning of the words without them realizing it. I was helping students with one of their SBA tasks for Form 5 where students had to write a pretend letter to the editor of a newspaper about the bauxite and oil spill in Rennell-Bellona, one of the islands in the Solomons. As I read over the essays, I noticed many students wrote: “the ship was licking oil.” When I asked students what they were trying say, they said “leaking.” They spelled it this way because /i/ in Pijin is pronounced [i] like the “ee” in bee. These students thought they were writing “leaking” but were writing “licking” and they did not recognize the difference between the two words since they did not understand the differences between English and Pijin phonics. When I explained to them what they had written, we all laughed at the idea of a ship licking oil without a tongue.

Another challenge was the confidence to speak English. I expand on the reasons behind this in the next chapter. As a quick overview, most students and many teachers feel intimidated to speak in English. They were afraid of messing up or acting pretentious by using English. There were very few spaces in schools where students were encouraged to practice speaking English since teachers and students relied on Pijin to explain and understand concepts. The next chapter will argue for the benefits that translanguaging between English and Pijin can have for student learning. However, one of the limitations of mostly using Pijin when teaching was that

students continued to struggle with their English knowledge, especially speaking and writing. Lack of confidence in English meant students were not prepared for their national exams and applying for jobs after school.

The struggles with English understanding also bled into struggles in other subjects such as Math. After their exams, I asked students how they felt it went. Most of them said something about it being mostly alright but noted that Math was hard. Among students in Honiara and Isabel, Math was the subject they said they struggled with the most. I asked one of the Math teachers at Ridge CHS why she thought this was. She said that students' success depended on their study habits. If they paid attention in class and did the assignments, the students did alright. However, she said that most of them struggled with word problems. For example, if they were caught on the meaning of one word because they did not know its definition, then they would not be able to solve the problem. Once they figured out the English meaning, then they struggled to apply the math concepts to the word problem. When I was observing the Form 5 Math class at Jejevo CHS both the teacher and the students struggled with the word problems. They were reviewing a lesson on exchange rates and placing phone calls using an international card (something that is hardly used anymore) and the teacher's explanation made no sense to me or the students. When I asked the teacher after class what was confusing, he said that they knew how to do the calculations, but sometimes the English descriptions were confusing for him and the students.

Lack of English understanding caused students to struggle in areas of problem-solving, critical thinking, and analysis. These areas are known as soft skills, or skills that are intangible and subjective, therefore hard to quantify and evaluate in learning; however, they are skills that are necessary for personal communication and success in school and work. These students were

capable of these things outside the school context but struggled when they had to express them in English. For example, during my observation of the Form 3 Agriculture class at Jejevo CHS, the students struggled to understand how to fill out a worksheet about plants. The teacher explained what she wanted them to do in Pijin, but emphasized they needed to read the whole worksheet before going outside to measure a pineapple and banana plant. While outside, many students did not understand what they needed to measure or fill out on the worksheet, so they kept going to the teacher for further explanation. Once back in the classroom, many students copied the measurements from each other's papers. One of the groups struggled to answer a question that said: "Why don't banana and pineapple plants need deep soil?" At the top of the worksheet there was a line that read, "bananas and pineapple do not need deep soil because their roots are shallow." When I asked if they had read the worksheet and I pointed out the line to them, they looked at it and went back to searching for the answer in the textbook. This example showed a struggle with reading comprehension since they did not understand all the English words they were reading. It also shows a struggle with critical thinking since they could not apply what they read to the answers needed on their worksheet. This lack of training in soft skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving alongside struggles in English, affected students' ability to do well on exams that were written in English. It also meant they were not prepared for many of the jobs they hoped to attain after schooling, as explained further in the final section of this chapter.

3.2.6 Interconnectedness of obstacles

Pushing in, overcrowding, and absenteeism are all connected in a cycle that causes students to fail their exams. Figure 3.1 at the beginning of this section shows the interconnected cycle of obstacles that students face, which make it difficult for them to do well in school.

Because students do not pass their exams, they find any available space where they can push into school. Since so many students push in, classes are overcrowded and lack resources. This overcrowding causes boredom, frustration, and a lack of focus for the students. It also causes a lack of focus for teachers who struggle to teach at two different levels. This leads to absenteeism of both teachers and students. Overcrowding, pushing in, and absenteeism all make it difficult for the teachers to relay the needed content through lectures and assignment feedback. All this together causes students to not pass their exams and the cycle continues. These obstacles to success make the future options for students uncertain and precarious.

The obstacles described in this section such as absenteeism, overcrowding, pushing in, English knowledge, and exam-focused education are only a few of the challenges youth faced. I highlighted them because I noticed they were intersecting obstacles that influenced one another and caused a cycle of obstacles to success as shown in Figure 3.1. Another major challenge was having the money needed to pay school fees. For this, students who went the furthest in school often relied on social networks and extended kin who had jobs in Honiara or overseas and had the money to pay school fees. In Chapter 7, I discuss the importance of these relationships for success in school and expand on the challenges with school fees in the next section. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, many rural students lacked the financial resources to continue in school, which widened the gap between rural students and urban elites.

I presented the challenges just discussed to some of the staff at the Ministry of Education in 2019. At the end of the presentation, I shared some possible solutions. These solutions included reducing class sizes, not allowing students to push ahead unless they meet knowledge requirements, creating a transitional literacy program from Pijin or vernacular to English, and providing schools with resources for more practical training. I received a mixed response to these

suggestions. Some people recognized the importance of these challenges, but also acknowledged that the challenges were deeper than just a simple solution. To implement any of these solutions takes money, time, and training, which the schools and Ministry of Education do not have. The attendees at my talk also wanted me to explain not only the challenges but how teachers and students kept going despite these obstacles. Although the obstacles young people face in education are significant, understanding how and why they continue in school despite these obstacles became a driving factor of my analysis. The next chapter shows how teachers are working through one obstacle, English and Pijin use in schools. Additionally, the final section of this chapter explains the journeys students take and what motivates them to stay in school despite all these obstacles.

3.3 Student journeys in and out of schooling

The ideal pathway for youth in Solomon Islands was to move through primary and secondary schooling until Form 6. Then after their exam, they hoped to be placed in a Form 7 or a university program and receive one of the competitive scholarships for tertiary education. From there, they would use their degree to find a well-paid job, usually in Honiara, so that they had money to support their family. However, very few students followed this specific pathway. For most the journey was much longer. It often included extra years of schooling after secondary school to improve their grades to get into university. Many took time off school to work so they had money for fees or to support their family's needs. For those who were pushed out in secondary school, the journey involved periods where they stayed at home and "marketed" (sold betel nut, cigarettes, and other small food items), attempted second chance education through distance learning programs, or went to vocational training programs. Munro et al. (2021, 365)

call these “diploma disruptions” where school to work pathways do not follow a “linear progression,” but instead are continually influenced by shifts in one’s life. Despite these disruptions, youth in Solomon Islands and their families still considered attaining a secondary certificate, university degree, and good job, to be a pathway to their goal.

Whether or not students complete school or are “pushed out,” there are not enough jobs. Unemployment is hard to track because of the migratory nature of individuals and because most people rely on subsistence agriculture and the informal economy; however, reports have shown that anywhere between 35 to 70 percent of youth ages 15-19 are unemployed, with closer to 60 to 70 percent of the youth in Honiara lacking wage-paying jobs (Evans 2016). In the 1980s-1990s, many researchers focused their studies on the “push-pull dynamics of villages and towns,” following rural villagers to urban centers (see Lindstrom and Jourdan 2017, 4 for an overview of these studies). During this period, Christine Jourdan conducted research on urban communities in Honiara. She classified many of the school dropouts who hang around Honiara as “*masta liu*,” mostly young men and occasionally young women⁶² who were “drifting in and out of jobs, in and out of hope, [and] they are very often on the verge of delinquency” (Jourdan 1995a, 202). These young “*liu*” continue to grow in number throughout Honiara and in urban areas in the provinces. Some of the youth who are pushed out of school enroll in continuing education in hopes of a certificate that will lead to secure employment, causing “diploma disruptions” where education and work do not follow a linear path (Munro, Parker, and Baransano 2021, 365). Additionally, as youth spend more time in urban areas for school and work, personal ambitions and connections to home begin to change (Kraemer 2020; McDougall

⁶² “*Masta liu*” is a term usually applied to males who hang around the city looking for odd jobs and occasionally becoming involved in criminal activity (Jourdan 1995a). The young women who drop out of school are more likely to return home or be a “*haos gele*” (nanny) for the young children of a family member. However, I did hear multiple youth use the word “*liu*” to describe youth who sit around, market betel nut, and don’t have anything to do.

2017), making it difficult for youth to reintegrate into village life. The sections that follow explain some of the journeys the students I met followed or hoped to follow and what kept them motivated to continue in school.

3.3.1 Aims after secondary school

In conversations with students, I often asked what they would do if they did or did not pass their exams. Usually students had a two-fold plan: one that involved passing and staying in school as long as possible, and the other involved continuing at a vocational training center or finding a job. Nearly everyone at Ridge CHS said that they would go to the next Form or apply for university (depending on their current level in school). When I asked what they would do if they did not pass, I usually received nervous laughs and statements like “*stay nomoa*” (just stay around). When I asked Reina, a Form 3 student at Ridge CHS, what she would do if she did not pass her exams, she said that she would cry and just stay at her house and be “*sem*” (ashamed), but she hoped this would not happen because she wanted to continue in school. Someday Reina hoped to be an accountant and own her own business. Reina said that lots of people went to the University of South Pacific (USP) in Fiji for schooling as an accountant and then come back and are unable to find a job. So even if she passed and made it to university, her employment options were uncertain. When I followed up with Reina in 2019, she had passed her exams and was placed back at Ridge CHS for Form 4 and Form 5. She attended another community high school in Honiara for Form 6 and graduated from high school in 2022. In early 2023, Reina was hoping to study at USP to “upgrade” and improve her scores to apply for university but did not have enough money for the school fees and books. She told me via Messenger, “no enough money

yet... so me have too wait lelebet time moa.” (*Not enough money yet... so I have to wait a little bit more time.*)

Other students had similar responses to Reina. Those in lower forms said they would try to “push in” to the next level of schooling if they did not pass their exams. Those in Form 5 or Form 6 said they would go to the University of the South Pacific (USP) Honiara campus or the Solomon Islands National University (SINU) second chance program and take classes to “upgrade” (improve their grades) so that they could be admitted to university. If these options failed, they planned to seek opportunities for training in other skills through vocational training centers.

For those who did well on their exams at Form 6 or Form 7, they might secure a government scholarship and a chance to attend SINU or an international university. If their exam scores were lacking, students would “upgrade” at USP to improve their scores until they were eligible for a scholarship to SINU. Students were reliant on “competitive” government scholarships to pay for university both locally and abroad. Even if a student had good grades, they did not always receive a scholarship. Many people expressed to me that the “*wantok* system” had corrupted education.⁶³ By this they meant that the students who received scholarships were the ones who had close connections to their member of parliament or someone at the Ministry of Education who would recommend them for a scholarship. Sometimes these recommendations coincided with merit, but not always, creating an unequal competition for these scholarships. For those who did not have connections, it often took many rounds of applications before they were accepted for scholarships if they ever received one. If they had

⁶³ The *wantok* system is both a social practice of support between urban and rural kin as well as a discourse about practices and relationships (Schram 2015, 15–16). On the discourse level, scholars and locals blame the corruption in society on the *wantok* system, but also discuss the opportunities the *wantok* system creates (Brigg 2009; Fukuyama 2008; Kabutaulaka 2015). See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the idea of *wantoks*.

other means of finances through family support, they might attend university anyway, but some students had to wait until they received a scholarship.



Image 3.2 Science lab storage room at KGVI. Photo by Ruth, Form 5 Ridge CHS

Ruth, a Form 5 student at Ridge CHS, took a picture (Image 3.3) of the storage room in the lab at King George VI National Secondary School (KGVI). Two of Ruth's cousin-sisters took her to the lab at KGVI since Ridge CHS did not have a lab. The room that was supposed to be a science lab at Ridge CHS was converted into a classroom because there was not enough space for all the Form 5 students. In our interview, Ruth said that she took this picture because one day she hoped to go to a school with a lab so she could study science. When she saw the lab

at KGVI she said that her heart started pounding and she was so happy to be in a lab. She described the experience like this⁶⁴:

So mi olsem mi lukim science lab olsem hat blo mi **always pump** bikos mi bara laek
*So when I looked at the science lab my heart **always pumps** because I really want*

fo wan de mi duim **anything** insaet lo science lab. So mi se, “oh mi hapi nao taem
*to one day do **anything** inside a science lab. So I say, “oh I am happy when*

tufala lidim go lo datafala ples. Oh wan de bae mi duim **experiment somewhere**”
*these two took me to that place. Oh one day I will do **experiments somewhere.**”*

I asked Ruth if she had applied for schools with labs for Form 6 and she said yes. Ruth ended up going to a Catholic school in Honiara, for Form 6, which had a lab, and she enjoyed finally doing science experiments. After Form 6 she went to Form 7 at an Anglican secondary school in Honiara. From there she was accepted to a 2-year program for a Diploma of Pharmacy Technology at SINU. Ruth struggled to pay her fees throughout university, worrying each semester if she would have enough for her fees. Her father was a security guard, and her mother worked for a while at a public toilet, so they had to save and ask for money from extended family to help with the costs. Although it took multiple applications, Ruth finally earned one of the coveted SINU scholarships to help finance the last year of her diploma, which relieved the burden of finances for tuition and housing. Ruth was one of the students that was working hard to reach her dreams. She was motivated to do well so she could support her family one day. Since her only brother dropped out of high school the responsibility was now on her to support her parents once they could no longer work.

⁶⁴ For all transcriptions, **bold** font signifies words said in English. *Italics* are my translation into English. As much as possible I based my Pijin spelling on the *Trilingual Cultural Dictionary Pijin-English-French* (Jourdan and Maebiru 2002). I identified a word as in English if it was a word in English without a Pijin translation. Spelling of Pijin is not standardized, so I tried to capture spelling of Pijin words that were not in the dictionary. Any inaccuracies in translation are my own.

In conversations with students, I regularly asked what their aim was once they finished school. Students, especially at Ridge CHS, had very ambitious goals. When I asked students to name their career goals, the most common responses were doctor, teacher, nurse, lawyer, engineer, or pilot. All these jobs existed in Solomon Islands, but the positions for them were limited. Most of them also required a university education, but many of these students would not make it to university because they were inhibited by the challenges they faced in secondary school and the costs of pursuing university training. If students did not make it to university, their options narrowed to fields such as construction worker and hospitality (such as a hotel employee), which were skills they could learn at a vocational training center.

In my photo elicitation conversation with Lusi, Gabi, and Sarah, Form 5 students at Jejevo CHS, they all took pictures related to school. Most were pictures of their friends at school that helped them with schoolwork. Lusi also took a picture of the science teacher while teaching because she said he was a good teacher and explained things well. They said school was important because it gave them a better future and a job once they finished. Gabi was the only student who wanted to make a poster from her photos, an option I gave all the students. She made two posters: one around the theme of school and the other of her life more broadly. The school poster was titled "School is important." She included pictures of the school in the highlands where she went to primary school and pictures from Jejevo CHS where she attended Form 5. In her description she emphasized three reasons school was important: for learning how to read and write, making friends, and to "become someone in the future and find a job." This final point of finding a job to support one's family was the main motivation of all the students in school.

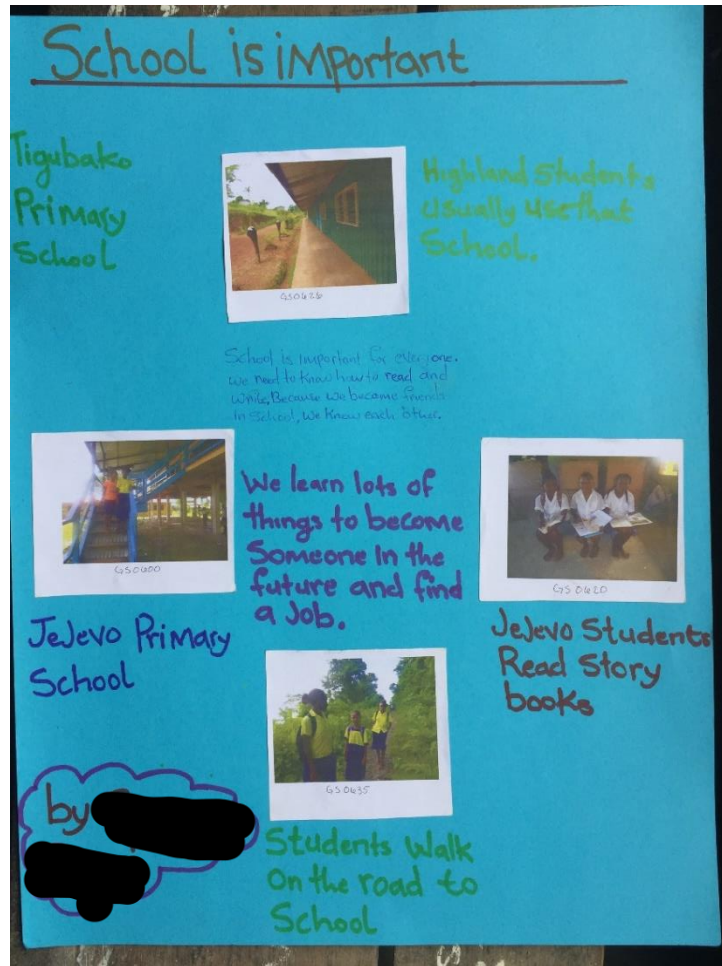


Image 3.3 “School is Important” Poster by Gabi, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

When discussing her poster, I asked Gabi what her goal was after school, and she said that she wanted to continue her education, but she did not know what subject to focus on. She was thinking about hospitality and working in a hotel. In our group conversation, she had previously said she wanted to be a nurse while Luci said she wanted to be a policewoman and Sarah had no aim. When I asked Gabi what would happen if she did not pass her exam that year, she laughed uncomfortably and said that she would find a way to continue in school. This uncertainty about career options but desire to remain in school as long as possible to find a job was echoed by many students. When I asked students about their aims, usually the answer to the

question was general and vague such as something students knew they were supposed to say but did not have much hope would come true. Other times students had big dreams and very specific aims.

Jacob, a Form 5 student at Ridge CHS had big aims to become a lawyer for the country so that he could update the laws. He said there needed to be changes about drinking *kwaso* (a home brewed liquor) and smoking marijuana, respecting the rights of others, and rights to land to help protect his family's land from others making claims on it. Before coming to Honiara, he was involved with lots of "influences." He did not go into the specifics but usually this meant influences from friends such as drinking a lot, sleeping around with girls, and sometimes it included things like stealing, fighting, or smoking marijuana. He told me that he changed his mindset so that he could do well in school and stop engaging in "influences." He was motivated both by his relationship with God and the example of his brother who was going to university in the Philippines.

Ruth, who took a picture of the lab mentioned above, was determined to study science so she could become a pharmacist like her mother's friend from the United States. This woman helped pay the school fees for Ruth throughout secondary school. At the end of 2022, Ruth finished her Diploma of Pharmacy Technology and worked at a hospital on Malaita. Even though she finished her diploma, Ruth still hoped that she could get her bachelor's degree somewhere outside of the Solomons like Australia, New Zealand, or the United States. In 2023, while waiting to graduate with her diploma, she took English classes at Solomon Islands Christian Association with Dr. Zobule (discussed in the next chapter) to improve her English so she could apply to schools outside Solomon Islands. As of 2024, she had a part-time job as a

pharmacy technician at a store in Honiara, but still hoped to get her bachelor's degree once she attained a scholarship.

Margie, another Form 5 student at Ridge CHS, was also someone with big dreams. She wanted to go to school overseas and see new places. She took business as her option for Form 5 and planned to go to a school with a science program for Form 6 because she wanted to be a doctor. Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to follow up with Margie to know if she was able to get into a Form 6 school with a science program. However, her drive, competence in English, and good grades were setting her up for success in this area.

Some students were driven by a specific goal, like Ruth, Jacob, and Margie. Others were keeping all their options open because they had no idea what the future held. Wayne, a Form 5 student at Ridge CHS had lots of aims – to be a teacher, a lawyer, to own his own bus company, or to return home and raise pigs and a garden. If he passed through school and could find a job in town he would stay in Honiara, but if he returned home, he said he would still do good work like raising pigs and a garden. He also thought teaching was a good career because there were lots of schools and so they needed lots of teachers. Wayne's various aims are an example of the different pathways students considered and prepared for since their future options were reliant on exam scores and finances for education, things that were often out of their control.

I noticed the students at Jejevo CHS were less certain of their aims and what came next after Form 5 than students in Honiara. Some students still had clear goals, but others were hesitant to say what their aims were. They knew staying in school was expensive and they were unsure if they could pay their school fees year to year. Although many Honiara youth also faced uncertainty about how to pay school fees, income was less stable in Isabel. In Isabel, most parents paid school fees through small-scale economy like gardening, fishing, marketing, and

running small canteens, which were inconsistent sources of income compared to many of the parents who worked in Honiara and received a fortnightly paycheck. Additionally, unlike students in Honiara who only needed to take a bus to get to the university, for students in Isabel, going to university would require leaving home and staying with family in Honiara, which added complications and expense. Similarly, to attend Form 6 or Form 7 Jejevo students would have to attend a school away from home since Jejevo only had classes through Form 5. These factors created more uncertainty about the future options available to them.

When I asked Chloe, Heather, and Jessie, three Form 5 girls at Jejevo CHS, about their aims, our conversation included much laughter. Heather said she wanted to be a nurse (though everyone laughed at her in disbelief). Chloe wanted to be a secondary school teacher. Jessie said she wanted to be a doctor, but once again everyone laughed in disbelief, and then she changed her aim and said she wanted to be a primary school teacher. They said they wanted to continue in their education either in Form 6 if they passed their exams or through vocational training centers if they did not pass. The laughter about aims could have been for multiple reasons – keeping each other in check for trying to achieve too big of an aim as Jourdan and Angeli (2014a) describe happening at universities, or it could have just been because they realized these dreams were unlikely to happen because of the schooling and money required.

In my conversation with Chloe, Heather, and Jessie, when I asked them what the most important thing in their lives was, they connected prayer, school, and work together. The first thing they mentioned was prayer. Then they recited a phrase they learned at school. “Prea had. Waka had. Stadi had.” (*Pray hard/with effort. Work hard/with effort. Study hard/with effort*). “Had” in Pijin means to do something with a lot of effort. They said that if they followed these three points it would help them in school and then they could find work once they finished

school. They emphasized that if you work hard but do not pray, it was not good because they believed God determined many of their opportunities. Similarly, in a conversation with three boys at Jejevo CHS, they mentioned that both school and church were important in their lives. They said that they needed to go to prayer to ask God to help them with school. This showed the close connection in many students' lives between school, help from God, and finding work. It also showed the individualized focus of schooling since they were taught that their success relied solely on their ability to pray, work, and study well. By concentrating solely on individual achievement, this focus neglected the significance of relationships and the structural obstacles that may impede student success.

Western models of education are very individualized, as seen by the emphasis on each student studying and working hard to be successful in schooling. Individual student success and reaching personal goals is prioritized over community success and community aims. As students are introduced to individualism through education, it can come into conflict with the collective values of their communities. This leads to “tensions between the ideology of formal schooling” that prioritizes “‘progress,’ ‘development,’ and latent individualism” and traditional values of the village such as “collectivism [and] egalitarianism” (Demerath 2000, 22). Demerath (2003) shows how Papua New Guineans on Pere Island in the mid-1990s prevented others from getting ahead in school through teasing and suggesting they were “*bikhed*” (stubborn/stuck up) if they tried to advance above others. Because of this, although students often had ambitions for paid work after school, they also felt the need to remain “grounded in their villages” and centered around “Melanesian egalitarianism and *wantok* loyalties,” pursuing opportunities that would benefit their whole community instead of leading to individual advancement (Demerath 2003, 152).

In Solomon Islands, youth similarly did not want to stand out from their peers. In university classrooms, many students chose not to speak in English when they were spoken to by the teacher because their peers would consider them to be “acting like a whiteman” and in so doing “claiming to be socially superior” (Jourdan and Angeli 2014a, 277). Although students often teased each other for having aims and desires that seemed unreachable, as seen in the example above, there was a shift among Solomon Islands youth toward prioritizing their own advancement for finding a good job. However, the motivation was not just for individual gain, young people were deeply rooted in relationships and collective values, reflecting the Melanesian idea of dividual personhood (Strathern 1988). Education gave them the possibility for new forms of individuality and collectivity.⁶⁵ As such, they desired jobs to be able to give back to their families who gave so much to them as well as to have money to buy the modern conveniences they desired.

In my conversation with the three boys at Jejevo CHS, Wade, Justin, and Seth, they all hoped to pass to Form 6. If he did not pass, Justin planned to become a plumber, but if he passed, he wanted to study accounting so he could work in a bank. Wade said he would upgrade and take distance learning classes if he did not pass, but he really wanted to be a lawyer. He then joked that after school he was going to marry someone from California. As of 2021, he was attending a community high school in Honiara for Form 6. During our photo elicitation, Seth said he did not know yet what he wanted to do. As the opening vignette for this dissertation described, when I asked what the most important things in their lives were, they said to attend school and find a job to help their families, which was a key motivation for many youth that I interviewed. Wade said:

Especially these days olsem parens stat from botom nao. Parens ota laek fo yu
Especially these days our parents start at the bottom. Parents want you to do

⁶⁵ See McDougall (2009) for a discussion of the ways Christianity has transformed Melanesian ideas of relationality and individuality. I also expand on these motivations in Chapters 6 and 7.

skul gud nao. So **attending** skul hem impoten tumas lo laef blo mifa den fo garem **job**. *well in school. So **attending** school is very important in our lives and then to find a job.*

olsem. Fo garem waka den helpem famili. Hem nao **big** tumas lo famili blo mifa. Olsem *and such. To have work and then help our families. This is very **big** in my family. As such*

big tumas lo tingting blo mifa. So impoten tumas lo mifa tu wanfa skul (JM: eee *it is very **big** in our thinking. So a very important thing for us is school. (JM: agrees)*

agreeing). Bara impoten tumas. Ating hem **the most these days** skul. *Really very important. I think it is **the most these days** school.*

Many youth in the Solomons, and more broadly in the Pacific, consider helping their families to be “their primary moral responsibility” (Lee and Craney 2019, 16), which is why they are so driven to do well in school and find jobs despite the challenges they face. Although they knew their options were limited, they still thought school was important because that is how they would find work and support their families who sacrificed so much for them.

Mercy, a Form 3 student at Ridge CHS, was another student who was very driven. She took the top grades in almost all her school subjects for Form 3. She was also one of the few Form 3 students that felt comfortable practicing her English with me. Mercy said she wanted to be a biochemist so that she could help people who were sick, especially with AIDS. Like many other students, Mercy wanted to attend a university overseas. She joked about wanting to live in England and just coming home for the holidays. She said if she did not pass her exams that she would go to a vocational training school for tourism or upgrade at USP. However, to no one’s surprise, Mercy was accepted to one of the prestigious Catholic boarding schools outside Honiara for Forms 4 and 5. Then for Form 6 she was accepted to KGVI, the most prestigious national secondary school. When students like Mercy were successful, their parents and extended kin worked together to pay school fees. Unfortunately, Mercy’s mother died during her Form 6

year, so she withdrew from school in 2022. In early 2022, she was working at a small shop owned by one of her family members, but when I chatted with her via Facebook Messenger, she planned to re-enroll the next school year either at KGVI or St. Nicholas. At the time, Mercy had shifted her goals and wanted to study corporate law, but scholarships for that were competitive so she needed to complete Form 7 first. Mercy is an example of a very bright student who faced family problems and responsibilities that stalled her education, one of the many reasons that education is not a direct pathway for many youth.

As shown by the goals students have, education and university are the only real options to achieve their aims. Parents pay a lot to send their children to school so the thought of not passing and doing well is something students do not even want to consider. The reality is that many of these students will not do well enough in school, they will struggle to have the money to pay for their education fees to reach university or will face family problems that limit their educational opportunities. Thus, they will have to consider other pathways to reach their goals or return home and “*stay nomoa*” (just stay).

3.3.2 Vocational training

Youth who dropped out of school or could not find jobs followed many alternate pathways. In Isabel, some young people stayed around the village and were drunk most evenings. These were the young people that community leaders were most worried about because they were not motivated to listen to their elders or do much to contribute to the community. Young men would do “*kasol*” work earning money through odd jobs, which they often spent on beer. Sometimes these jobs would involve community projects such as prepping for feasts or laying cement for burials. During the day young women often helped care for

younger siblings or nieces and nephews, which was a way for them to contribute to their family. Many youth would describe this stage of life as “*stay nomoa*” (stay around) or “stay boring” (being bored). They enjoyed freedom and lack of responsibility; however, after a few years, many young people would be tired of staying around without anything to do. Some sought other ways to continue their education through additional schooling at Rural Training Centers or the second chance distance education that had just begun in Buala.

The focus on exams was a problem in the 1970s, which is why Bugotu, et al. (1973) suggested vocational education as key to student success. In the 1990s, through a grant from the European Union, the Solomons began implementing rural training centers (RTC), also known as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), which provided an opportunity for students who dropped out of school to gain practical skills such as carpentry, agriculture, mechanics, and hospitality. For those who did not do well enough to attend university and occasionally those who attended university but could not find jobs, attending a Vocational Training School or some other skill training in town was the next preferred option. At these schools, learning practical skills was often complemented with an internship to apply what they learn. Although these schools were created so that people could use practical skills back in their villages, hence the alternate name Rural Training Center, most students used RTCs as a “pathway to re-enter the formal education system, or migrated to the city in search of formal employment” (Maebuta 2011, 102).

Rural Training Centers are still considered a key part of education in the Solomon Islands (MEHRD 2016). At both RTCs I visited during my fieldwork in 2017 after the first year of classes, students did internships at companies throughout the Solomons, many of which were based in Honiara. For example, students studying hospitality did internships at hotels or

hospitals, students studying mechanics often interned at logging companies, and students learning carpentry helped with building projects. After finishing their training, many students took jobs at the companies where they interned, which were usually based in Honiara, instead of returning to their villages and using the skills at home. Youth preferred finding jobs in Honiara with these skills because they had more consistent work and were paid more than they would be paid for similar work in their villages.

One of the youth I spoke with in Buala attended school through Form 5 and then was unable to pass into Form 6. He returned to Buala and stayed around the village, doing odd jobs to earn money for beer and to hang out with friends. After staying at home for three years without any work, he decided to go to the Rural Training Center a few hours away on Isabel. He chose electrician training as his subject of study since not many people in Buala had training in that. After he finished, he wanted to find a job in Honiara to get more experience and then eventually return to Buala. He decided to return to school because he wanted to help his family, especially his grandparents who raised him and were too old to work.

Although RTCs have the benefit of providing Solomon Islanders with the skills needed for paid work, there are not many jobs available in rural communities, which is another reason youth move to urban areas for work. Occasionally, individuals who studied agriculture at RTCs started small farms in their rural communities and some who studied carpentry received pay to build Western-style houses in their home villages, but more often, young people found paid work in urban area, continuing the cycle of rural-to-urban migration. Although RTCs provided students with important skills, they were still not all transferable to paid work. Stephen Close (2012, 25) reports that two years after graduating from an RTC, only 60 percent of alumni were employed in paid work. Students who studied construction and mechanical skills, male-

dominated courses, were more likely to find paid work than those who studied agriculture and home economics, female dominated courses, revealing a gap in gender equity for paid labor.

One of the reasons reforming education to include more skill training did not work well was that “parents still favoured an academic-based education” (Maebuta 2011, 102), encouraging their students to learn academic skills that opened doors for paid jobs and to attain upward mobility. Many people considered TVET programs to be a fallback for those who performed “poorly at school” (Lee and Craney 2019, 16), as seen by the stories of youth who planned to go to RTCs only if they could not pass their exams. This was evidence of the conflicting values between white-collar work and the skills needed for everyday life in rural communities. Although RTCs trained students with skills they could use in the village, youth preferred the lifestyle, money, and opportunities of working in Honiara since village life provided limited opportunities to attain social and financial capital. However, underlying this motivation for finding well-paid work was a desire to support and give back to their families.

3.3.3 Preparation for jobs

The focus on exams and memorizing materials meant that many students lacked not only academic knowledge, but the soft skills like critical thinking and problem solving needed for the life outside of school. Many students who dropped out or left school during secondary often struggled to find jobs. The owner of one of the chain grocery stores in Honiara told me that when employing school leavers, she only gave jobs like a cashier to Form 6 and looked for USP or Form 7 students for data entry jobs. She said that youth who left school at lower levels were great at doing what they were told to do in a specific way, like stocking shelves or baking bread, but they could not handle challenges or changes. If a customer came to them with a problem,

they did not know how to solve it. She said that Solomons youth did not learn basic soft skills like critical thinking, problem solving, time management, and basic literacy and numeracy, which made it hard for them to find jobs. For this reason, she preferred to have students who had completed Form 6 or higher education in the customer facing roles. Other researchers have similarly reported that jobs were available in Honiara, but employers could not find people with the needed skills (Close 2012; Craney 2021). In his evaluation of the labor force and education in the Solomons, Close (2012, 13) suggested that schools should train students in “behavioural or ‘life skills,’” so that students had the “problem solving abilities and workplace-relevant experience” desired by employers.

Because they did not learn all the skills needed for jobs like a cashier, students who left school early were left with job options like driving taxis or buses (though even these positions could be competitive) or working in a Chinese store where employees were underpaid and treated poorly. Many youth who dropped out of school or could not find jobs became *masta liu*. “*Liu*” is from a Malaitan word that means to “wander around aimlessly” and the adjective “*masta*” (master) emphasizes “a strong stereotype of laziness” (Jourdan 1995a, 220–21). *Masta liu* do not have a steady form of income and are dependent on extended family for support and places to live. Some students said to me that if they did not pass their exams they would just be “*liu*,” implying they would sit around aimlessly. Many youth who could not find other work turned to “marketing” in the informal economy where they sat along the road and sold betel nut, cigarettes, and other small items. Surprisingly, I learned that this can be a lucrative business. Because they did not receive a regular paycheck, there was less pressure to continually give money to extended family since no one knows exactly when they make money or how much. Although marketing can provide a lot of money, it was not as prestigious as the office-type jobs

that most youth longed for. For this reason, marketing was always seen as the fallback option if none of the other aims students had worked out.

In an interview with a youth in Honiara, he told me that university students only focused on finding jobs after they graduate but what they should be doing is creating new jobs and new ideas. Instead of developing new ways to make money or selling new products, people set up small shops that sell the same thing as the shop two doors down. This is another example of behavior that is caused by a lack of thinking outside of the box. There were a few individuals who started creative enterprises, but these people were in the minority. For example, one woman in Buala started selling secondhand clothes and basic household items from Australia at her shop because she noticed that no one in Buala was meeting this niche. In Honiara, young people were finding creative ways to make money by selling perfumes and handmade items. However, most canteens (small stores) that were built in both Honiara and Isabel sold the same things as the canteen two doors down, making it hard for anyone to make a significant profit.

In the past many of the jobs that students wanted were both lucrative and available, but in recent years these jobs have become limited because of the increasing number of people competing for the same jobs. The government offered a limited number of scholarships and opportunities for training abroad.⁶⁶ Even among the youth who received scholarships to pursue overseas university degrees, many struggled to secure jobs when they returned to the Solomons. Often these scholarships required young people to return to the Solomons to find work, so there was very little long-term out-migration of Solomon Islanders, even among those with university degrees. One man at Youth at Work, a local organization which provided skill training for youth,

⁶⁶ According to the 2019 Census, only 10 percent of the population over the age of 12 had tertiary degrees and only a small amount would have attained these degrees overseas since most people attend SINU or the Honiara USP campus for university.

expressed that some of his friends who pursued social science type educations at university struggled to find a job upon return. The only people who found jobs were those who studied business. There also continued to be a need for nurses and teachers, even though a person with such a degree may wait a year or two for a placement. Multiple teachers told me about their experience of not receiving a placement right away; and as a result, marketing, or volunteering at a school until they received a paid position. There were openings in rural areas, but many people who had gone through education did not want to live in rural communities where they must grow their own gardens and do physical labor in addition to working. They were more interested in the middle-class lifestyle they could have in Honiara or other peri-urban areas where they were reliant on a paycheck instead of hard physical labor for their needs.

Although youth still desired prestigious jobs, most would be unable to attain them. According to The World Bank (2017), nearly 50 percent of youth ages 15-24 in Solomon Islands are unemployed. Some struggle to find jobs because they have not completed their education and lack the appropriate qualifications. However, as shown in this chapter, many of those who have finished secondary school struggled to find jobs because they did not learn the literacy, numeracy, and soft skills needed for the types of jobs they want. This “mismatch between training and skills” needed for formal work is marginalizing many youth (Lee and Craney 2019, 15).

3.4 Conclusion: Education for what?

Reflecting on the obstacles students face in schooling, I return to the question and challenge that Solomon Islanders have been asking since pre-independence: What is education good for? (Bugotu, Solomon Islands, and Educational Policy Review Committee 1973). A few

years prior to independence, the educational committee recognized a need to evaluate the current education system and its future development. They organized a committee to conduct surveys and visit communities throughout Solomon Islands, evaluating the needs of the people. They found that the primary thing that parents wanted was for their children to be “good citizens of the Solomons;” therefore, they wanted a curriculum that was “geared to the needs of Solomon Islanders and the Solomon Islands way of life.” Their first priority was that the curriculum was “meaningful in the context of the Solomons Islands” and second that it met “the demands of a twentieth century society” (Bugotu, Solomon Islands, and Educational Policy Review Committee 1973, 50). To do this, changes to the curriculum were suggested and some were implemented such as integration of practical subjects into basic education.

Despite the changes over the last 40 years, such as integrating practical training into basic education, the government still does not have a clear sense of the purpose of education. Education conversations tended to be focused on issues such as “teaching standards, schools’ accountability and student achievement” (Maebuta 2011, 99). There have also been many discussions about how to promote “equity and justice,” “individual development as well as academic achievement,” and the skills needed to “play a transformative role” in society through schooling; however, Maebuta (2011, 99) argues that without in-depth conversations regarding the “fundamental purposes of education” it is impossible to design an education system that assists in “an individual’s development and search for meaningful life.” During my fieldwork, principals and officials in the Ministry of Education were still debating how the curriculum could be integrated to meet both the local needs of Solomon Islanders and create individuals who will be part of a global community.

As this chapter describes, students face many obstacles in schooling that intersect and limit their chances of doing well in school or finding a job once finished with schooling. Yet schooling remained very important to youth and their families. Although there was no guarantee that they would find a job, students knew they were more likely to find a job if they did well in school. Some students were very driven by aims which caused them to stay focused in school. Others were a lot less certain about what they wanted to do, which caused them to have less drive to continue in schooling beyond Form 6. Additionally, many were uncertain how they would be able to afford schooling since scholarships were very limited.

Despite the challenges they faced throughout their educational journey, students were motivated to do well in school to one day support their families. Some were also motivated by individual goals such as seeing new places, going overseas, and having the money for nice things. However, the underlying factor that drove them to stay in school was to be able to give back to their family who sacrificed so much for their education. Much of the development-focused literature on youth focuses on “youth problems,” which “ignores the positive contributions that young people make to their communities” and overlooks the resilience and “joyfulness of youth” (Lee and Craney 2019, 6). My participants faced many challenges, yet their drive for life and to do well in school was contagious. Although they knew limitations existed, they did not dwell on their deficits but hoped for better opportunities in the future.

The chapters that follow attempt to show the things that youth considered important and how these factors kept students going despite the obstacles they face. Each obstacle described here is complicated by many interconnected factors and each one could be its own research project. As the goal of my dissertation is not just to present problems, but to highlight the ways Solomon Islanders overcome these obstacles, in the next chapter I will focus on one of these

obstacles in more detail – the languages used in schooling. I will describe the challenges students and teachers faced using English in the classroom and suggest some pedagogical practices that may improve student learning, which the teachers I observed modeled for me.

Chapter 4 English and Pijin in Secondary Schools

“Sometimes in class I teach and then I am codeswitching. To Pijin. To English. Sometimes it confuses me too. When I want to explain something, a concept in English, and I quickly codeswitch to Pijin, sometimes I say, ‘wait wait let me think.’ It is a little confusing too. Because Pijin is like this, in the Solomons we call it broken English.”

- Zonita, English teacher, Honiara⁶⁷

This quote from Zonita, an English teacher in Honiara, Solomon Islands, identifies some of the linguistic ideologies and translanguaging practices that influence the use of Pijin and English in Solomon Islands schools. In the previous chapter, I identified a cycle of obstacles that hinder students’ success in education. In this chapter, I focus on one of those elements – the languages used in schools. In this chapter, I explore the ideologies people have around the languages they speak, particularly Solomon Islands Pijin, the lingua franca, and English, the official language of the Solomons. By focusing on the metalinguistic and metapragmatic characterizations of language use, I explain how the ideologies people hold about English and Pijin present challenges to using both in an educational context. To overcome this challenge, I give the example of English teachers using translanguaging between Pijin, vernacular languages,⁶⁸ and English to scaffold their students’ understanding of English. These examples come from reported interactions during our interviews as well as my own observations in secondary classrooms.

The complexities between English and Pijin are twofold. I argue that the language ideology that classifies Pijin as a “broken English” gives Pijin little authority in the classroom

⁶⁷ This quotation was spoken in a mix of Pijin and English. The original is included below in Example 4.4.

⁶⁸ Vernacular language was the terminology most frequently used by MEHRD to describe the mother tongue languages in Solomon Islands, but mother tongue was also common. In this chapter, I move between vernacular language, mother tongue, L1, and home language depending on the terminology my interlocutors used.

despite its usage as the main language to teach subjects. Using Pijin in schools helps students better understand the concepts they need to learn, but at the same time it inhibits their confidence in speaking English. This lack of confidence in speaking English, in turn, limits students' ability to find employment or continue in further education after secondary school. These stances on Pijin and English reflect an ambivalence toward both languages. Alex Golub (2014, 175) describes the "long history of ambivalence about urbanization, rural life, and its own culture" in Papua New Guinea that shapes the national imagination, creating at times a positive moral valuation and other times a negative moral valuation of areas of development. Similarly, as this chapter will show, an ambivalence toward Pijin and English causes the languages at times to be valued positively and at other times valued negatively.

Despite the prolific use of Pijin in schools, the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development was adamant during my fieldwork that English was the best language for formal education.⁶⁹ There were some secondary schools that regularly practiced English-only days and classes. These exercises helped students improve their English and become more confident in reading, writing, and speaking English. However, for the many schools that did not practice such things, students struggled in their understanding of English. At these schools, it was essential to use the other languages students knew to develop their learning of English. In the provinces where many students spoke the same language, teachers often used the local vernacular to help students understand English. However, in urban and peri-urban areas, like Honiara and Buala, teachers used Pijin since it was the language shared by all the students. By incorporating translanguaging into the classroom, teachers and students drew on the multilingual

⁶⁹ Since my research, MEHRD and SIG have stated that Pijin should be used in classrooms alongside Indigenous languages during the early years of education eventually transitioning to English. However, when I was conducting fieldwork the leaders in MEHRD insisted English was the best language of education.

repertoires that they brought to the classroom, which as I explain in this chapter, provided them with the language foundation they needed to understand the structure and use of English. On an ideological level, using Pijin in the classrooms as a pedagogical tool gave Pijin authority as a language, which pushed against the colonial stigma of Pijin as a broken language.

This chapter serves as an in-depth case study of one of the obstacles in education that young people must overcome to do well in school, the language of education. I share examples from classroom observations and excerpts from interviews with Zonita and Roselyn, two English teachers at Ridge CHS, and Lily, an English teacher at Jejevo CHS. In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I introduced the linguistic landscape of Solomon Islands and some of the colonial history that has influenced this landscape. In this chapter, I begin by building on the historical context in Chapter 2 to explain the roles of Pijin, English, and vernacular languages in education. I show how English immersion education is a remnant of the colonial legacy in education and I introduce translanguaging as a tool that teachers informally use to help students learn. Following that, I examine the linguistic ideologies that affect the use of English and Pijin in schools and more broadly. I explore the “*sem*” or shyness and embarrassment that students experience when speaking English, but also the value they place on English as the language of the upward mobility they seek, reflecting the ambivalence toward both languages. I then show the creative methods teachers use to engage their students in English learning and explain the ways that English teachers informally use translanguaging between Pijin, English, and vernacular languages to scaffold and support student learning. Through all of this, I argue that formalizing Pijin as an educational language would build on the valuable multilingual practices that students and teachers bring to the classroom, which would help them learn, while also legitimizing Pijin as a language.

4.1 English, Pijin, and vernaculars in education

English-only teaching was part of the education policy from the 1970s until 2007 when the National Education Plan (2007-2009) was revised to suggest that education should include “ways of strengthening language development, including policy on the use of the vernacular in primary schooling as a medium of instruction, and ways to improve performance in English” (MEHRD 2007, 44). Since 2013, the Ministry of Education has been working on educational literacy materials for two out of the 70 languages currently spoken in Solomon Islands, Arosi in Makira and Sa’a in Malaita. As of 2019 the project had stalled and literacy materials were still only available for a few grade levels (McDougall and Zobule 2021; SIL International 2013). However, in a statement to the press in February 2024, Dr. Franco Rodie, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, said that a 2019 report about the vernacular language projects revealed “positive learning outcomes for learners” such as reading and learning quickly. For this reason, MEHRD was planning to use the lessons learned to develop curriculum and resources for teachers (MEHRD Press 2024b). As such, the National Education Plan 2022-2026 continues to “encourage the use of vernacular as language of instruction for the early years of education” but states that this curriculum is still being developed (MEHRD 2022, 44). Formalizing the use of vernaculars and Pijin in education even further, the 2023 Education Act states that “the local vernacular, Pijin, English, or sign language should be used individually or in combination to facilitate learning according to the needs of the students” (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2023, 57). Using vernaculars in education is important, but English is still the goal language. The 2023 Education Act also states that “a teacher must endeavour to use English as the principle language of instruction” in primary school (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2023, 57). Because vernacular language educational resources are still in development,

most students enter school and are expected to learn to speak, read, and write in English without ever being taught how to read or write in their own first language.

This new legislative framework allows MEHRD to implement multilingual education. According to Dr. Rodie, the Education Regulation 2024 states that “mother tongue, Pijin and sign language” should be the medium of instruction from Early Childhood Education (ECE) through Grade 3 in primary school. In Grade 4 of primary school, teachers should begin introducing English language shifting to English as the main language of instruction in secondary school from Form 1 (Grade 7) through Form 6 (Grade 12) (MEHRD Press 2024b). During my fieldwork, vernacular languages and Pijin were allowed to be used in schools, but English immersion was the goal. The new policy allows for multilingual education in the early years, but states that English should be the main language used during secondary school. During my research the teachers regularly used Pijin and vernacular languages to explain topics, however they did not have any resources to do this systematically. Additionally, vernacular language and Pijin resources have not been developed for early years of education. So even though the policies have shifted since my fieldwork, the arguments in this chapter based on data collected in 2018 and 2019 are still relevant to the Solomon Islands education system in 2024. This section explains the history of English immersion education in Solomon Islands and introduces the idea of translanguaging, which was an important pedagogical practice I observed in classrooms.

4.1.1 Formally English immersion but informally Pijin in schools

When they begin school, children are introduced to English, a language they have had limited exposure to outside the classroom. Writing about the Solomon Islands Education system

in the 1990s, Heather Lotherington (1996a, 352) stated that the Ministry of Education implemented English immersion education so that children would experience a “sufficient threshold” of English in the classroom to “acquire literacy in English.” However, the day-to-day interactions at schools were not full English immersion. In the classrooms, students were immersed in written English but continued to hear and speak Pijin since the teachers themselves were not native English speakers and often lacked the confidence to teach in English. Lotherington (1996b, 408) said that instead of being immersed in English the children were “learning that the vernacular or MP (Melanesian Pidgin) is the language of real communication” since it was used to explain the content in the classroom instead of English.

Immersion education has been successful in places like Canada, where by Grade 8 students in the French immersion programs are equal to or surpassing the grade level standards of their monolingual Anglophone peers (Lotherington 1996a, 353). In these programs, teachers were trained and given appropriate resources to teach in the L2 (or second language, in this case French). Additionally, students attained early literacy skills in their L1 (or first language, in this case English) at home. As a result, learning French (L2) added to rather than subtracted from English (L1) knowledge (Lotherington 1996a, 353–54). Contrastingly, in Solomon Islands, teachers have not been trained to teach English as a second language and they lack resources to do so. Along with this, students receive very little family or community support to speak English. Together, these structural issues inhibit students’ learning of English. Lily, the English teacher I interviewed at Jejevo CHS, said that the lack of English use in schools was everyone’s failure.

Example 4.1 Failure Everywhere

L: So **failure** hem kam evriwea. From **the ministry** kam lo **teachers and then** go lo
 So **failure** comes everywhere. From **the ministry**, comes to **teachers and then** goes to

students. Sapos ota even kam assessem ota teachers lo skuls ia but lo datfala de nomoa *students. If they (referring to MEHRD) come assess the teachers in school only on that*

ota bae spik Inglis ia.⁷⁰ Afta ota man assessem go, finis! No ani Inglis **the next day**. *day will they speak English. After the men who assess leave, finished! No more English the next day.*

Lily suggested that the failure was everywhere because teachers did not teach in English, students preferred to speak in Pijin or local languages, and MEHRD did not properly assess what was happening in schools. Because of this, Lily said no improvement would happen.

There is very little early literacy in a student's L1 (vernacular language) and most Solomon Islanders do not use English in the home, so the use of English is not reinforced beyond the classroom.⁷¹ By requiring education in a "high-status, colonially-introduced language that does not have currency at the community level," community and family members are excluded from supporting students in their education (Lotherington 1996b, 404). As a result, English immersion in Solomon Islands promotes "subtractive bilingualism" where the L2 begins to replace a student's L1 (Lotherington 1996a, 355). Many authors have shown that "suppressive immersion programmes" which attempt to replace students' L1 with "a higher prestige L2," such as English, have caused problems like "atrophyed L1 development, inadequate L2 proficiency, poor academic achievement, and negative socio-cultural identity" (see Lotherington 1996a, 355 for a list of examples). I saw an occurrence of this in my 2008 research on Santa Cruz where the

⁷⁰ "ia" is most commonly used as a deictic such as "this, that, these." It "refers to and qualifies the noun that precedes it." Example: "man ia iumi lukim astede hem dae finis." Translation: *That man whom we saw yesterday is dead* (Jourdan and Maebiru 2002, 26).

⁷¹ Chapter 2 describes the domains where English and Pijin are spoken. Briefly, English is used for official communications, public media, and religious services, but in individual interactions, Pijin is the preferred language of communication.

introduction of English and Pijin through schools was replacing the local vernacular (Hicks 2017).

For some young people in Solomon Islands, especially those growing up in multilingual families or urban areas, their L1 or first language is Solomon Islands Pijin. There are now at least two generations in urban areas who speak Pijin as an L1 (Jourdan 2018). As such, the lack of educational resources in both vernacular languages and Pijin deprives students of education in their mother tongues. The *Ethnologue*, an encyclopedia of all of the known living languages in the world, classifies Pijin as a language of “wider communication,” but without the official status of a national language (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2024), meaning Pijin is actively spoken and not at risk for language loss.⁷² However, the stigmatization of Pijin as inadequate continues to affect the academic achievement and socio-cultural identity of students, as well as the standardization of Pijin as a formal language for education.

English immersion education creates a “mismatch between the language of schooling and the languages of life,” which Debra McDougall and Alpheaus Zobule (2021, 416) suggest “has had damaging effects on individual students, who come to doubt their own abilities when they fail at school.” As a result, when students do poorly in school, they think they are not smart enough to understand what is being taught. One Form 5 student said to me when I was trying to explain an English assignment she was struggling with “mind blo me block” (*my brain is blocked*). Similarly, students at the Kulu Language Institute, a vernacular project in Western province described in Chapter 2, said “concepts were ‘fuzzy’ in conventional school,” but much

⁷² *Ethnologue* uses the EGIDS language scale developed by Lewis and Simon (2010). This scale divides language vitality into 13 categories from the strongest as a national language (level 1) and the weakest extinct (level 10) with sublevels in between. Pijin is at Level 3 “Wider communication,” whereas Cheke Holo is Level 5 “Developing,” meaning it has “vigorous use” and some standardized literature though use of the literature is not widespread (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2024; Simons and Lewis 2013). Following this classification, I consider a language to be shifting or endangered when the language is not being passed on to the next generation.

clearer when studying at Kulu. For these students, studying their own first language “made them realize that confusion or failure was due not to their own stupidity but to a flawed mode of instruction” (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 426). The problem is not the students, but the educational structure that forces students to learn in English without providing them or their teachers enough resources and training to be competent in English.

Many studies have shown that children who learn early literacy in their vernacular language have stronger literacy levels throughout their education as they transition into learning second languages (Burnett 2008; Cummins 2000; McDougall and Zobule 2021 and others). Learning literacy in an L1 helps transfer academic skills to an L2, promotes additive literacy, engages the community in learning, and increases the “interest and motivation” of students. These benefits have been seen with languages such as Kriol in Australia, Seselwa in the Seychelles, and Crioulo in Guinea-Bissau where students who learned initial literacy in a creole performed better in the “official educational language” and had “increased motivation” (Siegel 2010, 396).

Despite this regular informal use of Pijin in schools, during my research officials at the Ministry of Education insisted that English should be the language of education because they considered Pijin to be a broken form of English with too much mixing of vocabulary and shortening of words, and as such, inadequate as an educational language.⁷³ The belief that English immersion was the best form of education was connected to the experiences of many government officials who attended school in the early days of postcolonialism where English classes were taught by expatriate, native speakers of English. The teachers I interviewed had a

⁷³ A similar stigmatization of Hawaiian Creole English was documented by Charlene Sato. For some examples see the edited volume by John Rickford and Suzanne Romaine (1999) and some of the many works by Charlene Sato (1989b; 1989a as examples).

nostalgia for the days of native English speakers teaching English and considered their own teaching practices to be inadequate compared to native speakers. Sinclair Dinnen and Matthew Allen (2018, 142) suggest that “colonial nostalgia” such as this does not reflect a “desire to return to the colonial past,” but is because of a “discontent with the ethnographic present.” In the transcript below, Lily longs for an English-speaking teacher to teach at her school while also critiquing her own language practice.

Example 4.2 Nostalgia for English speaking teachers

- 1 L: Bikos **the difference from before and today is that** yu lukim oketa wea ota
Because the difference from before and today is that if you look at all of them
- 2 whiteman tekem ota bifo **during the colonial time** ia. (RH: mhm) **Like for example,**
who were taught by whitemen during the colonial time. Like for example,
- 3 dadi blo mi (RH: mhm) hem se, “mifala oketa British wan nao tisim mifala bifo
my daddy, he says, “all the British taught us before
- 4 an **even** olketa **disciplining** mifala gud tu. Tude nomoa yufala ota black pipol tisim
and even they disciplining us well too. Today not anymore. All of you black people teach
- 5 olketa black pikini **but very weak discipline.**” (emphasized word black) **And even** hem
all the black kids but very weak discipline.” And even he
- 6 stori abaot ota whiteman hem tisim olketa olsem. Mi laekem. (said with emphasis)
talks about the whitemen and how they taught them like that. I like it.
- 7 Mi se whynao samafala whiteman sud kam **at least volunteer for** ota skuls
I say why can’t some white people come and at least volunteer for the schools
- 8 olsem. (RH: yeah). Mi laek **work close** wetem ota kaen **volunteers** olsem. Olsem dat
like that. I would like to work close with those kind of volunteers like that. So that is
- 9 tingting blo mi. (pause) Bikos hem hem **helpful** sapos, mi tingim, sapos wanfala Inglis
my thinking. (pause) Because it it would be helpful if, I think, if one English
- 10 woman hem tisim nao Inglis lo hia, mi tingim ota pikini luk **confident** tumas, man.
woman taught English here, I think the kids would look very confident, right.

- 11 **Confident** for spik lo Inglis, raet lo Inglis olsem mi barava **believe** ia dat bae hem **helpful** tumas.
Confident for speaking in English, writing in English and such I really believe that it will be very helpful.
- 12 RH: mhm. Whynao ota no save **confident** taem yufala **teach**?
Why aren't they confident when you all teach?
- 13 L: Taem mifala **teach** ota no save **confident**. Ating **probably the way** mifala tisim olketa
When we teach they aren't confident. I think probably the way we teach them
- 14 hem no **much** kasem **the standard** (RH: yeah) fo datfala Inglis. **So not everything** lo
it doesn't much reach the standard for that English. So not everything
- 15 Inglis mifala tisim ia, Rachel.
we teach in English, Rachel.
- [skipping a few lines where she says her colleagues are poor in English and she interrupts my next question to expand further]
- 16 L: Hem helpful ota pikini tu. Bikos **then the more** yu spikim lo Inglis den ota
It is helpful for all the kids too. Because then the more you speak in English then all the
- 17 pikini hem **get used to** hem an **the more** ota laek **respond** lo Inglis ya. But mifala
kids they get used to it and the more they are willing to respond in English. But all the
- 18 fulltaem Pijin Pijin so ota pikini **most of the** taem ota Pijin Pijin. Ating **that is one failure too**.
time we speak Pijin Pijin so all the kids most of the time they Pijin Pijin. I think that is one failure too.

This transcript revealed the complications and ambivalence of using Pijin and English in schools. Even though Lily longed for the days of native English speakers, she herself did not feel confident teaching only in English. As a result, she and many other teachers relied on Pijin when teaching. Lily recognized that because she and other teachers constantly used Pijin, the students spoke Pijin back to them, but she did not feel confident teaching in English. Later in the interview, as I will explain below, she also expressed that students did not understand her when she spoke only in English, which was another reason she relied on Pijin.

When studying the Solomon Islands educational system in the late-1990s, Heather Lotherington (1998) suggested that English should be used in a form of maintenance bilingual education where students learn initial literacy in Pijin (or their vernacular if available) and then transition slowly to English but continue to learn Pijin or their vernacular as a subject. Similarly, in a study of Tok Pisin preschools in Papua New Guinea, Jeff Siegel argued that the use of a pidgin or creole in education may help students learn instead of inhibiting learning. Jeff Siegel (1997) showed that early instruction in the pidgin helped students adjust to school, separate the pidgin from its lexifier English, and taught them transferable literacy skills. Additionally, in a comprehensive review of programs that used creole and vernacular languages in education, Siegel (2007) found no study that showed “negligible or negative effects.” Instead, the studies he reviewed showed “positive benefits, such as increased motivation and improvements in use of the standard variety and in general academic performance” (Siegel 2007, 75). These findings provide evidence that the concerns that MEHRD has that Pijin is inadequate as a language of instruction and would inhibit students from learning English are unjustified.

Pijin represents one of the tensions of the post-colonial state: it is denied legitimacy in any official capacity (such as government and schools) but in addition to being useful for communication, speaking Pijin is a marker of national identity and unity, giving it unofficial legitimacy and cultural value. For example, as I will explain in Chapter 5, a social studies teacher at Ridge CHS said Pijin unified the diverse languages of the Solomons. Jourdan and Angeli (2021) also suggest Pijin is gaining cultural legitimacy as it is claimed as a marker of urban identity, as explained in Chapter 2. Because of the increasing use of Pijin in all parts of life and the value it holds as the language of urban Solomon Islanders and the Solomon Islands more

broadly, formally integrating it into school curriculum would be an important part of giving it cultural legitimacy and help support students' academic success.⁷⁴

4.1.2 Translanguaging between Pijin and English in schools

Lanelle Tanangada, who was Minister of Education in Solomon Islands from 2019-2024 and a former English teacher, wrote her MA thesis on the languages used in Solomon Islands secondary schools. She conducted this study because even though she had a strong belief that English-only education was the best way for her students to learn, she found herself codeswitching to Pijin to explain concepts because her students better understood her. She writes:

My experience as an English teacher has challenged my beliefs. Having a preconceived notion that the English-only policy was the best way to support students' learning of the subject; I was an advocate of this language. My bias toward using solely English in the classroom resulted in students having difficulty understanding concepts. However, I naturally resorted to code-switching when I found my students struggled with understanding concepts. This misconception and lack of awareness of my own practice motivated this study on language use in secondary school classrooms (Tanangada 2013, 4).

Tanangada goes on to suggest that teachers should be trained in how to “scaffold” their teaching of English through codeswitching and translanguaging, which incorporates the language knowledge that students bring to the classroom. According to Li Wei (2018, 15), one of the initial iterations of the term translanguaging came from an English translation by Colin Baker (2001) of the Welsh term “*trawsieithu*” used in Cen Williams' (1994) doctoral dissertation. This

⁷⁴ I began exploring the use of Pijin and English toward the end of my fieldwork. For this reason, I was unable to test or specifically explore if these arguments by Siegel are still true in Solomon Islands. So for the moment, this is a hypothesis based on my observations and the experiences of the English teachers I interviewed. This is a definite area for further study, especially now that MEHRD has suggested Pijin should be used along with vernacular languages in the early years of education.

term described Williams' observation during Welsh revitalization lessons of teachers and students moving between English and Welsh to read things and explain concepts. Instead of considering this to be a practice that negatively affected learning, Williams showed that translanguaging "helped to maximize the learner's, and the teacher's, linguistic resources in the process of problem-solving and knowledge construction" (Li 2018, 15). Another line of scholarly development for translanguaging described by Li Wei (2014) came from the idea of "languaging," where language is always in the process of being made.

Since its conception, translanguaging has developed along two analytical lines: one which views language as fixed codes and another that sees language as fluid and relying on all of a speaker's semiotic resources (Bonacina-Pugh, da Costa Cabral, and Huang 2021). Depending on these lines of analysis, when applied to pedagogy, translanguaging can mean "the use of two or more separate languages for specific teaching and learning functions" or the "flexible use of semiotic signs to make meaning in a complex multilingual classroom" (Bonacina-Pugh, da Costa Cabral, and Huang 2021, 447). The kind of translanguaging identified by Tanangada in Solomon Islands classrooms aligns with the ideas of languages as distinct codes that teachers move between and use to scaffold student learning. Tanangada (2013, 38) describes translanguaging as a pedagogical practice that provides a "flexible space for language practices," which improves classroom communication by encouraging students and teachers to "use the language they understand best and switch from one language to the other to accomplish a task." Although she mentions flexibility, the examples she gives of translanguaging involve a distinct and intentional switch between the languages to help teachers teach or students to understand a concept. The end goal is still to attain English knowledge as opposed to developing a multilingual repertoire.

Analyzing translanguaging from a fluid language perspective, Li Wei (2018, 15–16) says translanguaging is more than just moving between two languages; it is “a practice that involves dynamic and functionally integrated use of different languages and language varieties” as “a process of knowledge construction that goes beyond language(s).” Li Wei suggests that translanguaging helps shift the goals of learning new languages from replacing a learner’s L1 to becoming bilingual or multilingual. MEHRD’s original educational policy of English immersion education left very little space for developing students’ other linguistic resources, which had the potential to lead to the replacive monolingualism described by Li Wei, while also erasing the important role of Pijin in students’ lives.

Codeswitching and translanguaging in the classroom can be a very useful pedagogical tool for teachers and students. In a study of codeswitching between Bislama and English in Vanuatu, Fiona Wilans (2011, 36) observed that very little classroom engagement happened with English, but in small groups students easily moved between English and Bislama to understand concepts, clarify confusions, and develop ideas, which she identifies as a form of translanguaging. In her observations she noted that students used Bislama for many reasons other than just compensating for “poor English.” As such, she suggests that “reconceptualising the way that languages are being used and moving away from the notion of Bislama and English as separate, competing systems, may help legitimise students’ bilingual practices” (Willans 2011, 37). Tanangada (2013, 40) observes that codeswitching by teachers in Solomon Islands usually involves repetition of words between English and the language students know best. Whereas translanguaging “moves beyond code-switching as the teacher needs to carefully scaffold students’ learning” using both languages. Tanangada (2013, 38) suggests that translanguaging is a valuable learning tool because it teaches students to develop their understanding, “make sense

of their worlds and academic materials,” engage in “collaborative learning,” and “acquire other ways of language.” However, she says that translanguaging must be done systematically and teachers must learn a variety of pedagogical practices, including translanguaging, to help students develop their language and English knowledge.

Through their review of the literature on translanguaging, Pugh et al. (2021, 464) show that “translanguaging can bring pedagogical benefits to learners and teachers.” Both the fixed and fluid approaches to translanguaging in the classroom “can have a transformative impact on learners’ identity and on their ideological ranking of languages” through giving them the opportunity to use “their minority non-English language and knowledge” in the classroom. From this perspective, translanguaging in Solomon Islands classrooms has the potential to make education more equitable by giving Pijin (and other languages) an official place in the classroom, which can reduce the stigmas around Pijin and vernacular languages introduced during colonialism (Jourdan and Angeli 2014a).⁷⁵

In the past few decades as Solomon Islanders have been trained as teachers, there has been a shift to more Pijin in the classrooms since the classes are now taught by non-native English speakers (Tanangada 2013). Lily’s comments (Example 4.2) about wishing a native English speaker could teach her classes also reflects this shift. As the examples in this chapter will show, teachers and students regularly use Pijin in the classroom to explain ideas, ask questions, and understand content. Tanangada (2013, 110) found in her study that there was a “mismatch” between the beliefs teachers had about language use in the classroom and what they actually did. Although most of the teachers she observed and interviewed used Pijin when teaching, they believed English was what they should use. Similarly, because of the language

⁷⁵ I introduced the stigmas affecting the use of Pijin, English, and vernacular languages in Chapter 2. I also expand on this in the section that follows.

ideologies explored in the next section, although the teachers and students I observed and interviewed relied on Pijin for communication, they still believed that English is what they should be speaking in the classroom. As a result of these ideologies, they considered their translanguaging between Pijin and English to be a deterrent to learning English instead of a useful pedagogical practice, as I argue for in the final section of this chapter.

4.2 Language Ideologies in Solomon Islands

Many scholars have discussed the meanings of language ideology, the history of its development, and the various strands of use (see Kroskrity 2005; Woolard 1998 for overviews). My use of language ideology comes from the definition proposed by Kathryn Woolard and Bambi Schieffelin. Woolard and Schieffelin (1994, 59) propose that language ideology links cultural structures to language by asking how representations of language are “socially produced” and how identities are created. They suggest that “ideologies of language” are “not only about language,” but also about how ideologies connect “language to group and personal identity” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, 55–56). This connection emphasizes the importance of understanding the power dynamics of language, culture, and relationships that influence someone’s language use and identity claims. Building on this, Susan Gal (2005, 24) emphasizes that language ideologies “posit close relations between linguistic practices and other social activities” and rely on “semiotic properties” to understand these relations and how ideologies work.

Within Solomon Islands, Christine Jourdan and Johanne Angeli (2014a) have discussed the traditional and colonial linguistic ideologies that are influencing language value and use. As described in Chapter 2, prior to the colonial era, Solomon Islanders valued “reciprocal

multilingualism” where everyone learned each other’s languages, but colonialism introduced “hierarchical multilingualism” with English on the top followed by written vernaculars. This hierarchy stigmatized both unwritten vernacular languages and Solomon Islands Pijin as “uncivilized” and “broken” (Jourdan and Angeli 2014a, 270–71). Additionally, the colonial administration worked to “delegitimize” Pijin through banning its use in schools and giving it “disparaging” labels such as “baby talk” and “broken” versions of English (Jourdan 2018, 80–82; see also 2013). English retained a place of hierarchy after independence when the Solomon Islands Government chose it as the official language. Although English is a prestige language and the goal language of the educated elite, Jourdan and Angeli (2014a, 277) also showed how speaking English is stigmatized in university classroom because students say when they speak English they are “claiming to be socially superior.”

As the examples that follow will show, intertwining language ideologies influence the use of both Pijin and English in Solomon Islands, creating an ambivalence that at times negatively values and at other times positively values both languages. Who uses a language and for what purposes has important implications for the authority and value of the language as well as the identity speakers are claiming. In the subsections that follow, I explore the language ideologies I encountered toward English and Pijin and show how these affect the authority of the languages, particularly the legitimacy they have as educational languages within classrooms in Solomon Islands. These ideologies are one of the factors that affect student learning.

4.2.1 “*Sem*” to speak because Pijin is “broken English”

Example 4.3: “*Sem*” to speak English

Taem mi lukim yu kam, mi sem fo stori.
When I saw you come, I was shy to talk with you.

Mi tingse yu bae stori kam lo Ingles.
I thought you would speak to me in English.

I heard phrases like this numerous times from people of all ages while I was in Solomon Islands. As an American, when a Solomon Islander sees me, or any white person, they often become “*sem*” (shy or ashamed) to speak with me.⁷⁶ In Solomon Islands Pijin, *sem* can be used when someone is timid to do something or when they feel shame or embarrassment. The study of *sem* in reference to shame has a long history in Melanesia, particularly in reference to relations between men and women and gender taboos (as an example see Epstein 1984; Fajans 1984; Hogbin 1947). In the case of *sem* when speaking English, the use here could be two-fold – Solomon Islanders may have felt some shame about their lack of English knowledge, which in turn, made them shy to speak with me. A teacher at Ridge CHS who first said this phrase to me, admitted that when she first saw me, she was afraid to say “hello” because she thought that I would speak to her in English, and she would have to respond in English. However, once she heard me speaking Pijin with other teachers, she felt much more comfortable. Although anyone who has attended school has learned some English, very few Solomon Islanders feel confident

⁷⁶ In this use, “*sem*” can mean shyness or ashamed. The *Trilingual Cultural Dictionary* gives the example of “*sem blong hem mekem gele ia no save stori*” (her shyness prevents this girl from talking). Or similarly, “*boy ia sem tumas*” (this boy is very shy). For ashamed, the example is “*gele ia no save sem long fasen blong hem*” (this girl is not ashamed of her behaviour) (Jourdan and Maebiru 2002, 204). Based on these uses, what was expressed to me was likely more shyness and timidity, but possibly mixed with embarrassment when speaking English.

speaking English. This timidity to speak English was closely intertwined with the linguistic ideology introduced during the colonial period that classified Pijin as a broken form of English.

Similar to the findings by Christine Jourdan (2013; 2018), my interlocutors regularly classified Pijin as a broken English. Despite a translation of the Bible into Solomon Islands Pijin and attempts by other linguists to standardize Pijin, most Solomon Islanders used Pijin for oral but not written purposes. There were occasional advertisements and signs written in Pijin and the Solomon Islanders who were active on social media wrote posts in a mix of Pijin, English, and vernacular languages. However, when asked, many still considered Pijin to be broken and unsuitable for writing because they said the spelling and grammar were inconsistent and mixed with English. Since they considered Pijin to be broken, Solomon Islanders often expressed that it was an obstacle to learning English, which made them *sem* to speak “proper English” for fear of mixing it with the “broken English” they regularly spoke. This lack of confidence in speaking English affected what students learned in school and how they performed on exams, which as the previous chapter showed, also influenced attendance and overcrowding in classrooms. Additionally, the lack of confidence in English and the resulting poor exam scores limited students’ opportunities for further education and well-paid jobs.

Most Solomon Islanders who were educated by English-speaking teachers in the early days of postcolonialism have adopted the colonial stigma that considered Pijin to be a broken form of English. In interviews, casual conversations, and professional presentations I observed the persistence of the ideology that Pijin was “broken English.” When talking with one of the Form 3 students at Ridge CHS she described Pijin as a “*rabbis*” (trash/rubbish) language and thought it should not be used as an educational language. At World Literacy Day in 2019 in Honiara, there was a panel of six students from secondary schools in Honiara who were asked to

discuss how Pijin affected their learning in school. Multiple students on the panel called Pijin “broken English,” however they were split on how it affected their learning. Three students said Pijin slowed down their learning and understanding of English while the other three said Pijin helped them write essays, understand lessons, and learn English. This recognition of the ways Pijin helped them learn English aligns with the work of many scholars who have similarly noted that Pijin and vernacular language use in education can improve student learning (such as Siegel 2008; Tanangada 2013; Willans 2011). This tension between the good and bad parts of Pijin was apparent in the interviews and observations with teachers as well. The three English teachers I interviewed all considered Pijin to be “broken English,” yet they relied on it in their teaching to help students learn difficult concepts. In Example 4.4 that follows, Zonita describes how she codeswitches while teaching, but instead of seeing this as a useful pedagogical tool, she views it as speaking “broken English.”

Example 4.4: Codeswitching and “broken” English

Z: Mi samtaem lo class taem mi **teach** den me **codeswitching** olsem. Go lo Pijin. Go lo *Sometimes in class I **teach** and then I am **codeswitching**. To Pijin. To*

Ingles. Samtaem hem **confusing** tu lo meseleva moa.
English. Sometimes it confusing me too.

[Both big laugh]

Z: Taem mi laek fo explanim **something, a concept in English, and** mi **quickly**
*When I want to explain **something, a concept in English, and** I **quickly***

codeswitch go lo Pijin, samfala taem mi se, “**wait wait let me think.**” (laughs)
***codeswitch** to Pijin, sometimes I say, “**wait wait let me think.**”*

[RH: yeah]

Z: Olsem lelebet tuya
*It is a little **confusing** too*

[RH: yeah]

Z: Bikos Pijin olsem hem, mifala lo Solomons mifa kolem **broken English**. (Laughs Loud)
Because Pijin is like this, us in the Solomons we call it broken English.

This excerpt is part of an interview with Zonita and Roselyn, the two English teachers in Honiara, about the challenges they faced when teaching, such as students' lack of understanding English. In her example, Zonita said she had to pause and think about her word choice in English and Pijin because moving between the two languages was confusing. To address this, Zonita and many other teachers regularly codeswitched between English and Solomon Islands Pijin to teach concepts that students did not understand in just English. Jourdan and Angeli (2021, 48) argue that this codeswitching between Pijin and English and what they call "enlanguaging" is a sign of fluency in both languages and a marker of urban identity. Jourdan and Angeli define enlanguagement as "the development of distinct social and cultural groups through the appropriation of a language that is already present in the community."⁷⁷ Zonita, who grew up in Malaita province, is a middle-class woman who has been teaching English for over 15 years at a community high school in Honiara. Although she may codeswitch at times as a way of showcasing an urban identity, when teaching, Zonita used codeswitching and translanguaging as a tool to teach her students (as Example 4.12 will show). Yet, she found it confusing for herself to move between the two languages since she had not been trained to teach English in this way.

⁷⁷ In this definition, Jourdan and Angeli (2021, 48) are contrasting enlanguagement with enregisterment (Agha 2003). They say that both concepts "associate the indexicality of language with the creation of identity." However, enregisterment "puts emphasis on the development of identifiable repertoires that are socially marked and have come to index the status of speakers in relation to 'particular schemes of cultural values'" whereas enlanguagement is the appropriation of already existing language.

4.2.2 English as a language that “belongs to you”

In addition to the negative valuations of Pijin, speaking English is negatively valued at times. Jourdan and Angeli (2014a, 277) write how youth at university are seen by their peers as “acting like a whiteman” and “claiming to be socially superior” when they speak English. Similarly, some of the students and teachers I interviewed said that people spoke English to show off their education.

In Example 4.5, Zonita and Roselyn were discussing whether English or Pijin should be an official language. Zonita starts by modeling in lines 2-6 what it sounded like to speak in English for formal purposes. This formality quickly broke into laughter and a joke about people who showed off their schooling by speaking English in lines 6-8.

Example 4.5: English to show off education

- 1 Z: Yumi usim [English] **only in the classroom** nomoa. **I mean** lo textbooks ia. **When we**
*We use it **only in the classroom. I mean** in textbooks. **When we***
- 2 **come outside and we converse and we tell stories and we communicate** we Pijin ia.
come outside and we converse and we tell stories and we communicate we use Pijin.
- (cadence changes to more formal speech)
- 3 **What we are telling stories about, when we want to put our stories in an official**
What we are telling stories about, when we want to put our stories in an official
- 4 **formal way we put it into English.** (laughs) yeah man? **We want to bring what want**
formal way we put it into English (laughs). Right? We want to bring what want
- 5 **to bring our stories to the public in a very formal way** we usim Ingles nao.⁷⁸
to bring our stories to the public in a very formal way we use English.
- 6 Ro: **Or you want to show that** yu skul kam overseas, **use** Inglis nao.
Or you want to show that you went to school overseas you use English.

⁷⁸ “nao” has many uses in Pijin. It can translate to the English “now” or suggest a sequence of events in storytelling. It can emphasize that an “action is over” or can “indicate the end of a sentence or the end of a line of reasoning” (Jourdan and Maebiru 2002, 145). In these instances, I understood it as a marker about the end of a thought.

- 7 All: (laugh)
[Ro starts saying something else which is hard to understand but stops when ZM talks]
- 8 Z: Hem nao yeah. If aniwan laek tok Ingles bae yumi sei “eee... man ia skul kam overseas”
Yes that's it. If anyone likes to talk in English we will say, “eee (expression of disbelief or in response to a joke)... that man went to school overseas.”
[Ro: (says at the same time as ZM) overseas]
- 9 RH: (laughs)
- 10 Ro: hem
That's it.
- 11 Z: **Then** if olsem hem **official language** blo yumi tu. **Even if** mi no go lo skul lo university
Then if it is our official language. Even if I do not go to university
- 12 bae mi spik Ingles nomoa ia bikos hem **official language everyone knows it**. So hem
I will speak English only because it is the official language everyone knows it. So it is
- 13 no tru nomoa hem sud **be referred to as an official language**.
not true that it should be referred to as an official language.
- 14 RH: Hem no tru?
It's not true?
- 15 Z: **I mean** hem **should not** true nomoa.
I mean it should not be true.

In my observations, English was used in official capacities, but when it was used informally it was spoken for humor or mocking. Students used English to imitate things they saw in movies, to make fun of expatriates, or to tease a friend who is trying to speak English. When students tried to practice speaking English with me, their friends were usually giggling nearby. These stigmas around English as an outsider language discouraged students from really wanting to practice English which in turn inhibited their ability to master the language. As Zonita suggested in Example 4.5, she does not believe that English should be the official language because if it were really an official language everyone would speak it, but most people in Solomons do not regularly speak it. As she described at the beginning of this example, English is

used when telling something in an official or formal way, but for normal communication, everyone uses Pijin, which is why most of our interview was in Pijin.

One of the reasons English was negatively valued is because Solomon Islanders did not consider it their language. In Solomon Islands, languages index ethnicity – every language has a corresponding ethnolinguistic group originating from the home villages in the provinces. Jourdan (2018, 87) suggests that this correlation between language and ethnicity extends to English which is seen as a foreign language that belongs to “the white man.” The only local, non-ethnic language in the Solomons is Pijin. Jourdan (2018, 88) suggests “it exists above ethnic boundaries without being a foreign language,” which is one of the reasons it has been successful as a lingua franca. Although Pijin does not index an ethnicity, Pijin is becoming a marker of an urban identity (Jourdan and Angeli 2021). English is not seen as anyone’s natural language in the Solomons. It is learned in school, and because it is learned in school, it is presumed to be accessible to everyone, but most people do not feel like it is a language they have full access to. When I asked Zonita in our interview if English felt like it belonged to her, she said to me, mainly in English, that the language belonged to me, implying it was mine because I am a native English speaker and white woman.

Example 4.6: English belongs to you

Z: **Well because we don't use it everyday.**

RH: yeah

Z: **So we feel like we don't own it. It belongs (2 sec pause) it it belongs to you.**

(We all laughed)

Z: **Because like some teachers usually say that in class too. “It is not our language so it is not easy.”** *Samtaem mi talem tu “It’s not our first language.”*
Because like some teachers usually say that in class too. “It is not our language so it is not easy.” Sometimes I say that too “It’s not our first language.”

Kathryn Woolard (2016, 25) writes that public languages “are supposed to be able to represent and be used equally by everyone precisely because they belong to no-one-in-particular.” As the official language of the Solomons, English is considered a “public” language that everyone should have access to, but as the quotes from these teachers show, most Solomon Islanders do not see English as “belonging” to them. Instead, they see it as a language belonging to foreigners and as such, do not feel like they have full access to the language.

Recognizing the alienation that teachers and students felt with English, I asked Lily how English could become a language with which they were all comfortable. Her response, shown in Example 4.2 above, reiterated the belief that English was better taught by native English speakers. Despite her ingenuity in teaching difficult English concepts, as explained in the next section, Lily was still critical of her own English abilities. She thought the only way for students really to learn English was to be taught by native English speakers as she and her father were. She considered the fact that she spoke Pijin as a failure instead of seeing it as a useful pedagogical practice.

Like Lily’s suggestion that native English speakers needed to teach English so that students could hear it more, Zonita thought that English needed to be spoken more in schools for students and teachers to be more confident in the language. She said they needed to stop looking at it as a foreign language, but instead, see it as a language that belonged to them. The discussion in Example 4.7 came after I asked if there is anything that should change about Pijin or English so that it did not feel like a leftover from the colonial period under Great Britain. In the transcript

that follows, Zonita highlights the idea that most people considered English to be a foreign language and suggests that for English to feel like it belongs to Solomon Islanders it must be spoken more and valued in the same way they value kastom practices.

Example 4.7 Must make English our own

- 1 Z: Den yumi sud fil olsem hem **own**. **I mean if** yumi **say that** hem impoten fo yumi
Then we should feel like its our own. I mean if we say that it's important for us
- 2 learnm den yumi sud **not look at it** olsem **language** blo **foreigners**.
to learn then we should not look at it like a language belonging to foreigners.
- 3 Z: yumi sud **look at it** olsem **language** blo yumi. Samting **that we should learn because it's ours**.
We should look at it like our language. Something that we should learn because it's ours.
- 4 [RT: mmm (agreement)]
- 5 Ro: **Can it** (starts to ask question. ZM starts talking)
- 6 Z: **And a bit related to your question**. Ansa blo ota kwestin. **Meaning** olsem. Yumi
And a bit related to your question. The answer to the question. I mean like this. We
- 7 sud tritim sem olsem ota kalsarol praktis blo yumi [RH: mhm] wea yumi no laek fo
should treat it the same like all our cultural practices where we don't want
- 8 yumi forgetem ia.
us to forget them.
- 9 [RH: mmm]
- 10 Z: yeah? Yumi sud preservem olsem. Yu sud **continue to practice it**. **To value it because it's our language**.
- 11 *Yeah? We should preserve it like this. You should continue to practice it. To value it because it's our language.*
- 12 [RH: mhm]
- 13 Z: yeah? Yumi sud lukim olsem. **It's not** gud fo yumi **look at the English language** olsem
Yeah? We should look like this. It's not good for us look at the English language like a
- 14 **foreign language**. [RH: mhm] yumi sud **look at it** olsem wanfa **national language**.
foreign language. [RH: mhm] We should look at it like one national language.

- 15 [RH: mhm]
- 16 Z: **That it's owned by us, belongs to us.** (laughs) hem. (RH: laughs) Jus laek yumi luk at *That it's owned by us, belongs to us. (laugh) like that. (RH: laughs). Just like we look at*
- 17 **traditional dancing** blo yumi, **traditional ways of cooking** blo yumi, kastom blo yumi *our traditional dancing, our traditional ways of cooking, our kastom.*
- 18 ia. **The same view** ia nao **we** sud viewim Ingles olsem. So dat yumi lukim olsem **it's part of us.**
The same view we should view English like that. So that we look like it's part of us.
- 19 [RH: hmm]
- 20 [RT: hmm (slight intonation)]
- 21 Z: mekem yumi **do away with the view that it's something that's been left behind.**
Make us do away with the view that it's something that's been left behind.

This conversation between Roselyn and Zonita was unique because they were suggesting English needed to be used in homes and remembered the same way traditional ways of cooking, dancing and kastom were practiced. By doing this, Zonita suggested it will become part of them. Yet, as Roselyn pointed out in line 31 of the next section, the only people who will have the ability to use English in their homes will be educated families, which will continue the divide of English being a language spoken by the upper class and elite.

Example 4.7 Continued

- 22 RH: Yeah. **So what does that look like practically?** Laek hao nao yu save senisim datfala
Yeah. So what does that look like practically? Like how do you change that
- 23 **view?** Laek hao nao yu save tritim olsem kastom?
view? Like how can you treat it like kastom?
- 24 [ZM: (starts speaking over question)Yumi mas usim nao. Yumi mas usim nao.
We must use it. We must use it
- 25 RH: mmm
- 26 Ro: **Can we** (starts for say something but ZM starts again)

- 27 Z: Yumi mas usim laek bikos **officially** nao yumi usim. Lo **formal way** nao yumi usim.
*We must use like because **officially** we use it. The **formal way** we use it.*
- 28 [RT: mhm]
- 29 Z: Yumi usim tu **for communication** [RT: mhm] ia jes laek **we** usim um Pijin ia. **Let's not**
*We must use it too **for communication** just like **we** use um Pijin. **Let's not reserve***
- 30 **reserve English for official occasions only.** [RH: mhm] **Let's not reserve English for**
in the classroom, but let's practice it in our home. In our daily communication.
 [RT:mhm] **Just like we use Pijin.**
- 31 Ro: But bae yu noticem laek **only those**, bae yumi se ota **educated family homes** nomoa
*But you will notice like **only those**, we will say all the **educated family homes** only.*
- 32 [ZM: yeah]
- 33 **They will practice speaking English in their homes. Whereas the rural ones ia, they**
won't ia.
They will practice speaking English in their homes. Whereas the rural ones, they
won't.
- 34 Z: yeah. So sapos lukim olsem **it's not theirs yet** ia.
*Yeah. So if we look at it like that **it's not theirs yet.***

While analyzing this transcript, I reached out to Roselyn via Facebook Messenger in 2022 to check in with her and ask some follow up questions. In this conversation, she told me that she had taught her youngest son English as a first language, instead of Pijin, which is the language her older son learned first. This is one of the only instances I encountered of English being taught to a child as a first language, usually children were raised speaking Pijin or one of their parents' home languages. As she predicted in Example 4.7, raising a child with English as their L1 was happening in a family of an urban educated English teacher.

Instead of elevating Pijin to a national language, these teachers and many other Solomon Islanders I spoke with, believed that using English more regularly would help them claim English as their own. However, as Lily remarked in Example 4.2, she felt ill-equipped to teach English well because it was not her first language. In her case, the fear and *sem* of speaking

English persisted. This fear caused teachers and students to rely on Pijin or vernaculars to teach and understand course content and in the process continued the cycle of *sem* when speaking English. This is the tension and ambivalence that is prevalent with English and Pijin – theoretically people want to speak English more, but Pijin is the language most people are comfortable in and the one they choose to speak. Because they choose to speak Pijin in contexts shared with English, such as schools, it is hard for people to gain enough experience to be comfortable with English. In this sense, Pijin is the public language that everyone has access to and the one they are not afraid to speak. Yet, English remains the language people believe they need to speak because it is the national language and the language of upward mobility and international engagement, as discussed in the next section.

4.2.3 English as a valuable Language

One of the reasons the Ministry of Education and Solomon Islanders considered English essential to know, even if they do not identify with it, was that they recognized English as the “gatekeeper language for both outward and upward social mobility” (Jourdan and Angeli 2014a, 275), especially for engagement with the “global world” (Jourdan 2018, 93). This “linguistic pragmatism,” as Jourdan and Angeli (2014a, 276) refer to it, was replacing the lingering colonial stigma of English, and providing a positive valuation of English because it was necessary for advancement in life. Lily expressed in Example 4.8 that English was important for students to learn because it opened doors for higher education, especially overseas, and jobs that students could not otherwise access.

Example 4.8: English for higher education and international issues

- 1 L: **I mean the more** yumi learnem Ingles as yumi go **higher** lo **educational institution**
I mean the more we learn English as we go higher in educational institution
- 2 hem **helpful**. Bikos **most** studens go lo **institution overseas** ota **struggle for the first**
it is helpful. Because most students go to institution overseas they struggle for the first
- 3 **time** ba. Yeah man?
time. Right?
- 4 RH: Yeah
- 5 L: Tru wan ya. Ota stori seleva. Ota **struggle. Might be standard** lo Ingles
It's true. They tell the stories themselves. They struggle. It might be standard of English
- 6 lo Solomons hem **below** lo hia nao (deepens voice when saying last 3 words).
in Solomons is below here.
- 7 Ota go lo ota **high institution** ota **have to** ota **have to struggle** blo **best** blo olketa fo ota
They go to the high institution they have to they have to struggle their best for them
- 8 **catch up** wetem ota man **higher** wan.
to catch up with the people at higher levels.

[Skipping a few lines where she gave a brief example of her cousin that struggled with his English when he went to university in Japan]

- 9 L: So why me tingm Ingles hem **still** hem **should still remain** lo kandere bikos **of dis type**
This is why I think English should still remain in our country because of this type
- 10 **of situation** difren **types of situations**. An sapos yumi **do away** wetem haomas moa bae
of situation different types of situations. And if we do away with it, how would
- 11 yumi go overseas? An lo **international issues** olsem **you have to speak in English** ia.
we go overseas? And for international issues and such you have to speak in English.
(pause)
- 12 So sapos yumi **do away** wetem Ingles **my goodness** bae yumi luk hao nao?
So if we do away with English my goodness how will we look?

This statement from Lily reflects the ambivalence toward English – Solomon Islanders recognize it as important for further education and opportunities, but they feel ill-equipped when they need to speak it. As Lily said in line 7, the lack of experience speaking and learning in

English meant that students “struggle” with English throughout their education, especially when they go to university. The only way Lily’s cousin was able to succeed in Japan was that he had friends at university to help him with the parts of English that he did not know. The *sem* of speaking incorrect English in primary and secondary school and the lack of training in the language meant that students struggled to “catch up” (line 8) with other students once they got to university. Solomon Islanders recognized the importance of being confident in English for engaging with international issues, but because of the fear of speaking incorrect English or acting like a “whiteman” (Jourdan and Angeli 2014a, 277) they chose to speak Pijin, the language in which they were most comfortable. Nonetheless, English was important because it allowed people to travel overseas and engage with “international issues.” Without it, Lily said in lines 11 and 12 that she did not know how Solomon Islanders would engage beyond the Solomons or how outsiders would perceive them.

Because of the challenges that teachers faced teaching in English and because of the prevalence of Solomon Islands Pijin as the language for everyday communication, I asked Zonita and Roselyn why they thought English was important for students to learn. In Example 4.9, Zonita and Roselyn expressed that English was important because it was the medium of exchange used in schools and all the textbooks were written in it.

Example 4.9 Why English is important

1 ZM: Bikos Ingles nao **become** wanfala **medium of exchange** lo hia lo kandere nao.
Because English has become one medium of exchange here in our country.

2 [RH: yeah

3 ZM: An everi **textbooks written in English.**
And all the textbooks are written in English.

4 [RH: mhm

5 ZM: So iven if yumi se
So even if we say
(2 sec pause)

6 yu **might think that** hem **not really important but then on the other hand important**
you might think that it's not really important but then on the other hand important.

7 nao. Den hem luk olsem hem **necessary for them to know** nao. **If the textbooks were**
Then it looks like it's necessary for them to know. If the textbooks were

8 **written in our language then English might not be that important. But the**
written in our language then English might not be that important. But the

9 **textbooks are written in English** nao. So if yumi **do away with English there will be**
problem nao
textbooks are written in English. So if we do away with English there will be problem

(3 sec pause)

10 **to understand.**
to understand.

(2 sec pause)

11 An den lo skul **become compulsory subject** tu
And then at school it has become compulsory subject too.

12 [RH: yeah

13 ZM: so hem impoten fo olta mas (2 sec) lanem nao.
So it's important for them to learn.

In this selection, Zonita is stating that English is important to learn because it is the “medium of exchange” in the Solomons (line 1), the language in which all the textbooks are written (lines 7-9), and a required subject in school (line 11). Because Zonita mentioned textbooks, I asked what they thought of the idea of putting textbooks in Pijin instead of English (Example 4.10). Both teachers thought that Pijin could be helpful for learning English, but they were concerned that if they switched to just Pijin in Solomon Islands education, students would be prevented from going to university and would be unprepared to speak and learn in English, reflecting the same concerns Lily mentioned in Example 4.8.

Example 4.10 Pijin in textbooks

- 1 Z: Bat mi ting if olta olsem bae spoilem nomoa pikini nomoa
But I think if they do this it will hurt/mess up the children
- 2 RH: **Sorry say it again**
- 3 Z: If me ting if olsem if samfala buk usim lo Pijin bae hem no **helpful** nomoa. Bae hem gud
*I think if they do this, if some books use Pijin it will not be **helpful**. It will be good*
- 4 bat den if olsem hem **if everything written** lo Pijin nao.
*but then if only **if everything written** in Pijin.*
- 5 RH: mhm
- 6 Ro: yeah
- 7 Z: o yumi garem **one version Pijin or one version** lo Ingles?
*Or will we have **one version Pijin or one version** lo English?*
- 8 Ro: mhm
- 9 RH: quiet laughs
- 10 Z: **then you will use them both** nao?
then you will use them both?
- 11 Ro: mhm
- (2 sec pause)
- 12 Z: hem ya bat
that's it but
- (3 sec pause)
- 13 Z: (quietly) no sua tu
I'm also not sure
- 14 (6 sec pause during which RH gives an awkward laugh)
- 15 Z: Yeah man. Bat if **again** if hem **go beyond** lo Solomons **I think** bae hem okay bat if mifa
*Right. But **again** if it (Pijin) **go beyond** Solomons **I think** it will be okay but if we*
- 16 putum lo Pijin **but then only at the primary level** o olsem an den hem stop bae hem
*put Pijin **but then only at the primary level or such** and then it stops it will*
- 17 **only** distractim studens nomoa **between the structures** nomoa nao.
***only** distract students **between the structures**.*

In line 11 of this example, Zonita is emphasizing her concern that if students only learned in Pijin then they would not be prepared for schooling or life outside of Solomon Islands since Pijin is only used in the Solomons. The teachers recognized that Pijin was essential to students' lives and learning, but because of the linguistic hierarchies introduced during colonial times and the stigma that Pijin was just "broken English," it created an ambivalence toward Pijin for fear it would inhibit students' ability to learn formal English. Zonita was concerned that using Pijin would hurt the students (line 1). In Example 4.10 the ambivalence toward Pijin is evident as she cannot decide if it would be better to have books only in Pijin or the same book in Pijin and English and at what levels of education this should occur. She thought teaching Pijin at the primary level could be okay, but was concerned students would be confused when they moved into English. Technically, this last thought would follow the vernacular education policy, which suggests that students should start school by learning in their first language (which for many is Pijin) and then slowly transition to English. However, because there were few resources or literature written in Solomon Islands Pijin, officially teaching in Pijin seemed unrealistic to the teachers.

Although they knew it was important for their students to learn English, the teachers recognized that students struggled with English and were often shy to speak it. This fear was one of the things that prevented their English from improving. As a result, teachers often relied on translanguaging between Pijin and vernacular languages to explain concepts, which helped students to understand the content, but also continued to limit the students' exposure to English. In the next section, I show some of the creative methods teachers used to teach English, especially their reliance on translanguaging.

4.3 Overcoming the challenges of teaching English

As the previous chapter showed, there are many structural issues that make teaching and learning at schools in the Solomons difficult. Despite these issues, teachers, students, and their families believed education was important for future opportunities and continued to persist in schooling. The previous chapter shared some of the journeys and motivations young people had to pursue schooling. This section shows the determination that teachers had to help their students learn English, even when they themselves lacked confidence in speaking or teaching in English. To overcome these obstacles, teachers used creative methodologies to keep students engaged in the content, including purchasing their own supplies and creating games and songs to help students learn. The teachers developed these pedagogical practices without specific training in or resources for teaching English as a second language. Intertwined through all of them is an informal translanguaging between English, Pijin, and vernacular languages to help students understand the course material.

4.3.1 Creative ways to teach English

The English teachers I knew were good at their jobs and tried hard to educate their students. However, the ambivalence toward English and Pijin caused many teachers to doubt their own ability to teach English well. Yet the teachers I interviewed found creative ways to practice English and explain concepts to keep students engaged and willing to learn a language they did not understand. The examples included below are not exhaustive, but they are distinctive because the teachers did not focus on rote learning, as was common among many teachers. This rote learning usually looked something like the following: the teacher writes notes, students copy, the teacher explains, the students listen quietly, the teacher gives an assignment to

practice, class ends. Although these three teachers often followed the pattern described above when first introducing a concept or reviewing for exams, they also sought new ways to help students with confusing topics.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, all the schools lacked textbooks in every subject, but this seemed to have the greatest impact on English teachers who lacked textbooks and other reading resources. While the lack of resources overwhelmed some teachers, for these women it was an important hurdle they must surmount. To overcome this, the teachers relied on their own ingenuity to develop learning materials and find books for their students. Roselyn recognized that the lack of reading resources was a challenge to her students, so she bought them with her own money. Zonita said that during her first year of teaching she relied on more experienced teachers for help. They gave her notes they had used previously and then she put them into her own words to make sure she was confident teaching. Since she was based in Honiara which had semi-reliable internet, she now used the internet to find and compile notes and said that over time she felt more confident teaching in English.

Unfortunately for Lily, the internet on Isabel was inconsistent and the printer was often out of ink. For this reason, during the June school break Lily went to Honiara to ask English teachers for teaching resources. Her trip to Honiara was a combination of business, shopping, and visiting family, which she paid for out of her own pocket. While there, she downloaded grammar and reading exercises since she had access to reliable internet. Because of the lack of resources, she was very excited when I shared some basic writing resources with her that I had on my computer.

Another challenge was that the resources that teachers and students had access to were not always accessible or understandable for students. When her students did not understand the

texts included in the Papua New Guinea textbook the school used, Zonita adapted the names and situations in the stories to reflect Solomon Islands. Through their dedication, these teachers found ways to teach without the Ministry of Education or schools providing the required resources for teaching students English as a second language.

The teachers also developed games and activities to help students practice their English and build confidence. To practice listening comprehension, two of the teachers used music and asked the students to put the lyrics of the song in order. For practicing speaking skills, Roselyn said she had students dress up in traditional costumes and describe them in English, so they were presenting on a topic they were familiar with already. For her Form 3 students who were struggling with spelling and pronunciation, she put words on the blackboard each week that they would read aloud together and look up in a dictionary before practicing spelling.

Lily told a very impactful story of a time when she struggled to teach her students a concept, so she developed a game to help them learn. She had been trying to teach her students subject verb agreement, but because of confusion from their previous teacher, the students disagreed with her explanations. When she went home, she knew her lesson had been unsuccessful, so she thought of a game to help them learn. She cut out simple sentences with brackets around verbs *is/are*, *was/were*, etc. and then she pasted them on a ball. The next day she took the class to the dining hall to play the game. The students bounced the ball to one another and wherever their fingers touched, they had to figure out the subject and verb of the example. She said that this finally helped students understand. After telling me the story, I asked why she thought this game worked better than her previous lessons. She was unsure, but in Example 4.11 Lily describes both the creative game and the translinguaging practice she used to help students understand.

Example 4.11 Game to help learn English

[Note: In this story she is recounting the interaction with students and how she explained it. The indents show the interaction within the story itself]

- 1 L: Mi no save. Ating bikos stap lo klas sitdaon lo klas **meaningless** lo
*I don't know. I think because they stay in class sit down in class and it is **meaningless** to*
- 2 olketa ating. So yumi traem **another technique** wea hao nao bae mekem ota pikini
*them I think. So we have to try **another technique** where it will make all the kids*
- 3 understandim olsem. So dat taem yu taem yu bouncem ball an ball hem catchem hem
understand like that. So that time you when you bounced the ball and they caught the ball
- 4 lukdaon lo finga covermap ball an hem luk lo sentens ia. An
look down at their finger where it covered up the ball and they look at that sentence. And
- 5 taem hem luk lo sentens hem olsem mekem maen blo hem ting. Den mi askem kwestin lo
dea.
*when they looked at the sentence like that it makes their minds think. Then I asked the
question there.*
- 6 L: “**The subject** ia hem **singular or hem plural?**” mi sei lo dea.
L: “**The subject** there is **singular or is it plural?**” I said then.
- 7 Den bae hem tingting bae hem tingting.
Then they will think and think.
- 8 L: “Bikos **subject** lo dea wat? **John or the students or wat?**”
L: “**Because the subject** there is what? **John or the students or what?**”
- 9 Sapos hem se, “Peter.”
If they say, “Peter.”
- 10 L: “Okay, **so Peter subject** lo dea. Peter hem **singular?**”
L: “**Okay, so Peter subject** there. Peter is **singular?**”
- 11 Mi stat fo **ask** kwestin fo **building** nao **mindsetting** blo hem.
*I start to **ask** questions for **building** their **mindset**.*
- 12 L: “Hem wanfala o hem tufala? John hem staka o hem wanfala?”
L: “*He is one or he is two? John is a lot or he is one?*”
- 13 Student: “Wanfala!”
Student: “One!”

L: “Okay so **which one** insaet lo **bracket** nao **correct?**”

*L: “Okay so **which one** inside of the **bracket** is **correct?**”*

The examples of using music and games to help students learn show the dedication that the teachers have when helping their students understand hard concepts. They worked hard to create student-centered learning opportunities. When one process failed, they tried something new. When students were disengaged from a lesson, they found a way to make it interesting. By doing this, the teachers showed their capacity to teach foreign concepts in an engaging way. These creative exercises also emphasized that students learned English best when they were engaged with an activity instead of just listening passively. Additionally, using Pijin and English as Lily did when explaining the subject/verb agreement, helped students understand the English lessons.

4.3.2 Using Pijin to teach English

Although the books, notes, and assignments were all in English, most lectures and conversations at schools in Solomon Islands occurred in Pijin. In this way, translanguaging between English and Pijin was embedded into the everyday interactions at schools. A typical lesson involved notes distributed or written on the board in English and then explained by the teacher in Pijin. When I observed Zonita teaching an English lesson to her Form 6 class at Ridge CHS on Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” she began by passing around a handout in English. They had read the story in class the day before and then after class Zonita took a handout from a book and modified it to explain words they might not understand. She then read each point on the handout one by one in English and gave an explanation in Pijin that the students would understand. For example, when describing the narrator, she said he was “man

hafhaf krangge man” [*a man who is half a crazy man*] or a “psycho man,” both terms that were regularly used to describe people with mental illnesses in Solomon Islands. When describing the policemen who came to the house, Zonita first read the handout in English and then explained the meaning of some of the words in Pijin, as seen in Example 4.12.

Example 4.12 Translanguaging in English class

Zonita reads handout in English:

“They inspect the house and sit in the old man’s chamber at the narrator’s invitation, chatting amicably (in a friendly manner/way).”

Zonita to class:

Chatting amicably meanim olsem **in a very friendly way**. Ota stori stori an kakam insaet
chatting amicably means something like in a very friendly way. They casually talk and come inside

On the handout, Zonita had added in parentheses a definition of “amicably”: “in a friendly manner/way.” She then explained the word “amicably” by translanguaging between Pijin and English and giving a culturally appropriate example, that of “*stori stori*.” “*Stori stori*” is a Pijin term for casually talking with one another.⁷⁹ Similarly, in the Solomons inviting someone to come sit down inside is a sign of friendship and hospitality. By using Pijin ideas to explain English words, Zonita helped students understand the deeper meaning behind the story.

Lily followed a similar principle when I observed her teaching Social Studies to the Form 1 class at Jejevo CHS. After taking attendance she explained to the students in Pijin that today’s lesson would be on types of leaders. Since the school was out of toner for their printer, she could not print the handout, so she told the students that she would write the types of leaders on the

⁷⁹ See Chapter 1 for further explanation of *stori stori* and its connection to *tok stori* and *talanoa* elsewhere in the Pacific.

board and then she would give them questions to discuss in groups. She said that they should copy into their notebooks what she wrote. Since the students were slower copying than she was writing she said to them in Pijin, “taem yu finis, putumdaon bairo blo yu an den bae mi **explain.**” (*When you are finished, put down your pencils and then I will **explain.***)

Example 4.13: Notes in Social Studies class

[The following are the notes on the board all written in English]

Here are some types of leadership that you might find in a community, family, or village.

Authoritative Leadership - when a strong leader uses his or her status to issue orders which must be obeyed by family, community or village.

Persuasive Leadership - leading by persuading and use of rewards and punishments

Democratic Leadership - when decisions are made with the whole family or community united.

Activity:

1. Who is the leader in your family?
2. What type of decision dose [does spelled wrong] your mother make?
3. Who usually makes decisions in your community or village?

Once they were done copying, Lily began explaining the definitions in Pijin with examples the students could relate to, translanguaging between Pijin and English. For example, she read the definition of persuasive leadership in English and then explained it with examples in Pijin. She then said that a persuasive leader was someone who tells you to do something, or they will punish you such as: “Taem aniwan se, ‘tekem kam betel nut o bae mi **punish** yu.’” (*When someone says, ‘bring me betel nut or I will **punish** you.’*). She also explained that persuasion could include a reward. “Taem teacher se, ‘go peim tufa gums an sapos yu go kuiktaem, narawan blo yu.’” (*When teacher says, ‘go buy two gums and if you go quickly, the other is yours.’*)

Throughout the lesson, she continued to use Pijin to explain the ideas written on the board in English.

Lily's story in Example 4.11 also showed how she was translanguaging between Pijin and English to help students understand tenses. She wrote the sample sentence in English on the board, but in class explained in Pijin the meaning of singular and plural such as "Hem wanfala or hem tufala? John hem staka o hem wanfala?" (*He is one or two? John is a lot or one?*) In both these examples, Pijin was necessary to help students grasp the words and ideas that they did not understand in English. These examples from Zonita and Lily were just a sample, but almost every class I observed followed a similar pattern of teachers using Pijin to clarify and explain the English concepts that students did not understand.

When I asked teachers why they spoke Pijin instead of English, they identified two main reasons. First, many teachers did not feel comfortable or confident explaining concepts in English, as explained in the earlier section. Second, the students did not understand what was taught when it was only explained in English. In class, students struggled to understand both the topic being taught and the English being spoken. For this reason, teachers used English for the notes and official parts of school like exams and assignments but gave most of their explanations and teaching in Pijin, or in rural areas sometimes in the vernacular language.

Lily told me in our interview that students struggled to understand English when she only taught them things in English. For this reason, she said would translanguage between English, Pijin, and vernacular languages to explain the assignment, as she described in Example 4.14.

Example 4.14: Students don't understand exercises in English

L: Samfala taem oketa **even** lo taem mi givem **exercises** lo olketa, olketa bae jes **comment**
*Sometimes they **even** when I give **exercises** to them, they will just **comment***

kam langguis kam lo mi dat “Madam, mifala barava no understandim nomoa nao.”
to me in their (vernacular) language, “Madam, we really don’t understand this at all.”

Olsem nomoa. So wat mi duim mi moa mi translatem lo langguis so dat ota
Like that. So what I do is translate it into language so that they

understandim. “Oh disfala pat lo sentens ia hem olsem lo langguis ia.” Olsem.
understand. “Oh this part of the sentence is like this in language.” Like that.

Mekem so dat hem **in line** nao lo **understanding** blo olketa.
*Make it so that it is **in line** with their **understanding**.*

In addition to explaining exercises in the vernacular language so that it is in line with students’ understanding, Lily went on to explain how she would have students break down large texts by having them act out each sentence. She would also translate the story into Pijin and have them look up English words they did not know in a dictionary. Using Pijin and vernacular languages in ways such as these helped the students grasp the English concepts.

In my conversation with Roselyn and Zonita, they mentioned using examples from vernacular languages and Pijin to teach grammar concepts. Both Zonita and Roselyn were taking an English grammar class taught by Dr. Alpheaus Zobule, the Indigenous scholar from Western province who founded the Kulu Language Institute (see Chapter 2). They said that these grammar classes helped them apply the understanding of English grammar to their own vernacular languages as well. Similarly, McDougall and Zobule (2021, 424) described how secondary students who took the Luqa grammar class at Kulu performed better in English and other subjects in school since “learning about the structure of their language” helped students “understand the structure of English.” Applying the training they received in their English grammar class to their own teaching, Zonita and Roselyn said that students understood English grammar when they saw how Pijin, or their home language, was similar to or different from

English. In Example 4.15, I had just asked Zonita and Roselyn if it could be useful for students to learn about the structure of Pijin alongside English. In response, Zonita suggested that her students understood English grammar when they saw the similarities and differences with Pijin or their mother tongues (lines 1-5). Roselyn also described a language book used by RAMSI after the Tension that explained the grammar and linguistics of Pijin (lines 6-9). They both agreed that teaching students the differences between English and Pijin, as the RAMSI book did, could help with their learning (lines 10-13).

Example 4.15 Comparing Pijin and English

1 Z: Bikos **I mean** if olta save aboatim oh **structure** nomoa difren **but the meaning** hem same.
Because I mean if then know about the structure is only different but the meaning is the same. (RH: mhm)

2 Laek olsem. Wods ya hem **written in the structure of our mother tongue**
For example, words are written in the structure of our mother tongue (RH: mhm)

3 bat **the structure** ia **structure** difren from **structure** blo Ingles.
but the structure is different structure from the structure of English. (RH: mhm)

4 But mining lo dea **mean the same thing**. Sentens hem minim **the same thing**. Ating bae hem **help**.
But the meaning means the same thing. Sentence means the same thing. I think it will help

(3 sec pause)

5 Z: bae hem help **in the way that** olta understandim watnao meaning blo **the** kwestin ia.
It will help in the way that they understand what the meaning of the question is.

(Pause 22 seconds) [skipping where Roselyn describes her previous job where she made a copy of a book to help RAMSI learn Pijin. She was sharing this as an example for learning about the structure of Pijin]

6 Ro: yeah so hem insaet lo dat buk **itself** bae yu luk olsem linguistiks ia. Olta putum
yeah so inside that book you will see something like linguistics. They put

- 7 **everything about Pijin** wat olsem hem insaet. So bae hem go tisim olta RAMSI bikos bae **them work** hia.
everything about Pijin inside. So it would teach RAMSI because they would be working here. (RH: mhm)
- 8 So ating if datwan yumi save duim **with our students first** bifo a yumi kakam up lo Inglis
So I think if we did that one with our students first before we continually move up in English (ZM: yeah)
- 9 Ro: Bikos hao nao olta (RAMSI) **from English then they learn Pijin. Ok us from Pijin to English**
Because how did they (RAMSI) from English then they learn Pijin. Ok us from Pijin to English (laughs)
- 10 Z: Hem nao mi minim. If **structures** olta save bae hem minim nao.
This is what I mean. If they know the structures they will understand. (RH: mhm)
- 11 If yumi **write one sentence in English structure and that same sentence you write it but in the Pijin structure.**
If we write one sentence in English structure and that same sentence you write it but in the Pijin structure. (RH: mhm)
- 12 Meaning hem sem nomoa (RH: yeah) **only structure** nomoa hem difren. (RH: Mhm)
The meaning is the same (RH: yeah) **only structure is different** (RH: Mhm)
- 13 Bae olta understandim nomoa ia
They will understand it.

This interaction continued in Example 4.16 where Zonita and Roselyn gave another example of how they taught students English by comparing it to local vernacular languages with which students were familiar. Using the example of “night good” in local vernaculars compared to “good night” in English, they explained how understanding the structure and order of a sentence in the vernacular language helped students compare it to English. Zonita and Roselyn suggested that helping students see the differences in the languages, like word order and sentence structure, helped them understand English better.

Example 4.16 “Night good”

- 1 Z: Ok for yumi save olsem. Lo structure olsem. Laek lo langguis samfala **adjectives**
*Ok for us it's like this. The structure is like this. Like in language some **adjectives***
- 2 olsem **might come first before the word they describe or come after**
*and such **might come first before the word they describe or come after***
- 3 Z: **after the words they describe** an olsem. Yumi mas garem olsem lo langguis blo yumi
after the words they describe and so on. We must have this in our language
- 4 **if sometimes the, for example, the goodnight** ia. Lo langguis **mother tongue** of
if sometimes the, for example, the goodnight. In the mother tongues of
- 5 Solomon Islands langguis ia **the good night we have the night coming first. And then**
*Solomon Islands languages **the good night we have the night coming first. And then***
- 6 **the adjective good** ia hem kam afta. **So that is an example of the difference in**
the adjective good it comes after. So that is an example of the difference in
- 7 **structure.** If olt save aboatim **what is a noun what is an adjective and where to place**
*structure. If they know about **what is a noun what is an adjective and where to place***
- 8 **them in the sentence part** hemi hem **easier for them to know the difference between**
those structures.
them in the sentence part it is easier for them to know the difference between those
structures.
- 9 [Son: babbling wata wata wata and (RH: laughs in response)]
- 10 Z: Hem nao olsem. If me ting if yumi luk yumi talem **the difference between language**
*It is like this. If I think if we look we tell **the difference between language***
- 11 **structures** fo olketa bae tekem easi. Bikos yumi olta must save languages. Mifa
structures for them, they will get it easy. Because we they must know languages. We
- 12 garem hem garem adjectives tu and garem nouns tu. And yu but save **about those and**
*have they have adjectives too and have nouns too. And you but know **about those and***
- 13 **where to place them in the sentence** bae hem easier for them nao. **For analyzing what**
*where to place them in the sentence it will be easier for them. **For analyzing what***
- 14 **the meaning of the sentence.**
the meaning of the sentence.
- 15 [RH: mhm]

Lily also compared English to the language that students knew, but often relied on Cheke Holo, the local vernacular language of the Buala area, because most of her students spoke that language with their families. Through translanguaging between English, Pijin, and the local vernacular as she described in Example 4.14, she helped students learn English and the content of their courses.

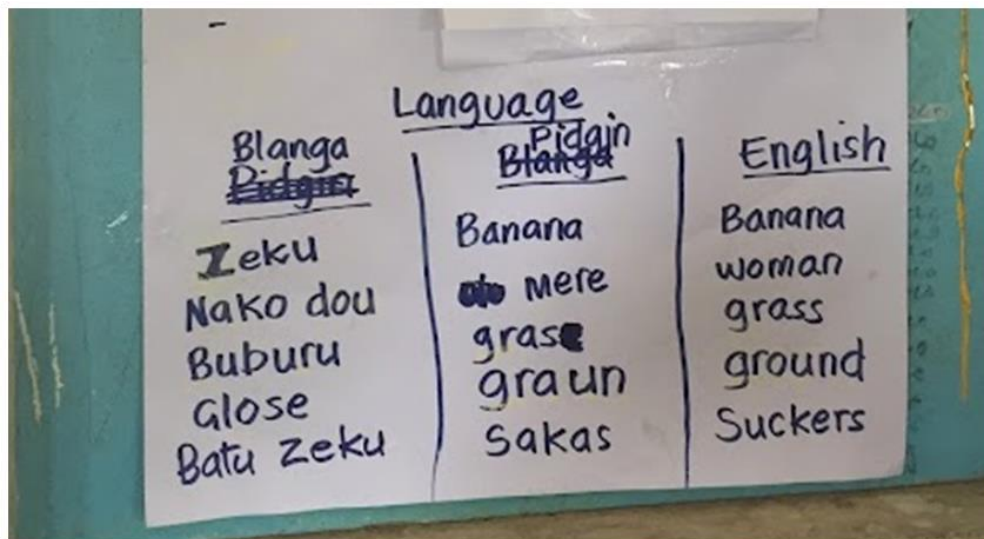


Image 4.1 Sign in a primary school classroom, Jejevo CHS, 2019, Photo by Author

Image 4.1 is from a primary classroom at Jejevo CHS, comparing Blanga, an Indigenous language of Isabel, to Pijin and English. This comparison of languages is also known as “metalinguistic comparison” where teachers juxtapose different languages, “drawing attention to the similarities and differences between them.” This comparison supports “children’s metalinguistic development” which aids in “the transfer of learning from one language to another” (Franken and August 2011, 225; citing Cummins 2007). This is another example of how teachers are already informally using students’ existing language knowledge to teach them English through translanguaging.

4.3.3 Translanguaging as a formalized educational tool

When interviewing students and teachers at the Kulu Language Institute, Debra McDougall asked “how they would feel about learning to read and analyze Pijin instead of Luqa,” which is their vernacular language (McDougall & Zobule 2021:428). None of the interviewees expressed the ideology that Pijin was “broken English” and therefore disqualified to be studied in schools. Instead, all the interviewees agreed it was best to begin learning in someone’s first language, such as Luqa in Ranongga; however, they suggested that “children who spoke Pijin as a first language should learn to read, write, and analyze the grammar of Pijin before learning other languages.” Many also thought it would be useful to study the grammar of Pijin after their first language, but before learning English (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 428). As the teachers I interviewed suggested, using Pijin for instruction removed the obstacle of understanding English so that students could grasp the other academic concepts being taught. The Kulu Language Institute followed a similar pedagogical principle: when teaching Luqa “move from what students know to what they do not know” (McDougall and Zobule 2021, 416). In places where Pijin is the first language of the students or where there is no shared vernacular language, beginning literacy in Pijin would start with what students know (Pijin) to teach them what they need to learn (English).

Integrating translanguaging into the classroom as a pedagogical practice builds on teachers’ and students’ existing language practices, moving from what they know to what they need to learn. Teachers are already using Pijin informally when teaching as seen in Zonita’s explanation of codeswitching (Example 4.4) and Lily’s description of how she helped her students who were confused (Example 4.14). Translanguaging between Pijin, English, and vernacular languages occurred among teachers and students in and out of the classroom as they

explained concepts and socialized. It is also evident throughout the interview transcripts with me. As such, formalizing Pijin in the curriculum as both a language of instruction and a subject to study would give teachers the tools they need to teach literacy more effectively, eliminating the confusion Zonita felt when codeswitching (as mentioned in Example 4.4).

On a day-to-day basis, Pijin was regularly spoken to help students learn. However, teachers were using Pijin informally without any specific guidance or training on how to teach in multilingual classrooms, which caused confusion for them and the students. Zonita expressed in Example 4.17 that when she was at university her professor said that she would be a TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language) teacher, but she was not given much training in what that meant and struggled because English was a second language for her too.

Example 4.17: Training in TESOL

- 1 Z: Taem mi duim yia wan blo mi. Tisa blo mifala talem. “Yufala nao yufala **you will**
When I did my year one (teaching) courses my teacher told us, “You all, you all, you will
- 2 **be TESOL teachers.”** (RH: ok) **teaching English as a second language.** Bat fo olta
be TESOL teachers.” (RH: ok) *teaching English as a second language. But for them to*
- 3 barava mekem **the difference. We are not teaching first language here. We are**
really make the difference. We are not teaching first language here. We are
- 4 **teaching second language.** So wat mi lukim lo dea nao **is** ota sud givim mifala **the**
teaching second language. So what I see there is that they should give us the
- 5 **structure of the second language that is different from the first language** hia.
structure of the second language that is different from the first language here.
- 6 Minim? Hem. **That should be the important thing** ia.
Understand? Yeah. That should be the important thing.

[Skipping a few sentences where she lists her teachers’ names]

- 7 Z: **So approach** sud tisim yumi lo hia nao **is** fo talem yumi **the structure of the second**
So approach they should teach us here is to tell us the structure of the second

- 8 **language that we will be teaching here is different from the first language. What are language that we will be teaching here is different from the first language. What are**
- 9 **the words for this? Words for house.** Laek lo **first language** hem garem wod ia fo **the words for this? Words for house. Like in our first language it has this word for**
- 10 haos ia *nume* mifala nao. **What’s the word for *nume* in the second language? Is house “nume” in our language. What’s the word for *nume* in the second language? Is**
- 12 **it a noun or whatever? Kaen olsem sud talem mifa. Where is that word should it a noun or whatever? Like that they should tell us. Where is it that the word should**
- 13 **appear in a sentence? Yea man? Hem. If yumi mekem olsem bae hem easi naia. appear in a sentence? Right? Yes. If we make it like that it will be easy.**

As this example from Zonita shows, training teachers to understand the differences between their first and second language would make it easier for them to teach English as a second language since most of them are learning English as a second or third language themselves. This is what Zonita, Roselyn, and Lily were already trying to do in the classroom without the formal training on how to do it. Formalizing Pijin as a language of instruction and training them to use translanguaging intentionally would give teachers the pedagogical tools they need to teach English as an additional language.

Tanangada (2013, 114) says that Solomon Islands teachers have a “limited understanding of bi/multilingual education pedagogies” that would support their students’ learning. She says that teachers need to be trained in “effective pedagogical approaches to teaching English as a second language without constraining the students’ L1.” Zonita expressed this desire for better training on how to teach English multiple times, in the TESOL quote above (Example 4.17) and in this quote below where she expresses her inadequacy in teaching English since English is her third language.

Example 4.18: Equipping teachers to impart the content

Z: Bikos hem nao **the challenge that we mention earlier. To really teach English as a** *Because this is the challenge that we mention earlier. To really teach English as a*
second language hia is a challenge ia because me the teacher English is my third *second language here is a challenge because me the teacher English is my third*
language too. Hao nao bae mi tisim go fo pikini? (laughs) So they need to really *language too. How will I teach the kids? (laughs) So they need to really*
equip me with the knowledge to impart the content. *equip me with the knowledge to impart the content.*

Formalizing Pijin in education does not mean it should fully replace English. When I asked teachers if Pijin should replace English in classrooms, they quickly disagreed. As Lily mentioned in Example 4.8, if students only learned Pijin in school they would not be equipped with the English knowledge they needed for higher education, jobs, and engaging with the global world. Instead, creating early literacy materials in Pijin to use in schools would build on the language knowledge students already have so they are prepared for understanding English as they go further in education. The Solomons have been working to localize education by training local teachers and developing curriculum rooted in Pacific cultures and ways of learning (MEHRD 2022; Oakeshott 2021b). Developing resources in the language teachers are already using, which in this case is Pijin, would be the next step in localizing the educational system and moving away from the colonial ideologies embedded in the education system.

According to Siegel (2010, 397), problems such as “a negative self-image, lack of motivation, inhibited self-expression” and even rejection of education altogether can occur when students’ own language varieties are devalued “by treating them as incorrect versions of the standard” or by “excluding them from the educational process.” Instead, he suggests that education should encourage an “awareness approach” where the creole is seen as “a resource for

learning the standard language of education and for education in general, rather than something to be ignored” (Siegel 2010, 399). The awareness approach incorporates into the classroom oral and written texts in the creole language, including “non-standard forms of literacy” such as those found in music, emails, and texting (Siegel 2010, 398). Thinking of the Solomons context, I would extend this approach to incorporate the forms of creole literacy that are occurring on social media. Solomon Islanders, especially youth, regularly translanguage between English and Pijin for writing on social media, which would provide a rich database for exploring translanguaging practices of written Pijin. Using examples from social media in schools could be a way to explore and understand the structure of Pijin in comparison to English and further localize the curriculum. The awareness approach of languages considers all the languages that students bring to the classroom as valuable resources that will aid in learning. It allows students to explore the different varieties of creole and compare their own varieties to other students’ varieties and the standard language (Siegel 2010). This creates flexible bilingual practices that allow students to use translanguaging to learn concepts and understand each other’s language experiences.

Other scholars have also concluded that incorporating creoles into the classroom would improve student learning and identity development. Vandeputte-Tavo (2013, 267) suggests that using Bislama in classrooms in Vanuatu would “increase the social and linguistic legitimacy of the language and boost speakers’, particularly those for whom it is a mother tongue, positive sense of self.” After studying post-colonial language education in the Pacific, Lotherington (1998, 72) argued that when education supports the cognitive and social development of a student’s L1 it also “supports the acquisition and development of the L2” through “general language development, increasing metalinguistic awareness and bolstering socio-cultural

identity.” One of the ways to provide this support is through providing teachers with more training in bi/multilingual educational practices such as translanguaging. Tanangada (2013, 39) says that through translanguaging, students “develop the linguistic security and identity needed for successful learning.” All these authors suggest that using a student’s L1 in education does more than just help their academic skills, it bolsters their identity, sense of self, and confidence in speaking their own language. Formalizing the use of Pijin, the L1 of two generations of youth in the Solomons (Jourdan 2018), as a language of instruction and a subject, would give it further authority as a national language and remove some of the colonial hierarchies and stigmas that prevent it from being formally used in education. It would also bolster the identity and confidence of youth who speak it as a first language.

These examples from PNG, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands all make arguments that integrating the respective Melanesian Pidgin in education would increase their value as a language and improve student learning. Li Wei (2018, 24) argues that “education can be a Translanguaging Space where teachers and students go between and beyond socially constructed language and educational systems” to engage in new ways of meaning-making that “challenge and transform old understandings and structures.” Similarly, Bonacina-Pugh et al. (2021, 464) suggest that translanguaging gives minoritized languages official roles in the classroom which transforms the identity of speakers. However, they also note that translanguaging is not fully transformational because it does not reorganize or remove the language structures and conditions of power and asymmetry that leads to inequality and stigmatization of language (Bonacina-Pugh, da Costa Cabral, and Huang 2021, 464). Therefore, translanguaging on its own is not enough to transform the Solomon Islands educational system. As the previous chapter identified there are many structural issues that need to be addressed. However, what this chapter has revealed are the

ways translanguaging allows teachers to use their multilingual repertoires to aid in student learning, instead of seeing them as a deficit to learning.

One limitation of using Pijin in schools is that there are students in rural areas who do not know Pijin until they begin schooling. For them, learning initial literacy in a vernacular language would be ideal. However, the large number of languages in Solomon Islands makes it difficult to develop resources for each language group, as seen by the stalled MEHRD vernacular language projects. The MEHRD vernacular language policy allows for Pijin to be used in schools where there is not another language shared by all students (MEHRD 2010; 2022). Since all school-aged youth in Solomon Islands learn some Pijin and many speak it as a first language, developing early literacy tools in Pijin would give students a stronger language foundation for learning English and other academic topics. Although this could increase educational inequalities between urban and rural schools, these inequalities are already in existence when students in rural locations are expected to learn English without any community support for that language. Pijin, as the de facto national language, is needed for mobility throughout the Solomons, so learning Pijin is necessary as students move on to secondary schools outside their home villages and eventually look for employment.

Using Pijin and vernacular languages as the foundation on which to learn English builds on the linguistic knowledge that students already have, helping them bridge into English. Highlighting the similarities and differences of Pijin and English helps students understand the structure of both languages, legitimizing Pijin as a language useful for learning. Establishing schools as a place of translanguaging empowers teachers and students to redesign the classroom as a place that builds on the multilingual strengths that they bring to the classroom instead of forcing them into just one language.

4.4 Conclusion: Overcoming Colonial Legacies

Despite studying English throughout their education, people in Solomon Islands are often *sem* (shy or embarrassed) to talk in English because they consider their English to be inadequate and a language that does not belong to them. Yet, as these teachers have expressed, English is essential for success in schooling, finding jobs, and engagement with a global world. This creates an ambivalence about speaking English. Although the teachers I interviewed mentioned their own insecurities about speaking English, they overcame this fear to help their students be successful. The teachers relied on their own and their students' multilingualism to teach English. Explaining the similarities and differences between languages enabled their students to understand difficult concepts.

English is a remnant of colonialism, but it is also the language Solomon Islands has chosen as their official language. Yet it remains a foreign language only a few can access. Zonita made an interesting point about English not “belonging” to them. She suggested that people needed to use English more so that they could see it as their own. However, another option is to recognize English as the foreign language it is and teach it as a second language. This would mean equipping teachers with bi/multilingual and translanguaging pedagogical practices. These three teachers used their own ingenuity to develop resources, but they suggested that training teachers in TESOL methods would help them feel more confident teaching English. This change in the curriculum would also require using Pijin or vernacular languages as the foundation to learn English.

By giving Pijin and English the same authority in the classroom, students can choose with whom and in what contexts they want to speak each language, slowly building their confidence and understanding of English, instead of feeling ashamed to use English at all. Using

Pijin and vernacular languages as the foundation on which to learn English builds on the linguistic knowledge that students already have, helping them bridge into English. Highlighting the similarities and differences of Pijin to English, as these English teachers are already doing, pushes against the colonial legacy that labels Pijin as broken English by demonstrating that Pijin has a grammar and an appropriate way to say things. Doing this pushes against colonial linguistic hierarchies by giving Pijin linguistic value in the classroom, while building on the linguistic knowledge students already have, and empowering them to speak English as another language in their multilingual repertoire.

This chapter dove into the specifics of language use in schools for two main reasons. First, it is an example of how the challenges I identified in Chapter 3 are more complicated than a specific fix would address. The colonial history, language ideologies, classroom practices, and teacher training all intersect to create an ambivalence toward speaking both Pijin and English. My goal in this chapter was to showcase how teachers, despite their negative valuation of their own English, overcame the linguistic challenges they faced to help their students learn English. Additionally, I suggested a path forward that would improve student learning in all subjects through translanguaging and training teachers in pedagogical practices for teaching English as a second language. The secondary goal of this chapter was to bridge the obstacles students face in education to the identities and values I explore in the second half of the dissertation. Knowing English is connected to an urban identity and opens the door for upward mobility. For young people who aim to attend university and have well-paid jobs, English is essential for their success and opportunities; without it their opportunities are limited. Speaking Solomon Islands Pijin can also index an identity, both an urban identity and a national identity as a Solomon Islander, a point mentioned in the next chapter. Finally, knowing one's vernacular language is

important for claiming an ethnic identity and connection to home. However, for many young people who grow up in urban areas or in families where the parents do not know each other's languages, Pijin is their first language, so they must find other ways to connect to their ethnic identities, as the following chapters will reveal.

Chapter 5 Performing Difference, Longing for ‘Home’: Claiming ethnic identities to build national unity among urban Solomon Islands youth

I began this dissertation by exploring some of the challenges youth face in schooling. In the second part of this dissertation, I will show the things that youth value and find important. To understand their motivations in school and their aims after school, we must understand who the young people in the Solomons are and what they value. Students want knowledge, good jobs, and better lives for themselves and their families, but they also value connections to land, to home, to family, and to community. Although education may take them away from these things, it is also the thing that roots them and gives them identity. For this reason, home remains a driving value for youth, both those who live in their ancestral homes and those who have gone to the city for education and work. Chapter 5 shows the importance of home for youth growing up and attending school in Honiara. Chapter 6 looks at elements of home that youth identified as important – the connection to land, church, and kastom practices. Home is a place where culture and kastom are maintained, even as they adapt to new influences. These things encourage youth to maintain an identity and relationships tied to home.

Painted on the walls outside Ridge CHS assembly hall in Honiara, Solomon Islands are two murals sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Partnership for Peace, Unity and Development. These were painted after “The Tension”⁸⁰ in early 2000s to encourage people from the nine different provinces to work together. They both say “Iumi Tugeda Waka for Peace, Unity and Development” (All of us together work for peace, unity and development). One painting shows silhouettes of figures holding hands with colors of the

⁸⁰ “The Tension” was a period of violence that erupted between Malaita and Guadalcanal provinces between 1998-2003. Section 2 of this chapter and Chapter 2 of the dissertation provide further details. See also (Akin 2013; Allen 2013; Kabutaulaka 2001; McDougall 2016).

Solomon Islands flag behind. The other (Image 5.1) has nine brown people wearing grass skirts and adornments which identify individuals as from each province. Visible in this image are the armbands of Isabel (second from left), shell money of Malaita (five from left), and the *tema* of Temotu (far right) as well as other cultural symbols specific to other provinces.



Image 5.1 Mural on the side of a building at Ridge CHS. Photo by author.

While the goal of this painting is to encourage unity, the diversity of where people come from remains important. Provincial identities⁸¹ have not been erased in the mural to show a national unity, instead they have been harmonized together emphasizing similarities between provinces. Although this painting suggests that people in each province share similar cultural

⁸¹ Solomon Islands is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government at the national level and within each of the nine provinces. Many provinces are named after the largest island but are comprised of many smaller islands usually with their own languages and variations of *kastom*.

practices (like *kastom* jewelry), the provinces are internally diverse with different languages, religious traditions, and agricultural practices. This photo exemplifies the narrative of “unity in diversity,” which is encouraged by the government and incorporated into secondary school curriculum. Based on the examples in this chapter and other observations during fieldwork, I interpret this narrative to be saying, “we all have unique elements that represent our ethnic groups, but we are also all similar; hence, we should value our differences while working together as Solomon Islanders.”

Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal, is the multiethnic capital city of Solomon Islands. Much of migration to Honiara, also known as “town,”⁸² has been to find jobs, but many youth move to Honiara for access to resources like internet, library, and prestigious schooling. Movement in and out of Honiara creates an urban center that is diverse with speakers of all 70 Indigenous languages residing permanently in or visiting Honiara at least once a year. Each group brings with them their own *kastom* practices, creating an environment of continual cultural mixing and hybridity.

The Solomon Islands Year 7 Social Studies textbook defines an ethnic group as a group of people who are “similar to each other in culture and way of life but different from other groups” (Solomon Islands Curriculum Development Division 2012, 27). Ethnic difference is a result of colonial history, uneven development in provinces, and the coming together of groups to achieve shared objectives (Allen 2013). Often ethnic boundaries are drawn along linguistic or cultural lines, but they may also be drawn even smaller along village lines or more broadly by provinces depending on where someone is and with whom they are talking. Solomon Islanders, even those who have grown up in Honiara, consider their family’s province of origin as “home”

⁸² Although the provincial headquarters in many provinces are the size of small towns, people refer to Honiara as “town.”

and the place they are from. However, for many youth growing up in Honiara, their connections to home are weakening – they may visit home once or twice a year, have extended family there and possibly land, but they have not grown up in their province and as a result, do not experience firsthand many of the *kastom* practices that are key markers of ethnic identity.

In this chapter, I argue that, despite the weak physical ties for many youth in Honiara, connections to their home province remain their most important identity marker as they work to stake a claim within the growing, multiethnic urban landscape. I explore how young people seek ways to maintain these connections to home, even if they may never live there, by engaging in activities that reflect their *kastom*, traditions, and relationships. Although this can take many forms such as joining sports teams from one’s province, attending church with others from one’s home, and using words and phrases from their Indigenous language, in this article I discuss two ways youth actively engage with *kastom* to claim an ethnic identity in Honiara: performing dances and wearing *kastom* jewelry. As students express their provincial identity through unique dance performances and *kastom* jewelry, they also learn about other ethnic traditions from their peers, which creates an identity claimed by urbanites that values connections to one’s home while incorporating traditions of others. In this way, youth in Honiara develop an ethnic identity to engage with the “unity in diversity” narrative that is a necessary part of claiming belonging in the urban area and the Solomons more broadly.

As described in Chapter 1, my research was multi-sited, split between Honiara and Isabel province. Much of the data for this chapter comes from the photo project I completed with sixteen students in Form 3 (Grade 9) and Form 5 (Grade 11) at Ridge CHS during 2018. Loosely following the photo elicitation methods discussed by Wentworth (2017), I asked students to take photos of their daily lives, particularly of people, places, or things that are important to them.

After printing a selection of photos, they described why they took the photos on a worksheet and then we discussed them in individual or small group interviews. This method allowed me to understand the values, identities, and relationships that shaped students' lives and connected them to home.⁸³

In the sections that follow, I begin by situating the development of ethnicity within post-tension Solomon Islands, exploring how “home” came to be a salient identifier in response to historical conditions. After this, I explain the development of a national identity in the Solomons and how the unity and diversity narrative is incorporated into curriculum. This leads to my specific findings of how secondary students at Ridge CHS in Honiara long for home and why this longing leads to claims of a provincial identity. I give examples of how youth claim a local identity within an urban space through the dances they perform and the *kastom* jewelry they wear. I argue that performing *kastom* practices allows students to find similarities with their diverse peers, while also connecting them with their home. These performances flag an ethnic identity that is needed to stake a claim in both the urban landscape and within the narrative of national unity of Solomon Islanders.

5.1 Identity, Ethnicity, and the Significance of Home

Since World War II, when Honiara became the main urban center of Solomon Islands, migration from rural to urban areas has increased as people seek employment, schooling, and access to goods that are not available in remote villages. Sometimes migration is circular, where individuals move back and forth from their home for various lengths of time (Chapman and Prothero 1985); however, many people are now long-term or permanent residents of Honiara. At

⁸³ For further elaboration of the photo elicitation methodology and my overall methods, see Chapter 1.

schools in Honiara there is a mix of students: those who came to Honiara for secondary school and those who grew up in Honiara, with most of my research participants being the latter. As in other Melanesian areas (see Lindstrom and Jourdan 2017; Rousseau 2017), these long-term residents value close connections to home since it is a marker of ethnic identity.

Although ethnicity in Solomon Islands has connections to blood and land, ethnicity is not just primordial; it is constructed in relation to others and in response to “historical conditions” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 38). One such condition is “the Tension,” which occurred from 1998-2003 between Guadalcanal and Malaita province. Although news reporters and government officials referred to the tension as an ethnic conflict, many analysts argue that this is an over-simplification of complex issues that led to the crisis, such as dissatisfaction with the state who focused more on serving political elites than meeting the needs of local people (see Akin 2013; Allen 2013; Kabutaulaka 2001).⁸⁴ Despite the complex issues that caused the Tension, lines were often drawn along ethnic boundaries. Matthew Allen (2013, 33) suggests that “island-wide and regional identities” formed during the Tension because of unequal access to development and resources that had been occurring since the early colonial period. This put island-based groups in competition with one another (see also Scott 2012). The violence of the Tension caused thousands of long-term Honiara residents, who were originally from Malaita and other provinces, to flee Guadalcanal and return home, relying on their tenuous connections to kin and land to welcome them back. Comparing “modernist” Honiarans, who prior to the Tension were seeking ways to “disentangle themselves from the obligations” of rural family, to more “traditionalist” Honiarans, who had maintained close ties to home, Debra McDougall (2016, 215) suggests that traditionalists “fared better” during the Tension because they had land and

⁸⁴ For a more detailed explanation of the Tension and its effects on education see Chapter 2.

relationships to which to return. While staying connected to one's ethnic identity has always been important to Solomon Islanders, the Tension caused a stark realization of the importance of one's kin and home.

Prior to the Tension in the mid-1990s, Christine Jourdan (1995b, 144) saw national consciousness emerging, especially in Honiara, as a way for Solomon Islanders to “shape a future for themselves away from custom and tradition (kastom).” Similarly, Rachael Gooberman-Hill (1999) suggested that middle-class Honiarans prioritized developing a class identity that distanced them from rural kin. Twenty years after the start of the Tension, I found that the events of the past two decades had shifted how urbanites understood their ethnic identities and connections to home. Instead of ignoring ethnic differences as Gooberman-Hill suggested middle-class urbanites did in the 1990s, I observed youth embracing these ethnic differences in an apolitical way that unified them. Melanesian personhood has been described as “dividual” or “partible,” composed of the many relationships and exchanges that produced them (Lindstrom 2011; Strathern 1988). For this reason, maintaining relationships even amidst conflict and difference has always been important to Solomon Islanders (Oakeshott 2021a; Whiteley 2017). Particularly since the Tension, showcasing ethnic difference has become a way to build relationships with other urbanites to stake a claim in the multi-ethnic urban Honiara, while still maintaining a connection to one's home and identity.

I define identity as an ongoing construction that changes with circumstances. Individuals claim particular identities in many ways including the way they dress (Mills 1999) and the languages they speak (Woolard 2016). Instead of choosing an identity on the spectrum between rural and urban, migrants have a “mosaic” of possible identities and practices in which they can participate (Anh et al. 2012). Pacific Islanders who for millennia have voyaged to other islands

for marriage and trade often have multiple fluid identities as they constantly adapt to new environments while maintaining connections to their home communities (Chapman 1991). For some, identity is a type of “bifocality” where individuals engage with both global and local identities but the two are never quite reconciled (Besnier 2011). For Melanesians, their sense of self and identity has been described as “partible” because they are embedded in multiple places and relationships “through acts of exchange and by establishing multilocal homes” (Lindstrom 2011; see also Strathern 1988).

Kastom is essential to the identity, practices, and cultural heritage of Solomon Islanders. Just as identities are multiple, the way kastom is enacted also has multiple forms (Lindstrom and White 1993). Kastom encompasses the cultural practices of a group, such as their rituals, arts, and dress, as well as their religious, political, and social structures and processes (Keesing 1989; White 1993). The idea of kastom is used broadly across Melanesia. Although Solomon Islanders often view kastom as similar throughout the Solomons, its manifestations vary depending on province and community (Akin 2013; Moore 2015). Kastom and Western-influenced practices often intertwine, transforming both local practices and modern influences, such as the example of Christianity that shapes and has been shaped by kastom in Isabel (White 1993, 492). Goberman-Hill (1999, 56) suggests that the hybridization of modern and kastom practices in Honiara “operates in a dialectic with maintenance of ethnicity.” Together these allow the growing middle class to distance themselves from obligations to rural kin while still maintaining an ethnic identity connected to home. Benedicta Rousseau (2017, 38), writing about migrants to Port Vila, suggests that “an island-based identity both illustrates and enables the existence of kastom in town.”

In the Solomons many of the provinces are named after the largest island in the province, though most are comprised of many smaller islands as well. Provinces are not homogeneous but consist of a mix of languages and cultural practices (see McDougall 2016 for a critique of the homogeneity of provinces). Although some people also identify by smaller islands, villages, or languages within the province, unless conversing with someone familiar with the area, they claim a provincial identity. Claiming an island identity as opposed to a provincial identity was common among people from the Polynesian outliers, arguably because some of their cultural practices are different than Melanesia.⁸⁵ For youth in Honiara, claiming a provincial identity through maintaining kastom practices, such as dance, is a way for students to ground themselves in their home community and claim a unique ethnic identity amidst the overcrowded, multiethnic surroundings. As they claim authentic local identities tied to their home province, they also intermix their cultural practices with urban influences, transforming their kastom practices and creating a unique form of identity claimed particularly by urbanites.

For youth in Honiara, losing their cultural practices results in a simultaneous loss of their connection to home and a sense of who they are. As Margie, a Form 5 student stated when describing her kastom village and practices, “Hem nao impoten bikos **the moment** yumi lusim kultur blo yumi **the moment** yumi lusim yumi.” (*These are important because **the moment** we lose our culture is **the moment** we lose ourselves*). Because of this fear of loss and the pressure to maintain an ethnic identity to have a place within the narrative of national unity, urban youth find ways to highlight and perform their ethnic traditions. Although this performance of identity

⁸⁵ Although Solomon Islanders are mostly Melanesian, there are groups of Polynesians and Micronesians who have lived in the outer islands of Malaita, Choiseul, Temotu, and other provinces for centuries. With sea level rise, some of these groups have moved off the atolls and smaller islands to Honiara and the larger islands. Polynesians are “originally” from the island chain that extends from Hawaii in the north, Easter Island in the east, and New Zealand in the south.

also happens in provinces, there is more at stake within the multiethnic urban context when claiming a unique ethnic identity. McDougall (2016, 14) suggests that in rural areas identity and belonging is formed “by living on local land [and] caring for local people.” However, she says that in urban areas where people are less dependent on the land, “fluid and emergent place-based identities are likely to calcify into ethnic identity” (McDougall 2016, 15). In this sense, home identities codify into ethnic identities when removed from place-based contexts.

Within the Pacific context, the idea of home, even if just a romanticizing of the easy life (Jourdan 2017), continues to remain important for many migrants (Lindstrom and Jourdan 2017). However, for some second and third generations of urban residents, their close connections to home are weakening in their perspectives and in the eyes of family members at home (Kraemer 2020; McDougall 2017). Instead of mourning something lost, for some urbanites this nostalgia for home becomes a way to create a social life and identity within an urban context (Battaglia 1995). Many of the students who participated in my research lived in Honiara and enjoyed the modern conveniences it provided, yet they also had a nostalgia and longing for home even when they rarely had a chance to visit, which caused them to maintain their ethnic identities and provincial connections.

5.2 Schools as a place of national identity

In the early 1970s, as the British Solomon Islands Protectorate was preparing for independence from Great Britain,⁸⁶ the educational committee visited communities and conducted surveys to evaluate the educational needs throughout Solomon Islands. They found

⁸⁶ Solomon Islands was a protectorate of Great Britain from 1893-1978. It received its independence on July 7, 1978.

that the primary thing that parents wanted was for their children to be “good citizens of the Solomons;” therefore, they wanted a curriculum that was “geared to the needs of Solomon Islanders and the Solomon Islands way of life.” Both in the past and as new changes are implemented by the Ministry of Education, the priority has been that the curriculum remains “meaningful in the context of the Solomons Islands” and that it meets “the demands of a twentieth century society” (Bugotu, Solomon Islands, and Educational Policy Review Committee 1973, 50; MEHRD 2016). These priorities show the creation of an education system that not only taught academic skills to students, but also created a national identity around being a “good citizen” of the country.

Since the tension, schools and curriculum have been key sites of government efforts to create a national identity evident in the “unity in diversity” narrative. “Unity in diversity” was first promoted as part of the decolonization efforts post-independence in an attempt to build a nation based on “shared diversities” (Kabutaulaka 2015, 128). After the Tension, the need for a shared national culture became more apparent. According to the MEHRD 2011 Curriculum Policy, the first learning outcome of the National curriculum defined as “culture promotion” will “integrate awareness of the Solomon Islands culture; in particular, the promotion of the concept of unity in diversity” (MEHRD 2011, 9). Borrowing from Christine Jourdan (1995b), David Oakeshott and Matthew Allen (2015, 14) view schools and the integration of “unity in diversity” into curriculum as a “stepping-stone” to developing a national identity. The goal of developing a national identity is integrated throughout the Form 1 (Grade 7) Solomon Islands Social Studies textbook and is summarized as follows: “although we are diverse (we have many different languages, cultures and customs) we are also united because there are many things we all have in

common. The things we share give us our national identity” (Solomon Islands Curriculum Development Division 2012, 41).

Schools are a place where cultural differences can be highlighted while also encouraging a national identity. In my observations, students and teachers at schools regularly teased each other about ethnic stereotypes, such as certain groups being more aggressive, lazy, or ignorant; however, these jokes did not develop into actual conflicts. Oakeshott (2021a, 182) describes the secondary school “cultural shows” as a place where students could identify their cultural differences at the level of island or province, while also finding commensurability. One example he gives of commensurability is the way Solomon Islanders engage in conflict and seek reconciliation. Minor conflicts regularly happen among Solomon Islanders, but reconciliation that prioritizes the relationships is quickly sought, which he identifies as part of the broader Solomon Islands identity (Oakeshott 2021a, 195). Solomon Islanders often point to Solomon Islands as a Christian nation as a key part of their national identity. Times of prayer and Bible study are integral to the curriculum and daily life at all schools. The identification as a Christian nation⁸⁷ also comes with the expectation of maintaining Christian values, such as peace and loving one another, which align with *kastom* values of reconciliation and relationality. For this reason, even when cultural differences are identified at schools, they are also made commensurable, such as all islands observing similar *kastom* practices or having their own form of *kastom* adornment, as seen in Image 5.1. This commensuration subsumes difference under a national identity of Solomon Islander and emphasizes the importance of “unity in diversity.”

⁸⁷ Over 90 percent of Solomon Islanders identify as Christian (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023). Christianity is not officially enshrined in the Constitution, but the idea of Solomon Islands as a Christian nation is regularly invoked in speeches and prayers at the national and provincial levels. For example, at a reconciliation ceremony in May 2024 Prime Minister Jeremy Manele said, “Solomon Islands as a Christian nation and diverse society cannot allow hatred to dictate its path” (Ma’hanua 2024).

The narrative of unity in diversity aligns with research on “panethnicity.” Dina Okamoto & Cristina Mora (2014, 221) define panethnicity as “the construction of a new categorical boundary through the consolidation of ethnic, tribal, religious, or national groups” which maintains “an inherent tension derived from maintaining subgroup distinctions while developing a sense of metagroup unity.” Describing Pacific Islanders in the Australian diaspora, Kirsten McGavin (2014, 127) suggests that the panethnic category of islander “subsumes but does not negate ethno-national identity labels.” Although panethnicity has mostly been studied in colonial and international migrant contexts, it fits with the push of the Solomon Islands government, especially after the tension, to unite the many linguistic and ethnic groups under the panethnic label of Solomon Islander to form a national consciousness.

The narrative of unity in diversity was evident in both the curriculum and daily activities at Ridge CHS. During a Social Studies lesson on “Continuity and Change in Solomon Islands” the Form 5 Social Studies teacher described Solomon Islands as a “diverse” country with “mixed cultures.” She explained that Honiara was a mixture of all societies, so it is important for people to live and work together. Later in the lesson she described how society is changing, and people do not always know how to identify themselves because they are “*hafhaf*” [half half] from lots of places. She shared that after she finished school in Honiara, she did not know the cultural dances of her family, so she learned them from her *wantoks*. *Wantoks* translates to “one talk” or “one language,” but it is used to refer to extended kin from one’s home of origin. The Year 7 Social Studies textbook emphasized that *wantoks* are often a marker of ethnicity. This anecdote from the teacher was meant to encourage students that no matter where they grew up, culture and ethnicity were something they could learn at any time, especially through *kastom* practices like dances.

Another way school creates a national identity is through the languages used. In chapters 2 and 4 I elaborated on the roles of English, Pijin, and vernacular languages in schools and the wider society. Of note for the argument of this chapter is the role of Pijin as a “de facto national language” and a language of national identity used in unifying and forming a national consciousness (Jourdan 1995b, 139). Many of the university students that Johanne Angeli (2008, 183) interviewed valued Pijin as part of their “national belonging and distinctiveness” as a Solomon Islander. In my own earlier research, people referred to Pijin as the “language of Solomon Islands” and identified schools as the reason for the spread of Pijin throughout the Solomons (Hicks 2017). During another lesson in the Form 5 Social Studies class, the teacher mentioned that since everyone speaks Pijin it unifies society. When I asked her about this, she explained to me that when missionaries introduced schools it brought peace, but schools also bring people together and unify them under one language, Pijin.

Michael Billig (1995, 7) writes that “to have a national identity is to possess ways of talking about nationhood” and nationalism is “flagg[ed]” through familiar everyday elements of life. Although the narrative of developing a national identity was evident through lessons at Ridge CHS, in my conversations and interactions with students, the identity that was “flagged” and discussed most often in their interactions was not that of a national identity, but a connection to their “home” and ethnicity. For youth in Honiara, performing their culture through highlighting their “authentic” ethnic differences creates a “sense of belonging” to the nation (Lindholm 2008) as well as to be seen and “see themselves” as a “named people with a ‘tradition and way of life’” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 11). McGavin (2014, 128) suggests that being an “islander” in Australia means being connected to one’s “‘homeland’ no matter the distance in time or space.” Similarly, I argue that for youth who have lived most of their life in Honiara,

performing an ethnic identity requires them to be connected to a “home” even if they have never lived there themselves.

5.3 Longing for Home

Ridge CHS is part of the Honiara Education Authority and is located west of Point Cruz, the main urban center of Honiara. Most students live within walking distance from school, but many take public buses from neighboring communities each morning. A regular topic of conversation during my time at Ridge CHS was whether students would go “home” for the holidays. There are two major school breaks: a one-month holiday in June and a two-month holiday in December and January. If students and their families have the money, almost everyone prefers to go home during these times. I often asked students to compare life at “home” with life in town, reflecting on the good and bad parts. Students regularly described Honiara with adjectives such as “dirty,” “crowded,” “noisy,” and “expensive” while they described home as “free,” “cheap,” “easy,” and “quiet.” Although many of these youth had grown up in town because of their parents’ jobs and only returned home once a year, and some far less than that, they idealized and remembered the best parts of home —freedom to do what they want, sit around and talk with family, go to the beach, go swimming in the sea, and find “free” food on trees, in the garden, or in the ocean. As Jourdan (2017, 8) writes, despite the physical labor necessary for survival at home, Honiarans “romanticize” and remember home with “nostalgia.” Going home and sharing food with extended family embeds Solomon Islanders in relationships and obligations for reciprocity (Lindstrom 2011; Whiteley 2017); however, for these students going home was akin to a vacation or holiday because they did not have to engage in the hard labor or kinship obligations. For these Honiara students, home was not only the place where they

are from or an ethnicity to claim, but the place they longed to go for a time, though not necessarily stay.



Image 5.2 The sky, the sea, and the trees. Photo by Julie, Form 5 student Ridge CHS

As part of the photo project I organized with Ridge CHS students, Julie, a Form 5 student, took a picture from a hillside in Honiara looking out at the sea (Image 5.2). In the distance are the islands of Central province and on a clear day when looking in the right direction Malaita or Isabel province are visible. In her worksheet description, Julie wrote, “This is important to me because I love the view and every time when I look up in the sky or in the sea I usually think about the good things in my life.” In my interview with her and Ruth, Julie discussed this photo and what she felt when looking at the view.

Example 5.1: Relaxed looking at the sea

J: why mi siusim nao disfala piksa olsem hem impoten. Ota lukim go skae lo dea, si lo *Why I chose this picture is like this it's important. They look at the sky there, the sea*

dea, olta tri. Everi taem if kaen type luk lo skae, o ste lo ples kwaet luk lo si *there, all the trees. Every time, if I look at the sky, or stay in a quiet place, look at the sea*

olsem hed save fil **relaxed**. Olsem why impoten an mi laek tekem. *like this head feels relaxed. Like this is why it is important and I wanted to take it (the photo).*

Impoten lo mi. Hem fil **relaxed**. Olsem if luk ples luk nice, fil *It is important to me. I feel relaxed. Like this, if I look at the place, it looks nice, feels*

gud, fil **relaxed**. Hem nao ples olsem impoten lo mi. *good, feel relaxed. This is why the place like this is important to me.*

R: Taem yu lukluk lo diswan yu tingting lo wat? *When you look at this what are you thinking about?*

J: Olsem (laughs) mi barava (all laugh) olsem mi barava mi luk lo sae olsem me fil *Like this (laughs) I really (all laugh) like this I really I look at the sky and such I feel*

relaxed nomoa olsem no ting hevi tumas, fogetem. hem nomoa. *relaxed only. Like this, I don't think about hard things too much, forget. That's it.*

R: samtaem taem pipol luk aot lo si an naraples an ting abaot lo nara pat lo si. *Sometimes when people look out at the sea and another place and think about another part of the sea*

J & Ru: yeah

J: Ting abaot hom, olsem ting abaot lo hom watnao olta duim taem olsem. *I think about home, like this I think about home what the people are doing there right now and such.*

Julie, who was eighteen in 2018, had not visited her “home” in Malaita since she was a small child. She was born and grew up in town, but had grandparents, aunts, and uncles who were back home. In our interview during October 2018, she told me that if she were “lucky” she would go home for Christmas that year, but in the end, she was unable to go. The following year,

Julie explained to me over Facebook messenger that she would not return home for Christmas again; instead, she told me she spent her days at her house feeling “bored.” In the boring, dirty streets of Honiara, home was what Julie longed for.

Despite weakening attachments, migrants are still emotionally connected to the idea of “home,” bringing them home for holidays or sending money for kinship responsibilities, but it is not strong enough to make them return permanently to the village. This longing to return home is contrasted with the benefits of living in an urban area. In my interviews I asked students if they preferred to live in town or at home. One of the reasons youth preferred to live in town was that they had better access to electricity to study during evenings and could use the internet for school projects as well as entertainment. For youth who temporarily migrate to Honiara to attend better schools, the attachment to home remains especially strong and they are likely to return home for holidays and express a desire to live there after their education. However, for youth who have grown up in Honiara, the attachment to home is an emotional longing. When I asked where they would like to live after school many students wanted to live in Honiara, or if possible, internationally to find a job with a good and steady income; yet many still dreamed of “going home.” They longed for the life at home that they perceived to be “easy” where everything was “free,” while aiming for jobs that brought upward mobility and kept them away from the hard subsistence labor of rural communities.

Secondary schools in Honiara are microcosms of Solomon Islands where students can showcase their connections to home while learning about cultural practices of their peers. One day while waiting for a teacher to come to the Form 5 classroom, I sat with students and without any prompting from me they began discussing the differences and similarities of their cultural practices. Claire is from Lord Howe, one of the Polynesian outer islands in Malaita province. She

grew up there and came to Honiara for school in 2016. Margie is from Sikaiana, a different Polynesian outer island in Malaita, but grew up in Honiara and has only returned home a few times. They talked about their similar traditions around marriage and birth. Another girl who moved to Honiara from the main island of Malaita in 2016 was surprised how different the Polynesian-influenced practices were from the traditions in her community. All three girls considered their kastom important and were excited to identify the similarities and differences. This inclusivity and desire to learn about different traditions was one of the unique elements of expressing an ethnic identity within an urban context that helped diverse students establish a sense of community and place.



Image 5.3 Sikaiana Cultural Village with kastom houses. Photo by Margie, Form 5 student Ridge CHS

During my conversation with these three students, they emphasized that it was important to keep the cultural practices of their homes. Margie took pictures of the Sikaianan cultural village (Image 5.3), a place for tourists to come and learn about Sikaianan cultural practices such as cooking, weaving, and dancing through visiting a replica of a kastom house, kitchen, and performance area. Margie lives in the community just outside the cultural village. The community uses the area to learn dances and to hold community events such as volleyball tournaments. When describing why she took these photos she said,

Example 5.2: Keeping kastom

Diswan why mi tekem disfala **photo** ia hem moa impoten **to** mi bikos um **in order** fo
*This one why I took this **photo** it is more important **to** me because um **in order** for*

mifala whatya kipim gud kastom blo mifala **stable** fo **years** fo **new generations** olsem
*us, what um, keep our kastom good **stable** for **years** for **new generations** and like*

so mifala **maybe** buildim dis kastom haos. So wat impoten lo mi nomoa
*So we **maybe** build this kastom house. So what is mainly important to me*

olsem bae mifala no save fogetem nao kultur blo mifala.
is like this that we will not be able to forget our culture.

In this conversation, Margie is emphasizing the importance of not forgetting her culture and kastom. As mentioned in the introduction, for Margie and other students, forgetting their culture meant losing a part of themselves. Debora Battaglia (1995) argues that a nostalgia for home keeps Trobrianders in Port Moresby connected to their histories, but also allows them to create new forms of social life in the urban area. Similarly, for youth in Honiara, this longing for home, even if just a romanticized notion of home, becomes a way to establish a new sense of community in Honiara. Maintaining and sharing cultural traditions, such as dance and kastom jewelry, is essential to constructing an ethnic identity amidst the various identities they could

claim in the hybridity of Honiara. In so doing, they assert their belonging within the narrative of national unity.

5.4 Performing identity through dance

Throughout the Solomons, “kastom” dances from provinces and “*akson*” (action) choruses from churches are regularly performed as part of celebrations and ceremonies. A kastom dance uses traditional foot patterns, music, lyrics, props and/or costumes from a specific province or village, while *akson* choruses are usually Christian hymns or contemporary songs performed with hand motions, actions, and other steps. Some choruses are particular to certain denominations of Christianity or more common in certain provinces, but others are performed by many different Christian groups. Within the school context, these cultural performances are a way to showcase unity within diversity by celebrating ethnic differences in an apolitical way while coming together as a student body. At Ridge CHS in the weeks leading up to graduation, teachers invited students to prepare any style of dance and then perform the dances on stage after the official graduation ceremony. Although many students performed hip hop and contemporary style dances, most dances were a type of kastom dance that showcased a provincial identity.

Because of the costumes, the music style, and the language of the lyrics, kastom dances become iconic of certain provinces. For example, Isabel province is known for their “*sa’ale olo*” dance involving a three-count beat, quick footwork, and a dancing stick for women (see Image 5.4). Malaitans are known for their pan-pipe players (though many provinces including Isabel also play and dance to panpipes) and a partner dance called “*tagiai*.” The Polynesian outliers in Malaita are known for painting their bodies with turmeric, while the Gilbertese, also known as Kiribati from Micronesia, have dances called “*tamure*” with quick hip movements that are quite

different than the more Melanesian style dances. Since many of the dances and songs are sung in a vernacular language, dances are also a way to maintain Indigenous languages. In my interviews with Ridge CHS photo participants, as well as with fourteen other youth in Honiara whom I interviewed in 2019, many said that language was one of the most important aspects of their culture. Although I learned that in the case of Isabel many of the *sa'ale olo* songs are sung in an old form of the Bughotu language that most people do not know, being able to sing the song, even if they do not understand the full meaning, allows youth to join in a cultural practice that has been passed down for generations.



Image 5.4 *Sa'ale olo* dancers at the Isabel Provincial Youth Forum Greero Festival 2019. Photo by Mike Hicks

In interviews with students, many emphasized that dances were an important part of their culture and something they did not want to lose. One student took a photo of dancing during

graduation at a different school. She wrote on her worksheet that dancing is important because “in Solomon Islands we are a diverse country in terms of cultures and customs that we have.” Solomon Islands students at the boarding schools in Oakeshott’s (2021a) research enjoyed the cultural shows put on by students at the school because they were a sanctioned time to display their cultural difference and learn about their *kastom* from home. Performing dances from different provinces showcases the diversity of Honiara and the school, but also creates unity as people come together to watch performances. Students often use celebrations to learn and perform dances that they may not know since they grew up in town. Although graduation was a valuable time for students to perform their provincial identity, it was also a space for others to learn those dances. Many groups were composed of people from just one province, but other groups formed around a grade level. These grade level groups had a leader who taught the dance of their province to students from multiple provinces. As of my research in 2018-2019, there were no copyright laws in Solomon Islands so many dances that were iconic to a province could be performed without specific permission. However, there usually was a person in the group from that province who taught and led the dance. For example, it would be odd for a group of all Malaitan women to do the *sa’ale olo* dance from Isabel unless one of them had a connection to Isabel.

Celebrating cultural dances also happens outside the school realm. A student from Ridge CHS invited me to attend the cultural Sunday service at her church where representatives from each province performed a dance, sang a song, or described key parts of their ethnic practices. She was excited to show me her traditional dances and *kastom* jewelry from Malaita. During International Youth Week, youth from around Honiara were invited to perform dances in the afternoon at the city auditorium. Although there were workshops and events throughout the

morning, the afternoons of dancing were always the most popular. Likewise, during the annual celebration of World Teacher's Day, the afternoon section of the program was dedicated to teachers performing dances. When World Teacher's Day was in Honiara in 2019 only teachers from Honiara schools were in attendance, so it became a place for teachers to learn and perform dances from all the provinces represented at their schools. However, when World Teacher's Day was in Malaita in 2018, teachers came from every province. Each evening the teachers performed dances and *akson* choruses that were iconic to where they were from. Since Ridge CHS had teachers from many different provinces, both years at World Teacher's Day they performed dances from all over the Solomons including dances from Isabel, Malaita, and Western Provinces, which represented the multiethnic backgrounds of the teachers. They invited me to join them to dance both years and in 2019 asked me to teach them a line dance from the United States, which highlights the value they see in learning dances from other places.

Dancing is a part of nearly every celebration throughout Solomon Islands. In the provinces, people usually perform *kastom* dances local to that island or dances from outside Solomons, such as hip hop or Polynesian dance. Although dances from outside the Solomons were also performed at events in Honiara, when *kastom* dances were performed there was usually a representation of every province. Oakeshott (2021b) writes about Solomon Islands social studies teachers who refuse to discuss contentious points of the Tension that highlight ethnic difference, which teaches students to prioritize relationships and respect the knowledge and experiences of their peers. Similarly, dance performances are apolitical expressions that enable schools to encourage inclusivity and create space to celebrate diversity while also unifying students from various places. However, because dances have clear markers of a

provincial identity, it is also a way for urban youth to construct an identity that highlights their ethnic heritage amidst the hybridity of an urban center.

For students, learning dances from their friends at school adds to the mosaic of possible identities that youth in Honiara can claim, including a panethnic identity as a Solomon Islander. This emphasis on inclusivity is unique to the urban environment and gatherings where people from every province were present. McGavin (2014, 147) suggests that in the Pacific diaspora the “appropriation of broader Pacific culture shows an emergent authenticity of ethnicity through which individual Islander identities are strengthened and panethnicity is simultaneously reinforced.” Similarly, performing dances from around the Solomons allows students to highlight their ethnic difference while reinforcing their panethnic identity as a Solomon Islander. At the same time, learning the dance from one’s home is a way youth can “remake themselves in a new place and remake the place themselves” (Lindstrom 2011, 12), allowing them to construct an authentic local identity connected to home.

5.5 Displaying identity through jewelry

As seen during dances, one of the things that marks where someone is from is the *kastom* costumes worn while dancing. However, in everyday life people dress in Western styles of clothing so this form of provincial identity disappears. Although schools require uniforms, students find ways to express their personality and identity through necklaces, earrings, and hairstyles. Western-influenced jewelry is becoming extremely popular with young women; however, most people continue to wear jewelry made in Solomon Islands. Each province has styles of jewelry that are unique to their area giving Solomon Islanders a way to show off a provincial identity while following a conventional dress code.

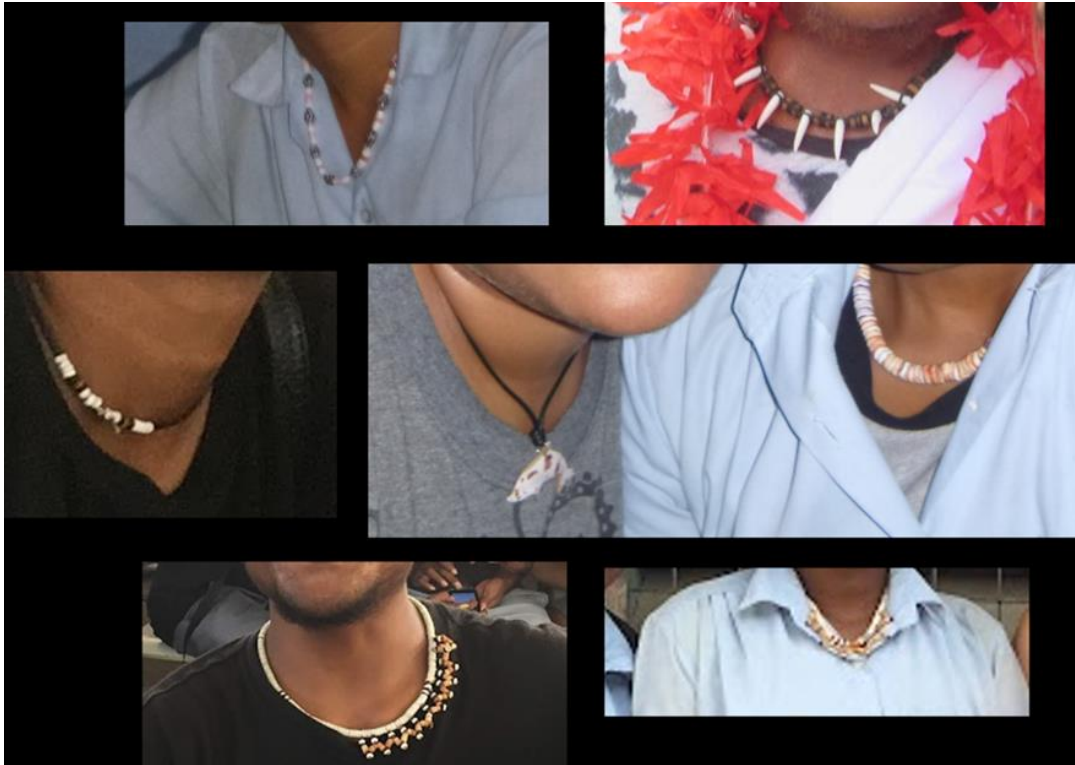


Image 5.5 Students wearing various types of Solomon Islands jewelry at school. Picture compilation by Author

One of the most iconic forms of jewelry in Solomon Islands is the shell money of Malaita, which is used as part of the bride price given to a woman’s family before she is married. For people from Malaita, which was “home” to over half of the students in the Ridge CHS photo project, bride price rituals and gifting of shell money have become a major marker of ethnic identity. Malaitan women are known as being the “most expensive” brides in the Solomons because of the amounts of cash, shell money, and other gifts required before the family agrees to a marriage.⁸⁸ Although shell money can be bought in chains of shells (seen on the left of Image 5.6), often they are made into jewelry such as necklaces and headpieces for dancing.

⁸⁸ In conversations, Malaitan friends said that families paid an average of \$5,000 SBD (approximately \$600 USD, based on an exchange rate of 1 USD to 8.26 SBD in March 2020) plus three or four shell monies, each starting at a



Image 5.6 Malaitan shell money at Honiara central market. Photo by Ruth Form 5 student Ridge CHS

Multiple girls in my project took pictures of Malaitan shell money. Most of them took pictures of shell money for sale in the central market (such as Image 5.6), but one took a picture of shell money on display at a bride price ceremony, and another took a picture of herself wearing shell money that belonged to her family. In their descriptions, the students clearly classified shell money as a marker of their identity and culture. When describing Image 5.6 on her worksheet, Ruth in Form 5 wrote that “shell money is the most valuable thing in Solomons (Malaita province). It is part of my culture and identity.” A few months after this project was completed, Ruth took a picture of shell money and posted on Facebook with the simple caption

worth of approximately \$1000-2000 SBD (\$120-240 USD) and going up from there. However, the amount varies depending on the prestige of the family and the character or educational background of the woman.

“identity.” Mercy, in Form 3, wrote on her worksheet that Malaita’s traditional money is important because “it reminds me of my culture and ancestors, who started the money.” Reina also in Form 3 wrote that shell money is important because “it shows the identity of where I come from. It has values to life of Malaita through culture and belief.” She also wrote in the description for the picture where she was wearing shell money (Image 5.7) that it teaches her how to dress for marriage and displays her culture, which she sees as important for future generations.

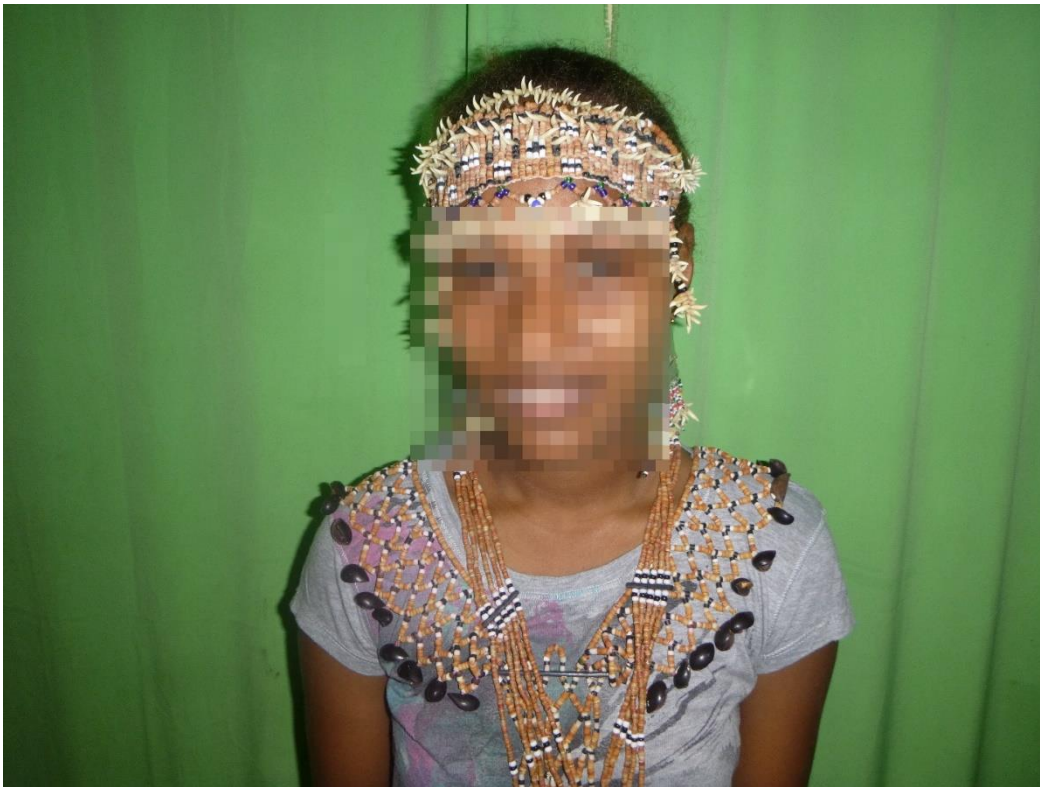


Image 5.7 Reina showing how to dress during brideprice, Photo by Reina, Form 3 Ridge CHS

After asking Reina if it was important for the practice of shell money to continue, she said, “Mas kontinu bikos nogud olta lusim den **future** jenereson no save watnao selmani olsem”

(Must continue because it isn't good if they lose it then future generations will not know what shell money is). This echoes Margie's statement about the importance of cultural maintenance for future generations. All three of these girls had spent most of their lives in Honiara, yet shell money remained an important marker of where they were from and something they did not want to lose.



Image 5.8 Solomons kastom necklaces (left to right): Decorative red shell money (Malaita), Everyday shells (Malaita), Shells (Isabel), Seeds (Isabel), Tema (Santa Cruz, Temotu). Photo by author

Red shell money is the most valuable type of shell money and reserved for special ceremonies, but other forms of shell money are made into jewelry and worn daily by Solomon Islanders. Made from less valuable shells, the iconic zigzag style necklace (see Image 5.8 second

from left and in the collage of students wearing jewelry Image 5.5) is an example of everyday jewelry that signifies a connection to Malaita. Although Malaitan shell money is the most prominent style of jewelry in Solomon Islands, other provinces also have unique styles of jewelry. In Isabel, they make necklaces and earrings out of seeds from an endemic grass or small snail shells (Image 5.8 fourth and third from the left respectively). They also have iconic armbands worn on their upper arms made traditionally out of a giant clamshell. The traditional “*tema*” breastplate originally worn by warriors in Temotu is made into a necklace (Image 5.8 far right) and clearly marks someone as from that province. These adornments are all visible in the school mural (Image 5.1), representing each province.

Although Solomon Islanders do not wear kastom shell money daily, choosing to highlight this as important in their photo project shows the significance that this kastom has in students’ lives. Of the young women mentioned who described shell money, only one had lived in Malaita and only for the first seven years of her life. By identifying shell money as important, these students are highlighting an identity distinctly tied to home despite living in Honiara. In this sense shell money is a “partible” connection to home (Lindstrom 2011) because it allows urbanites to remain connected to their kastom through an item made at home, even when living elsewhere. I asked students if any of their families knew how to make shell money, but they said only a few Malaitans knew how to find and carve the shells. Divers find the shells in the lagoons of Malaita. Then Malaitan artisans cut the shells and string them together into chains of jewelry. Honiara-based Malaitans sell these at the central market in Honiara for both kastom and everyday uses, connecting Malaitans in the province and town. Similarly, at the Isabel Provincial Youth Forum Grereo Festival in Honiara, which showcased kastom practices of Isabel, Isabellians were excited to buy and wear jewelry made from seeds grown only in Isabel.

The commodification of kastom jewelry is also a way that the kastom practice is transformed in the urban environment. Some families own shell money that they pass down to their children as part of a bride price, such as the shell money described by Reina (Image 5.7). Other families buy shell money like chains of shells on the left of Image 5.8 from the market to give in traditional exchanges like bride price or reconciliation ceremonies. Additionally, shell money has been made into everyday forms of jewelry for purchase by Solomon Islanders seeking to display their Malaitan identity or tourists looking for a souvenir. John and Jean Comaroff (2009, 28) suggest that the sale of cultural products is not just a commodification of culture, but a way for the commodity to be “rendered explicitly cultural.” In this case, the jewelry becomes a marker of a cultural practice and ethnic identity that connects urban Solomon Islanders to traditions of their past and their home.

Both the shell and seed necklaces are a tangible connection to home, which emphasizes the “simultaneity” of relationships, history, and kastom that connect home and town (Rousseau 2017, 41). They are also a tangible form of the dividuality of Melanesian personhood, embedding young people into relationships and connections with home. Through wearing jewelry that is iconic of their province, youth are “flagging” an ethnic identity within the multiethnic urban landscape, which allows them to display their ethnic difference to establish their place within the national identity. As Image 5.1 showed, all the provinces have different adornments which make them unique, but the fact that they all have them shows the similarities in kastom and draws urban Solomon Islanders together.

5.6 Conclusion

As Anh *et al.* (2012, 1128) state, “becoming urban” is “a process” that does not follow a uniform path, but instead, presents people with a “mosaic of possibilities” to express urban and rural identities. Sometimes in urban melting pots identities merge to make a uniquely urban identity. At other times, people balance multiple identities and choose to emphasize one or the other at different points for different purposes (Besnier 2011; Lindstrom 2011). These “subgroup distinctions” (Okamoto and Mora 2014, 221) identify cultural differences, but these differences become commensurable under the national identity as a panethnic Solomon Islander.

The Solomon Islands narrative of unity in diversity encourages students to highlight their ethnic diversity so that they can recognize their similarities with others and thus join the national identity of Solomon Islander. Since provinces tend to be viewed as culturally similar and are one of the markers of ethnic identity, as stated in the Year 7 Social Studies textbook, youth in provinces do not need to work as hard to establish their ethnicity since it is assumed to be of that province. However, in the multiethnic urban space of Honiara, where connections to land may be tenuous, these ethnic ties may not be as obvious. For this reason, urbanites must find ways to showcase their ethnic affiliations to establish themselves in the urban landscape and national identity.

To claim an ethnic identity, Solomon Islanders need to be connected to their home or the home of their parents. Since many youth are second or third generation urbanities, and irregularly return home, these connections to home are becoming weak. As a result, this need for an ethnic identity turns into nostalgia and longing for home. As Battaglia (1995, 93) suggests, nostalgia is not just a “yearning for some real or authentic thing;” it manifests itself in “productive engagement” and the creation of home in town. This can occur in many forms, but

this chapter explicated two ways in which Solomon Islands students established an ethnic identity and connection to home through their *kastom* practices of dance and jewelry. The manifestations of identity in town and in provinces are similar; people in both places wear jewelry and perform dances that are unique to their province. In provinces, this is the way of everyday life, but in Honiara, these are ways to construct an authentic ethnic identity, which has become an essential element of being urban.

Just as Geoffrey White (1993) expressed that *kastom* and Western-influenced practices transform each other, these displays of a home identity transform and are transformed by urban spaces. Part of the unity in diversity narrative encourages inclusivity of all forms of culture, something that has always been important to Solomon Islanders; therefore, urban events always give space and time for dance performances from all groups. Ridge CHS and other schools encourage cultural days and celebrations where students can showcase their traditional practices, costumes, and dances. This performance of difference is done in an apolitical way that encourages respect and understanding of one another, which is important in post-Tension Solomon Islands. It is done under an umbrella of unity with the goal that if people understand one another, they will be able to see how their differences are not actually that different. Displaying ethnic differences while appreciating others allows for a recognition of diversity, which gives youth a place within the national narrative of unity. Through this difference, Solomon Islanders can maintain their unique ethnic identities while also developing a panethnic Solomon Islands identity.

By claiming an ethnic identity through their dances and jewelry, youth establish an identity grounded in home which displays their diversity and uniqueness. By performing their identity in such ways, youth also recognize the similarities between them and their peers, which

in turn grounds them in a distinct “national” identity. They long for home and since they cannot go home, they find ways to bring home to them, creating an identity claimed by urbanites that relies on a localized ethnic identity to be a panethnic Solomon Islander.

This chapter has shown how young people in Honiara showcase an ethnic identity while longing for home. The next chapter focus on youth in Isabel living “at home.” Through their photo project, I highlight the parts of life they considered important, which, like Honiara youth, included a connection to home and kastom practices.

Acknowledgments

Chapter 5 was originally published as a standalone article. Hicks, Rachel Emerine. (2022). Performing Difference, Longing for ‘Home’: Claiming ethnic identities to build national unity among urban Solomon Islands youth. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 33:117-132. I have removed parts that were repetitive to other parts of the dissertation and elaborated on some elements I did not have space for in the article. I have also added additional photographs and clarified my argument in a few places.

Chapter 6 The Value of Home, Community, and Kastom for Solomon Islands Youth

I feel the warmth of the sun coming through my window as a neighbor's rooster crows announcing to everyone that morning has arrived. Outside birds are singing and a river splashes happily along the rocks and pebbles into a cool natural pool. The air is fresh, and the ground is wet after the night's rain. As I walk down the path toward the dirt road below, I watch my footing as I step over large rocks and along the slippery mud while enjoying the bright colors around me. Everything around me is green – the trees, the bushes, the clover that covers my yard – with sprinkles of reds, yellows, purples, and pinks from the flowers blooming nearby. Once I reach the road, I avoid large mud puddles as I begin my daily walk to the community high school about fifteen minutes away. This is the same path that many students and teachers follow each day, some coming from even further distance than I do. There are a few trucks that travel on the road, bringing people to the market from further west down the island or carrying goods from a recently arrived ship, but for the most part, everyone travels on foot. Children and neighbors greet me, “*Monin missus! Hamarane keli!*” (Morning miss! Good morning!) to which I reply “*Hamarane keli!*” Since I am renting a house in the village and do not have my own garden, I wander past the local market. It is a concrete area covered by a tin roof with tables for vendors to sell their food. Women come in daily from the nearby villages to sell their produce to the people who work in Buala station and do not have time to tend their own gardens. I glance around the market filled with *kumara* (sweet potato), leafy greens, coconuts, pumpkins, green beans, bananas, and the occasional pineapple. The fruits shift with the season; sometimes oranges, mangos, or ngali nuts are in abundance. I purchase some ngali nuts and bananas to share with

students after school when we meet to discuss their photos later in the day. I then continue my walk toward the school passing a few shops and more friendly smiles along the way.

This is not my “home,” but for the nine months I was in Buala on the island of Santa Isabel I considered it my home in the Solomons. The clean air, abundant water, fresh food, beautiful seas and rivers, and the people who became friends and family fill me with nostalgia and longing to return, even today. I long to introduce my daughter – to whom we gave the middle name Isabella in honor of the community – to the family and friends who cared for us while we lived there. These feelings and memories are just a small glimpse into the even deeper connection that people in the Solomons have with home. Feelings that could not be more different than my memories of the expatriate compound, dusty roads, and the hustle and bustle of Honiara.

In this chapter, I describe “home” through the eyes of Isabellian youth. The first half of the dissertation elaborated on the challenges young people face in schooling. To really understand who these students are and why they are driven to do well in school, it is important to examine the things they find important. Chapter 5 explained how a connection to home is important for students in Honiara to claim an ethnic identity amidst the national narrative of unity in diversity. This chapter focuses on the experiences of young people who are living and going to school at home. In Honiara, young people described the province they were from as home, but when living in Isabel, young people described the village where they have ancestral connections to land as home. Through their photo elicitation projects,⁸⁹ where I asked students to take pictures of the people, places, and things that were important to them, Isabellian youth

⁸⁹ I explain the photo elicitation methodology in Chapter 1. In depth discussion of how this methodology revealed important insights can be found in my publication in *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* (Hicks and Villavicencio Miranda 2024).

showed me the parts of life at home they valued. Students took pictures of many things – friends, family, plants, school, church, ocean, and food, to name a few. In this chapter, I highlight examples of a physical connection to home through photos of land and waterways as well as a social and emotional connection to home through photos of church, community, and kastom.

In this chapter, I begin with a brief discussion of the young people in Isabel who were part of my project. I then introduce some key theoretical points underlying my analysis. From there, I move on to a discussion of what these young people found important as revealed through their photos. I discuss the land and waterways as seen in photos, describing the importance for physical and emotional nourishment. I then describe the importance of community as a place of celebration, support, and belonging, which is manifested through the church and kastom performances. In this chapter, I focus on Isabel youth, but I occasionally connect back to the Honiara youth to show a comparison of life in both places and why there is such a strong nostalgia for home as mentioned in Chapter 5.

Through these narratives, I show how home – the physical connection to land and the emotional connection to their community – is a grounding place for youth. I argue that the importance of home, as seen through the students' photos and conversations, reveals a nuanced identity for youth that values both kastom and modern influences. I end the chapter by showing how young people are combining these different values to claim a unique youth identity that respects their history and Isabellian identity, but also equips them to engage with others beyond Isabel. Connections to home remain a grounding place for youth as they face the challenges of schooling and employment that I explained in the beginning of this dissertation. For those young people who remain in Isabel, home is important because it provides them with physical nourishment, social relations, and a connection to their history and identity.

6.1 Background to youth and kastom in Isabel

In Solomon Islands, youth is a fluid terminology. According to the Solomon Islands National Youth Policy 2017-2030, a youth is anyone between the ages of 15-34 (Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs 2017). However, as Aidan Craney (2022) describes, the definition of youth is also reliant on social recognition. Young people transition out of being “youth” when they take on “adult responsibilities and characteristics – marriage, having children, employment and/or positions of authority” (Craney 2022, 15). Similarly, in Isabel, youth were those who were unmarried, did not have jobs, did not have children, and sometimes were still in school. Young mothers, especially single women who had dropped out of school, faced social stigmas and were in a liminal place between youth and adult where they did not have the authority and respect given adults because they were unmarried but carried the responsibilities of parenthood. Sometimes a parent or older sibling would “adopt⁹⁰” the baby of an unwed mother so that the young mother would have a second chance at education, but this was dependent on a strong family network. I give examples of young women balancing the responsibilities of children, school, and work in Chapter 7.

As described in Chapter 1, my participants in the photo elicitation project in Isabel were all Form 5 students. Their homes were all in villages along Maringe lagoon, stretching from Buala to the villages within an hour walk southeast of Jejevo. Many of them considered Buala village to be their home, but those who lived in Jejevo because of a parent’s job, referred to other villages on Isabel as home. Thirteen students participated in the photo elicitation project and four

⁹⁰ I put adopt in scare quotes because many adoptions were informal and did not entail legal paperwork. Sometimes a relative would raise a child for their whole lives or for part of it. Adoptions happened when parents were unable to take care of children, but also when a family could not have children – or did not have children of a certain gender such as in Isabel where women are needed to keep land in a family line. Sometimes a child would know who their real parents were and sometimes they did not.

of those students did additional social network analysis interviews. Of the thirteen students, three were males and ten were females. In conversations around the school grounds and through the brief survey I completed with the students, I learned about their ambitions, school experiences, and the parts of life in Isabel that they most valued, which helped direct and broaden our future conversations.

Although many of the students had ambitions to leave Isabel for senior secondary school or university, most of them knew this would be a challenge since their families did not have much money.⁹¹ In some families, one parent had a job, but for many young people, their parents earned money through selling produce, homemade bread, and fish. Because of the proximity to government employment, in Buala area a larger number of parents had jobs than in rural areas, but usually only one parent earned wages, so most families still supplemented their income in other ways. Additionally, as I will explain in Chapter 7, to pay school fees most families relied on financial contributions from many extended family members. As such, although the students listed ambitions such as nurses, teachers, pastors, and lawyers on their surveys, in our conversations many were uncertain about their future aims because they were uncertain if they would be able to afford further schooling.

A few young people wanted to live in town to find well-paid jobs, but when I asked about the good and bad parts of Isabel and Honiara, most young people preferred life in Isabel. Although there are very few well-paid jobs in Isabel, the students liked life in Isabel because the people were peaceful and friendly, and life was easy. They said that in Honiara you must work and pay for everything, but in Isabel, water, transportation, and food were all “free.” I put “free”

⁹¹ Senior secondary school includes Form 6 (Grade 12) and Form 7 (College Prep). Jejevo CHS ends at Form 5 (Grade 11). Although a few schools on Isabel had Form 6, students would still have to live away from home, which accrued additional expenses for room and board on top of the basic school fees.

in quotations, because most families still bought many staples like flour, rice, and canned tuna from stores, but other resources like fish and fresh produce were available for those who tended gardens or went fishing, which requires hard labor but very little money. This desire to remain connected to home caused a tension faced by many young people – most wanted to live at home near their families where life was easy, but if they also had an ambition to do well in school and find a well-paid job to support their families, they would have to move away from home. Many authors have written about the importance of urban migrants retaining connections with home to maintain their identity and cultural values (Hirsch 2007; Lindstrom 2011) as well as the tenuous nature of these connections (McDougall 2017; Kraemer 2020). The photo elicitation project and ensuing conversations emphasized the importance of home for identity, cultural values, and kastom for both those living in Isabel and those who moved away.

Kastom in the Solomons encompasses the social and political structures of a group as well as their cultural and religious practices which includes kinship relationships, arts, and dress (Keesing 1989; White 1993). As explained in Chapter 5, kastom practices are a way to connect someone to their home, even if they have never lived there, and claim a unique ethnic identity, which is an essential part of the national unity in diversity narrative. William Donner (1993) suggests that for the Sikaiana in the Solomons identification of kastom practices developed in response to the change introduced during the 20th century. He considers kastom “a mirror” for self-reflection through which “calling attention to the differences of the past and others” allows people to reflect on “the cultural practices of the present” (Donner 1993, 151). Although people generally use kastom to contrast the past with the present, kastom as compared to Western ideas is not always “dichotomous or exclusionary;” instead, kastom and outside ideas often influence and transform one another (White 1993). David Akin (2004) explains how Mountain Kwaio in

Malaita codified their kastom practices to make their community distinct from the modern and Christian influences entwined in Malaitan society, but as they did this it changed their kastom practices and social structure. Similarly, Christianity has intertwined with kastom practices, shaping both the kastom and Christian practices (Allen 2013, 17; Lindstrom 2008; McDougall and Kere 2011; Timmer 2008; White 1991). Because most of Isabel belongs to the same church, there is a unique alignment of kastom, community, and religion, which I will elaborate on in this chapter.

The manifestations of kastom have always been something that shifts and transforms in response to the “modern” and outside influences of the time. Although historically kastom has adapted to new influences, many elders expressed a concern to me that young people were losing their kastom values and replacing them with modern influences. Because kastom is so closely connected to identity and history, a loss of kastom is seen as a loss of identity and history as well. As such, the churches and government in Isabel work together to facilitate events that teach young people kastom practices. The analysis of my photo elicitation project and my interactions with youth revealed that young people value parts of kastom and did not want to disregard it completely, but they also enjoyed the advantages that modernity introduced.

As I elaborate on the photographs taken by youth, it is worth noting that no matter the methodology, there is always a bias in what people tell or show a researcher. Images are always a “mechanism of representation” and although they appear natural, they can be distorted and can be missing key elements of life (Mitchell 1984, 504). Other researchers have found that photo methodologies reduce the power dynamics between researcher and participants, develop trust, and provide insights into participants’ lives that they may not usually feel comfortable expressing (Cappello 2005; Castleden, Garvin, and First Nation 2008; Mikhailovich, Pamphilon,

and Chambers 2015b). I left the photo prompt open-ended; however, my positionality as a Western anthropologist may have influenced what the young people thought they should capture in their photographs. As I mention below, some elements of life I observed youth engaging with in the village like Friday night dancing were not revealed through the photo project. These missing elements in the photographs likely reflected students' decisions to present me with only the parts of their lives they thought were "appropriate" or the ones they assumed I as an anthropologist and educator wanted to see.

My goal in using photo elicitation was to create a participant-led element of my research. So even though the students did not take pictures of certain things the fact that photos are representations chosen by the students is part of what made this methodology so revealing. "Images can serve as signifiers of culture, highlighting values and expectations of individuals, community and society" (Liebenberg 2018, 3). As Linda Liebenberg suggests, as students chose what to photograph, and which details they wanted to highlight, they were making decisions shaped by their "community values" and how they wanted to reflect their lives to me. I asked questions to contextualize the images, but this method allowed for candid conversations around topics identified by the students, which revealed connections to values that were not apparent from just participant observation or structured interviews, making this methodology participant led (Hicks and Villavicencio Miranda 2024). Even if the students may have been biased toward taking photographs of certain things, the photos were still reflections of their life they chose to show me.

6.2 Land and waterways for sustenance and rest

Land has always been important to Solomon Islanders for political, social, religious, and

economic reasons (Ben 1979, xiii). In Solomon Islands, as in many other Pacific nations, there are “constant flows of people, goods, and information between rural and urban areas and between different rural localities,” which allows people to maintain ties to land even when they are not living on it (Allen 2013, 38). For those in rural communities, connection to land comes through living on it, planting crops in a garden, building a house there, and for many being buried there. Debra McDougall (2016, 14) describes how migrants from Malaita to Western province seek to attach themselves to land in ways similar to the residents of the area by “living on local land, caring for local people, bearing children, clearing land, planting trees, or even dying and being buried on their adoptive land.” People in Isabel spoke about the relationship to land in similar ways. The woman I rented my house from spoke of wanting to be buried in Isabel next to her husband, even though she spent most of her time in Honiara, because then she and her children retained rights to the land. Similarly, Johanna Whiteley describes the “*fangamu taego*” (feeding the caregiver feast)⁹² as a representation of the emotional attachments that develop in exchange relationships between parents and children (Whiteley 2017).

The photos taken by the Isabel youth as part of the photo elicitation project I facilitated echoed the importance of land, waterways, and the resources they provide. The youth at Jejevo CHS took pictures of plants, gardens, islands, rivers, and the ocean. The youth expressed that these places were important for food, for selling what they harvested, and for just having fun and swimming. A few students also reflected on the beauty and the peaceful feeling when they looked out at the islands. The land and waterways provided them with the resources they needed to live as well as a space for enjoyment and rest. Through the analysis of these photos, I will show how land and water provided physical and emotional nourishment as well as a strong sense

⁹² I give a brief explanation of this feast in Chapter 2 in the section about Isabel.

of connection to home, since home is the land and places where one's ancestors are from.

6.2.1 Resources from land and rivers



Image 6.1 Coconut tree, Photo by Gabi, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

Example 6.1: Coconut trees

G: Disfala piksa hem kokonat. Kokonat impoten tumas lo Solomon Aelan bikos hem
This picture is a coconut. Coconut is very important in Solomon Islands because it is

useful hem **useful** tumas disfala kokonat ia. Lif stalk blo hem, fruts blo hem den wat
useful it is very **useful** this coconut. It's leaf stalk, its fruits and then what

nao me talem?
do I call it?

RH & L: **Trunk?**

G: yeah **trunk** blo hem. **Everything about about** kokonat tri **useful**. Diswan **trunk** blo
Yeah its trunk. Everything about about coconut tree useful. This one its trunk

hem mifa save usim watya? Faeawud. bae mifa mekem faeawud blo hem. Den lif blo
we can use for what is it? Firewood. We will make firewood from it. Then its leaves

hem mifa save mekem olta basket, mat, den hat, fan. Den mifa save mekem fruts blo
we make all the baskets, mat, then hat, fan. Then we can make its fruit

hem fo drink an kaikai.
for drink and food.

This description of coconut by Gabi (G) is one example of the usefulness of plants that surround the island. Solomon Islanders use every part of the things they grow. In this example Gabi described using the coconut for food, for building and weaving materials, and for firewood. Her family used them for their own sustenance and to sell for money. Gabi also took a picture of a papaya tree, explaining how it was useful for food, especially for babies, and for curing ailments. Josef took pictures of the trees and plants (Image 6.2) near his village. He wrote on his worksheet that the trees were important for oxygen and the area outside his village was a place to grow food like tomatoes. Through these and other similar photos, students described the ways the environment provided resources that nourished their physical bodies.



Image 6.2 Trees and tomato plants in Josef’s village, Photo by Josef, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

The food produced in a garden provided nourishment, but consuming it also connected people to the land it was from. People in Honiara remained attached to home through sending and receiving items from home, showing their reliance on the environment and what it produced. Lamont Lindstrom (2011, 7), describing urban migrants in Vanuatu, writes, “eating food from a specific place converts a person into a child of that place, and transforms place thusly into home.” People in Honiara were always excited to receive ngali nuts, *nambo* (dried breadfruit), and seafood sent from their homes. These items sold quickly and brought much nostalgia. Having a garden or house at home and growing items brought from home in the city showed that someone still had a physical presence on the island even if they spent most of their time in Honiara. Likewise, sharing and consuming the food grown at home embedded people in social relationships that tied them to ancestral lands.



Image 6.3 Gabi's Aunt selling betel nut, Photo by Gabi, Form 5 Jejevo CHS⁹³

Gabi also took a picture of her aunt selling betel nut and cigarettes to support her family (Image 6.3). Betel nut (the areca nut) combined with lime powder and leaf is chewed by most Solomon Islanders multiple times a day. It staves off hunger and provides a relaxing feeling because of its “psychoactive effect” (Pratt 2014, 103–4). Selling betel nut through small stands set up near one's home as Gabi's aunt has done, called *maket* (marketing), is a main source of income for people in the provinces and in Honiara. Most of the betel nut sold in Honiara comes from remote villages where there is space for it to grow, such as the gardens surrounding villages on Isabel. When describing Image 6.3 in our photo elicitation, Gabi said that her aunt sold betel

⁹³ As part of the Photo elicitation training, I taught students about informed consent. Participants of photos signed a release to be a part of the project, and parents of minors signed a form for them. However, it was not always clear who signed which forms, so I have chosen to protect people's anonymity, especially minors, by covering eyes, blurring faces, or distorting the whole photo.

nut because her husband had passed away and she used the money to buy food for her family. In addition to growing nourishing food, the land at home provides space to plant resources that people can sell to make money and support their family whether buying food, paying school fees, or contributing to other community and family events.

Another important natural resource highlighted by the students was fresh water. Many students took pictures of streams, rivers, and waterfalls, which they used for fresh water for cooking, washing clothes, bathing, swimming for fun, and drinking. Much of Buala village had taps of water piped down from the river that flowed through the village. Although many people would shower via the taps, swimming in the cool river and pools, like the one I described in the opening vignette that flowed past my house, was a favorite form of enjoyment while bathing or washing clothes.

Beth and Leslie took pictures of themselves at a pool outside their village (Image 6.4). They said it was a cool pool for swimming, bathing, and washing clothes. They said that they went there every weekend to bathe before coming back to the village for church. It was also a place they went to during Easter, a time filled with community events and celebrations. I will explain the significance of mentioning Easter in this description later in this chapter.



Image 6.4 Fresh, Clean Pool, Photo by Beth, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

Example 6.2: Fresh rivers

B: Hem um wanfa **pool** lo antap hom blo mifa lo [village]⁹⁴ hem nao lo dea. Mifa tekem
*This is um one **pool** above our home in [village] that is what's there. We took it*

antap lo midol bus. Den **why** hem impoten lo mi bikos **pool**
*high in the middle of the bush. Then **why** it is important to me because **pool***

everitaem mifa staka pikini save go swim lo hem kaen lo **Easter** mifa go suim an ple. An
*all the time lots of us kids can go swim there like at **Easter** we go swim and play. And*

den **even** mifa save go everi Sande afta mifa ple gem o ple volibol lo hom.
*then **even** we can go every Sunday after we play games or play volleyball at home.*

RH: Ok. Wata lo dea hem kol fo suim? (BF chuckles) Hem **fresh**?
*Ok. Water there is cool for swim? (BF chuckles). It's **fresh**?*

⁹⁴ Unless necessary for understanding the context, I removed the names of villages to protect the identities of students.

B: Hem **fresh** hem naes. Den wata **pool** ia hem klin tu.
*It's **fresh**. It's nice. Then water **pool** is clean too.*

One of the reasons Beth and her friends liked this pool was because it was a cool, clean place to swim, wash, and have fun. Unfortunately, in some places, like a village where some of the students were from, the water source was also used as a toilet, contaminating the water source for those further down river. Multiple students mentioned the contaminated waterfall that flowed into the sea (Image 6.5).



Image 6.5 Contaminated waterfall, Photo by Gabi, Form 5 student Jejevo CHS

When Gabi described this waterfall in our interview, she mentioned both the beauty and the contamination. “Dis watafol if yu go lo dea hem barava naes **beautiful** an lo dea fil **breeze**

kol olsem. Bat wanfa rabis samting lo dea. Olta usim disfala watafol ia fo toalet.” (*This is a waterfall if you go there it looks really nice and **beautiful** and you can feel the cool **breeze** there. But one rubbish/bad thing there. They use this waterfall for a toilet.*) When I mentioned it looked like a nice waterfall, Lusi responded, “yeah hem luk naes bat samting rong nao pipol spoelem nao” (*yeah it looks nice, but something wrong the people have spoiled it*). When I said I was sorry that people could not swim there because it looked nice, they both agreed.

The waterfall came up in a conversation with Josef when he was discussing a photograph that he took of children playing near a stream. He took the picture of a stream to show a place where he used to play as a kid and where he liked to go sit now because it had a nice view of the sea. When I asked if they could swim in the stream, I learned that this stream was part of the water that was “spoiled,” which Josef described as misuse.

EXAMPLE 6.3 “Misusing Water” (00:33:00)

RH: yufala save suim lo **stream** o nomoa?
*Can you swim in the **stream** or no?*

JS: um mifala olsem mifala lo hom mifa misusim nao disfala ota **streams**.
*Um we like this us at home we misuse this, all the **streams**.*

[skipping details where JS Describes where the waterfall is and how they don’t have good sanitation such as many toilets.]

JS: Ota **ancestors** blo mifa nao olsem
*Our **ancestors** were the same*
[WD: **Started from the bottom**

JS: **started from** botom go kasem lo mifala. Mi no save.
***Started from** bottom and continue to us. I don’t know.*

This contamination of a natural resource alongside a place that people enjoy for fun and

nourishment almost seems contradictory. Josef took the picture of the stream to remember a place he enjoyed playing as a child, yet at the same time it was “spoiled” water where they could not swim. When I asked Josef why they misused their water, at first he said he did not know, and then he said it was because they did not have good sanitation or toilets. Josef and Wade both suggested that this practice of misusing the streams had been passed down from Josef’s ancestors. Josef then went on to describe how “rich” his village was in water – they have four streams flowing through their village – but according to Josef they “spoiled” all of them.

I noticed this contradictory connection to natural resources as a place people valued but also misused many times. For many people it almost seemed like there was an attitude of abundance – we have so much it does not matter if we misuse some. At the same time, these young people expressed a sense of regret and lack of agency to change this contamination and destruction. People in the community would comment on how important something was but did not necessarily change their practices to take care of it. There was much advocacy being done by the government and outside organizations to preserve the reefs, especially the fish and turtles, from overfishing. People knew the laws, but when they needed fish to eat or sell or a turtle for a special ceremony, these laws were often disregarded. Another example of this was seen in the way rivers, oceans, and streets throughout the Solomons were littered with trash. One of the reasons the students at Jejevo CHS took pictures of white sand beaches elsewhere on the island (as described below) was because they described them as clean and beautiful, likely in contrast to the beaches around Buala that were littered with trash and beer cans.

People took responsibility for the land their house was on, keeping it beautiful by maintaining plants and flowers and picking up trash, which young people were proud to show off in photos, such as the example of the garden by Josef’s house (Image 6.2). Each week different

groups from Buala village took turns cleaning, landscaping, and maintaining the church, cemetery, and nearby areas. Similarly, the school would have a workday once a week, and more frequently for student punishment, where students picked up litter, cut the grass, and maintained the grounds. However, it was the areas that did not belong to one person or family and were used by many people, such as town grounds, beaches, and rivers, that were contaminated by litter and waste.⁹⁵

These comments from students seem to reflect contrasting narratives and ways of life – the tension between local and Western ways of life. Despite the seeming disregard for parts of the environment by the wider community, young people identified the land and waterways as important in their lives, even as they grappled with the misuse of the environment around them. Since there was little structural development in rural areas, few people had septic tanks or pit toilets to treat sewage. As a result, rivers and sections of beaches were common places for people to relieve themselves since the waste could be “washed away.” Likewise, since there were no waste management companies to dispose of trash, people buried it, burned it, or dropped it into the deep sea outside the reef. However, in school these young people were learning about care for the environment, proper hygiene, and the ways other countries managed their resources. So as Josef’s comments reflect there was a tension between lament that they were not caring for their environment and convenience of what they had always done.

In the Isabel Provincial Youth Forum (IPYF) Facebook group there have been many recent discussions about the environmental damage occurring from logging and mining elsewhere on Isabel. Since these projects were not happening near Maringe lagoon, none of the students took pictures of them. However, the discussions in the IPYF forum were like the

⁹⁵ This lack of care and litter, especially in Honiara, is probably connected to disputes over land ownership and larger development issues, which I do not have space to delve into.

conversations I had with students at Jejevo CHS – young people were recognizing the environmental damage occurring and wanted to change it but felt helpless because decisions to allow mining or logging fell to traditional landowners, chiefs, and the government, roles that youth were not yet able to fill. Despite the misuse of some of the resources in Isabel, the pictures taken by the students in Isabel reflected a romanticizing of home like the way residents of Honiara remembered home – a longing for places that were clean, peaceful, and free, even if these places never truly existed in this ideal state.

Home was a place people long to go because of the access to resources and ancestral connections to land. Most people in Honiara did not have access to land for planting crops or to fresh water for swimming and bathing because they did not own the land where they lives. Three students in Honiara took pictures of their “*sup sup gaden*” (backyard produce gardens), small gardens and fruit trees that grow a few things to eat such as leafy greens, fruit, or vegetables. However, most people bought the food they needed each day at the Honiara Central Market. Honiara residents also relied on rain tanks or city water for washing, drinking, and bathing. Because Honiara was drier than most parts of the Solomons and the city water was expensive, fresh water could be scarce. Additionally, many of the rivers around Honiara have been spoiled by logging upstream making them unsafe for drinking. Key to the longing for home expressed by so many Honiara residents is the fact that Honiara was expensive and lacked the natural resources of the provinces. My interlocutors considered home to be a place where everything was “free” – they could pick fruit off trees, swim in rivers, and walk wherever they needed to go. Although Honiara residents might not pay cash for food and water when at home, eating the food produced by the labor of rural kin embedded Honiara residents in social expectations of reciprocity. For those with paid jobs, the costs came at different times and were paid through

social expectations, such as sending financial support to kin for school fees, sending store bought supplies home, and hosting relatives when they came to town.

6.2.2 Seas and beaches for sustenance, play, and peace



CT0411

CT0413

CT0414

Image 6.6 Fera Island and Small Islands, Photos by Cami, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

Example 6.4: Photo descriptions from Cami's worksheet

CT0411: "It is important to us because sometimes we go to Fera to have a picnic trip, and also we enjoy our picnic because we have some games like water pool ect..⁹⁶"

CT0413: "It is important because we travel around the island and I was very happy to travel with my friends."

CT0414: "This island is important to us because we can go fishing near that island. Also some people go diving for some shells to earn their money."

The descriptions in Example 6.4 written by Cami about Fera Island, two and a half miles across the lagoon from Buala, each included a different element of why the islands were

⁹⁶ When directly quoting the descriptions written on worksheets by students, I chose to keep their spellings and sentence structure instead of polishing the English.

important to young people. The first two photo descriptions (CT0411 & CT0413) emphasized the social importance of the island, a place where families went for picnics and fun. CT0414 described the importance of the islands for food and income. Cami also included other pictures of these islands describing on her worksheet the fish, eggs, and shells they found to eat and sell, which was a main source of income and sustenance for many families in Maringe lagoon. Since these islands were so small, they did not have the same boundaries established by landowning groups to protect the resources (personal communication Geoffrey White July 2024). The progression of descriptions by Cami showed the different ways that the environment was important for youth. Even if they were collecting shells or fishing to provide for their families, they were enjoying time with friends and family, eating together, and swimming in the sea. Most people paid for petrol to take an outboard motor boat across Maringe Lagoon, but since they could also take a dugout canoe across the lagoon, the resources of the sea were essentially free and a key part of the livelihoods of coastal Isabellians.

In the Maringe area, the oceans and nearby islands were a main source of sustenance, but they were also a place for fun and community. One of the reasons families enjoyed picnics on the islands was that they were clean with white sandy beaches. Beth described the seaside, particularly white sandy beaches, as a place where there was fresh air, they could play in the sand, swim in the sea, and enjoy themselves. When discussing why their group put four pictures of islands together, Hope (H) and Beth (B) highlighted how they were clean places for picnics with white sand and reefs.

Example 6.5: Island picnics

RH: so whynao aelan impoten lo yufa?
So why is the island important to you all?

(all laugh)

H: bikos hem klia ples. save go **picnic** lo hem olsem
*Because it is a clear place. You can go **picnic** there and such*

RH: whynao yu laek fo **picnic**?
*Why do you like to **picnic**?*

H: olsem garem naes san olsem waet san ste lo hem
It has nice sand such as white sand is there

B: hem klia an den hem **breezy view**
*It is clear and it is a **breezy view***

S: taem Kriskas samfala famili save go **picnic** lo hem
*When it is Christmas some families have **picnics** there*

Similarly, Hope wrote on her worksheet describing the picture of the sand beach in Sosoilo⁹⁷ (Image 6.7) that it was important because “Sosoilo sand beach is a very clean sand beach and clean place.” The contradiction of beauty and contamination is evident again. In Buala and Jejevo area where many of the students lived, there was a wharf and muddy coastline with dark sand that was often littered with beer cans and trash. Even Fera Island, which had white sandy beaches and was a regular destination for family picnics, was often covered in beer cans. Some individuals tried to keep the areas clean, but since they were communal and used by everyone, there was less individual care for the land. Contrastingly, the beach in Sosoilo had white sand and was maintained by the Melanesian brotherhood, who kept it clean. The young people who traveled to Sosoilo went for a short visit to perform at a Saint Day celebration (described in Section 5.3.3 below). This trip was different than other islands described as picnic areas since it was a place young people did not regularly go to, making this beach even more

⁹⁷ Sosoilo was the area where the Melanesian brothers lived together down the island west of Buala. The Melanesian brothers are a ministry of the Anglican church explained later in this chapter.

special and unique for the students.



Image 6.7 White Sand Beach at Sosoilo, Photo by Hope, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

The islands and ocean were also important to youth because the trips there were filled with fond memories and gave students a sense of peace. Because it cost money for the fuel to get to the island and the food they consumed while there, most families could not afford trips to the islands regularly. They went to the islands for special occasions such as celebrating birthdays and holidays. In these narratives, the islands were also an important place of community where families shared food, had fun, and made memories together. Everyone talked about how relaxed they felt on the islands and how they enjoyed themselves. These islands have long been a kind of getaway for people of Maringe lagoon (Geoffery White, personal communication July 2024).

Looking out at the islands and feeling the fresh wind was often described as a way to clear one's mind. When discussing Image 6.8, Seth's photo taken from the veranda of his house looking out at the sea, Seth described the nice view and fresh wind that came. When Wade (W) asked further questions, Seth (ST) said it was also a place to clear his mind from his troubles.



Image 6.8 Views from the Verandah, Photo by Seth, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

Example 6.6: Views and fresh air

ST: Why hem impoten lo mi bikos **view** blo hem naes. Hem naes lo mi. Bikos yu luk
*Why it is important to me because its **view** is nice. It is nice for me. Because you can look*

*daon luk go lo evri ples lukim ota aelan.
down and look at every place, every island.*

[Skipping lines Seth describes watching boats and planes go passed and a place where visitors

come sit].

Den ota win ota fres win kam lo haos an kam kasem lo mifala. Hem nao risen impoten.
Then all the wind all the fresh wind comes to the house and reaches us. This is the reason it is important.

[Skipping lines where ST and W discuss the location of the view of the photo and how close it is to school]

W: Olsem exampol. Yu kaen olsem sorry yeah? (someone agree ee). Olsem yu kaen olsem
One example. You are something like sorry, yeah? (someone agrees). You are something
little bit lonely. Taem yu sitdaon seleva lo dea olsem. Taem yu sitdaon den yu lukluk go
*like a **little bit lonely**? When you sit down by yourself there, when you sit down and look*
lo ota si, aelan, ota tri olsem lo dea. Olsem taem yu sitdaon olsem **lonely** olsem ota
*at the sea, the islands, the trees and such there. When you sit down like that **lonely** all*
olsem samting bae wokim yu fil hapi baek tu?
these things will make you feel happy again?

ST: yeah (something can't understand) maen kam up, kam baek moa
Yeah (...) mind improves, comes back more.

Looking out at the beauty of nature helped youth feel relaxed and peaceful. The enjoyment of picnics at the beach and the beauty of the seaside show that land provided more than just physical nourishment. The environment provided nourishment of one's inner being. The students' descriptions of the islands and sea show how the islands nourished their bodies through the food they ate and their hearts through fun times with family and friends. These times with family also reinforced the importance of relationships with kin, embedding the young people in the important social network of relationships they would rely on as they matured. The ancestral and emotional connections to the land and aquatic environment through memories, relationships, and resources consumed, was why home had such a strong connection for Solomon Islanders no matter where they lived.

Some of the photos taken in Honiara identified similar themes. One girl who lived

outside the main part of town took a picture of the ocean and river and talked about the importance of fishing there and swimming for fun. However, most of the beaches surrounding Honiara were dirty from the port so to access clean swimming areas residents had to drive outside of town and pay an entrance fee to beaches,⁹⁸ which meant most people could not enjoy the ocean as they did in the provinces. This lack of access made the nostalgia for home even stronger. Julie took a picture in Honiara looking out at the sea and islands and described it as giving her peace and reminding her of home (see Image 5.2 in Chapter 5).

Both urban and rural residents throughout the Solomons relied on the land and sea for physical and emotional nourishment. However, those who lived in the provinces had greater access to these resources, which was why a greater number of students in Isabel took pictures of the land and waterways around them. For example, in Honiara two young women took pictures of the view of the sea, reflecting on how it brought them peace, and one took a picture of the beach where the Sikaianan community had a cultural village, but only one young woman took a picture of a river and the sea, describing the resources it provided. Additionally, two young women and one young man took pictures of the plants their family grew for food. Comparatively, in Isabel ten out of thirteen people took pictures of a river, island, sea, or garden, describing the resources this part of the environment provided for their family. Most of these students also commented that the islands, beaches, and waterways were places of beauty, rest, and fun.

Much of the nostalgia for home experienced by Honiara residents was for the holidays

⁹⁸ During my residence in 2018-2019, landowning groups had organized and restricted access to beaches through charging fees based on the size of vehicle or number of people in the group. In exchange these groups set up tables and benches made of local materials and kept the beach “clean.” Some of the popular dive sites also provided fresh water to rinse gear. They asked everyone who came to pick up their trash, but not everyone followed this rule. Even with the access fees, beaches were enjoyed by both Solomon Islanders and expatriates. This is another example of how “free” resources are being monetized as capitalistic ideals spread and the cost of living continues to increase.

spent swimming in the ocean and rivers and the “free” food that was all around. The picnics on the islands, fishing in the sea, and swimming in the rivers which the Isabel youth described as important was what Honiara youth longed for. These students were also unfettered by the family obligations that would come once they were older and were unfamiliar with the hard labor put in by rural residents, which made home seem like a free holiday. As I explain in Chapter 7, these family relationships worked as a type of social security net for young people as they pursued schooling and moved away from home, providing them with physical and emotional support.

6.3 Community and church: places of celebration and belonging

In addition to the abundance of natural resources, a key part of what made Isabel home was the celebrations and community. These celebrations and community interactions were part of what Honiara residents missed about home. Church was a place for prayer but also a place for community celebration and a place where kastom practices were maintained through dance, drama, and song. While I was in Buala, I celebrated many community and church events: Saints’ Days, weddings, holy days, burials, and baptisms, to name a few. Many of these community events were centered around church celebrations. They always included food and most of them included dance and storytelling. In his description of Isabel feasts, Geoffrey White (1991, 41) suggests that “feasting constitutes identities and relations” by working together as a community to prepare the feast and through the “speeches, songs and other performances” given during the celebration. These feasts also embed individuals in social relationships through the exchange and sharing of food and resources (Whiteley 2017). The photos taken by the youth highlight the importance of these community relationships and celebrations. They show how community

provides a physical connection to home as well as emotional connection and support that shapes their identity.

The main church throughout Isabel is the Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM), originally the Melanesian Mission. There are a few other denominations present on the island, but most of the island belongs to the Church of Melanesia, creating a unique alignment of religious and island identities.⁹⁹ As such, much of daily life still centers around the cycles of the Anglican church. There is a prayer service every morning and evening that is attended by a few people. Those who do not attend “*stap kwaet lo haos*” (stay quietly at their house and avoid getting in trouble) during those times. Sunday Holy Communion services are attended widely by much of the community, though many youth and adults who consider themselves “backsliders,” or people who are not living the way the church wants, once again “*stap kwaet lo haos.*” Saints’ Days, holy days, and other celebrations of historical events (like the coming of Christianity) are marked with a Holy Communion service attended by many people and then followed by feasting and dancing that everyone in the community joins. Although the prayer and communion elements of these celebrations are important, the feast, dancing, and celebrations that followed are what everyone looked forward to. These are the events where the community and families come together, where youth learn and perform *kastom* dances, and where history and stories are told through speeches and drama. Church is central to community life and provides support through connections to God and connections to others, which is manifested in celebrations.

⁹⁹ For more on the history of the Anglican church in Isabel see Chapter 2.

6.3.1 Connections to God



Image 6.9 Buala Church Decorated for Easter, Photo by Jesi, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

Example 6.7: Church for worshipping God

JE: Church hem save kontrolem laef fo yumi ota pipol fo yumi falom fo yumi falom nao
Church can control the lives of us all the people for us to follow for us to follow

rod blo God fo yumi go lo ples blo hem. Bat sapos no garem ani church bae yumi had fo
God's road for us to go to his place. But if we don't have any church it will be hard for us

go lo ples blo God. Impoten blo church nao (fades off)
to go to God's place. The importance of the church is (fades off)

[She fades off because the girls in her group start laughing at and discussing another photo. I'm skipping some lines where the girls briefly discuss something in Cheke Holo and then ask if I am hot before Julie continues.]

JE: yumi wosipim God evride. Hem nao impoten blo church.
We worship God everyday. Now that's the importance of the church.

Many students emphasized how important God and prayer were in their lives. In this discussion (Example 6.7) about Image 6.9, Jesi was highlighting the importance of being close to God for direction in life and to go to God's place after death. She saw church as the place where she could worship and be close to God. Jesi took three pictures of the celebrations at Easter, which show the connections between church, community, and celebration. This one emphasizes the importance of following God. The other two photos I will highlight in the sections to come.



Image 6.10 Buala Church, Photo by Wade, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

Wade had similar remarks that highlighted the importance of God in his life. Wade also took a picture of the Buala church (Image 6.10) and in our interview described that church was important for Christians both as a place for celebration of big events, but also as a place to go

every day for prayer. When describing the importance of the church he said:

Example 6.8: Church a place for prayer and celebration

W: Ples wea mifa save go pre pre an ste presim God blo mifala
It is the place where can go and pray a lot and sit and praise our God

an lukhae. Nao church. An den save presim hem. Den mifa save **go give** lo hem
and worship. That's church. And then we can praise him. Then we can go give to him

all our life. Hem nao church. And den ples wea bae mifa save selebretem Krismas.
All our life. That's the church. And then it's a place where we can celebrate Christmas.

Mifa save everi bik de mifala Kristins, Gud Fraede, Ista de, Jisas hem go an
We can every big day for us Christians, Good Friday, Easter day, Jesus goes and

taem Jisas hem dae. Church impoten tumas lo laef blo mi fo mi go an attendem evride
when Jesus died. Church is very important in my life for me to go and attend every day.

[skipping a few lines where he discusses how he feels the Holy Spirit during church services]

W: And den mi save ask taem go lo **children church** tu mi save askem God fo helpem mi lo
And then I can ask when I go to children's church¹⁰⁰ I can ask God to help me with
ota stadi blo mi fo **everything** nao. And den mi save go tenk yu lo hem fo
all my studies, for everything. And then I can say thank you to him for

everything olsem san, ren, **everything** givem, ota **resources** an hem tu holem laef blo
everything like the sun, rain, everything given, all the resources and he too holds my life

mi olowe kasem tude. Hem insaet lo bele blo mi.
all the way until today. He is inside my belly (soul/spirit).

For Wade, church was important because it was a place where he connected with God.

He said that when he went to prayer and really connected with the prayers, he felt God's presence inside him. He asked God for help, especially with exams, and thanked God for

¹⁰⁰ Children's church is another name for Sunday school. At the Anglican church in Buala, Sunday school happened Sunday afternoons. It was open to any school aged young person but was mostly attended by elementary age students and their older siblings. During this time, they would read Scripture passages, have a short lesson, sing songs, and prepare dances for upcoming events.

everything in his life. Later in our interview, Wade talked about how he had been involved with “influences” (which usually implied drinking and smoking), but he had changed his life and part of that was because of church and his family support.

Although not every youth took pictures of the church, many echoed the importance of prayer and God in their lives. When I asked one group of the Isabel girls during the photo elicitation what the most important thing was in their lives, they immediately said that prayer was the most important. They then added, “prea had, waka had, stadi had” (*prayer hard/with effort, work hard/with effort, study hard/with effort*) so that they could do well in school and find a good job. For both Jesi and Wade, church was important for prayer, but their pictures revealed additional reasons church was important – for community and celebrations, which I expand on in the next two sections.

6.3.2 Community connections

Example 6.9: Mothers’ Union

G: Diswan [village] Mothers’ union. Olsem hem impoten tumas bikos ota save **help** taem
*This is [village] Mothers’ union. It is very important because they can **help** when*

*olta prea. Lo prea lo olta **helpful**. Prea helpem olketa **sick person**, helpem olketa*
*praying. Their prayers are **helpful**. Prayer helps all the **sick person**, helps all the*

***rich and poor**, helpem olketa hu waka insaet lo **ship**. Olta waka blo olketa hem fo*
***rich and poor**, helps all who work on **ships**. Their work is*

helpem saet lo prayers.
to help by praying



Image 6.11 Mothers' Union members in uniform, Photo by Gabi, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

In this description, Gabi explained the role of Mothers' Union as leaders in the community and supporting people through prayer. Mothers' Union is a ministry of the Anglican church for mothers and women of mothering age who regularly pray for all the mothers and families in the community and are actively involved in community engagement. Members of Mothers' Union were mentioned several times by students as supporting the community through prayer and resources. For example, Heather took a picture of the computer she used at the Mothers' Union office to help with schoolwork. She also took a picture of a young boy holding a water bottle at the Mothers' Union office, explaining that she could get clean water there to drink.

Another important church ministry is the Companions, a ministry of the Anglican church

that prays for the Melanesian Brotherhood¹⁰¹ and visits community members. In Buala, members of the Companions visited the sick and elderly, brought them food, prayed for them, and sang songs. In this sense, the Companions were an important part of the social support network in the community. Leslie and Beth were both members of the Companions in their villages. They took pictures of their Companions groups when they traveled to other villages to perform dances on Saints' Days (See Image 6.12 as an example). This opportunity to travel to different communities was another benefit of being a part of a church ministry.



Image 6.12 Beth's mother and aunt in Companions uniform for a Saint's Day celebration, Photo by Beth, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

¹⁰¹ The Melanesian Brotherhood (i.e. Brothers) are men who have committed a few years of their life to celibacy and church ministry. The Melanesian Mission founded the organization to establish an Indigenous group of missionaries (Whiteley 2015, 31). See Macdonald-Milne's (2003) book *The True Way of Service* for a history of the Melanesian brotherhood.

The photos these students took of church ministries showed how the church was central in supporting members of the nearby community both with physical needs, like access to resources, and spiritual needs by praying for the community. Additionally, church ministries fostered community and provided opportunities for young people to enjoy celebrations and perform kastom dances, which emphasized the important connections between church, community, and kastom.



Image 6.13 Family meal at Easter, Photo by Jesi Form 5, Jejevo CHS

Community connections and relationships through the church was another aspect highlighted in the pictures taken by Jesi. Jesi took a picture of the family meal that occurred on Easter evening (Image 6.13). People from the village were paired up with another family to share

food and eat together. The goal was to build new connections between family groups across the village. The third church-related picture Jesi took that night was a picture of Cami, with another girl and boy (Image 6.14). Jesi wrote on her worksheet that they were important because “they were best friend ever.” During our photo elicitation, the girls talked about how celebrations were a chance to make new friends, eat together, and have fun.



Image 6.14 Best friends during dancing at Easter meal, Photo by Jesi, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

Through the two photos discussed here and the one at the beginning of this section, Jesi showcased three important elements of church: God, community, and celebrations. During prayer, young people connected to God. Through church ministries and church events, young people built relationships with one another, connected to the community, and engaged with

kastom practices, which I expand on in the next section. Since nearly all of Isabel belongs to the Anglican Church of Melanesia, this shows the distinctly Isabellian integration of church, community, and kastom. This integration is exemplified by two paramount chiefs who have also been bishops in the church and the interworking of the “tripod” leaders¹⁰² – Isabel Provincial Government, Anglican Church of Melanesia, and Isabel Council of Chiefs – who work together to preserve cultural practices (White 1991; 2015). The next section shows how celebrations and the kastom practices fundamental to them build on community connections to ground youth in their homes and form their identity.

6.3.3 Celebrations to remember kastom

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, church celebrations were looked forward to by the whole community and something people in Honiara reminisced about. The importance of these celebrations for the community was identified in the photos youth took but the significance only became apparent through the elaboration by students. Beth took a picture of a stone in the sea (Image 6.15), but the importance of it for her was not just the swimming, but that she swam, paddled, and played there at Easter.¹⁰³ Similarly, Beth’s picture of the natural pool for swimming (Image 6.2) was important to her not only because of the clean water, but because it was a place she went to swim during Easter with the other young people in her village. Easter was one of the holy days where people from the village came together for feasting, speeches, and entertainment, such as kastom dances.

¹⁰² I briefly introduce the tripod in Chapter 2 but see White 1991 and 2015 for a more expansive discussion.

¹⁰³ In personal communication with Geoffrey White he notes that this stone figures in local legends and has a name, giving it an even deeper kastom meaning. However, Beth did not highlight this to me in our conversation.



Image 6.15 Stone for swimming and paddle races, Picture by Beth, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

Example 6.10: Photo description for Image 6.15 on Beth's worksheet:

Who/what is in the photo?

“A stone that we can go and have a swim at”

Why is this important to you?

“Because that stone we can play and swim even during easter celebration we can also have a paddle race and who's person can manage to reach that stone so that always remind me that kind of games that we had every easter seasons.”

Another important time of community celebration was Saints' Days for each of the local churches. These days celebrate the Christian Saint that the church is named after. White (2015, 82) suggests that these celebrations developed from the traditional *diklo* feasts, where chiefs from one area invited chiefs and their kin from another area to a feast which entailed “days of feasting, speechmaking, and entertainment.” After the consolidation of villages around the

church, this style of feasting shifted to “church days” celebrations and eventually to larger festivals (White 1991; 2015). Many students took pictures with friends at different Saints’ Day celebrations.



Image 6.16 Photos taken by Form 5 students of their church groups at various Saints’ Day celebrations, Photo by author

The photos in Image 6.16 were grouped together by Leslie, Hope, Beth, and Selah during their photo elicitation because they were all photos of church groups. Leslie took a picture with members of her Sunday school group (in purple shirts) when they traveled to a nearby village to

perform *kastom* dances and *akson* (action) choruses¹⁰⁴ for the Saint's Day celebration. She also took pictures of members of her Companions group (in blue shirts) when they traveled together to a different Saint's Day celebration. Making matching "uniform" shirts for special events as seen in these photos was common across the Solomons. The other pictures were from when Hope and Lusi traveled together to Sosoilo for the Saint's Day celebration of the Melanesian brothers. At all these events, the church groups attended a prayer service, ate food, and performed *kastom* dances and *akson* choruses. The students told me that they took pictures of these events to remember the experience and the dances they performed.

These pictures show the significance of community, church, *kastom*, and celebration since all of this is wrapped into Saints' Day celebrations. At St. Paul's Saint's Day celebration in Buala, people were invited from outside the local church to perform, bringing together the wider community for the celebration. Hope's youth group was one of the groups invited to perform at the St. Paul's day celebration. Hope took a picture of herself and some friends dressed in *kastom* clothes in front of Buala church (Image 6.17). They wore dyed grass skirts, banana leaf tops, strings of shells across their bodies, and two girls wore head pieces made of a natural material, and two wore sashes of grass across their tops. They each held a dancing stick that appears to be made of fabric or plastic.¹⁰⁵ Hope said she took the picture because it was important to wear *kastom* clothes when dancing and show what *kastom* clothes looked like. It is important to note that this picture was taken before we began the photo project since Buala's Saint Day celebration was in January. Hope took the time to find the photo and included it with the photos she wanted

¹⁰⁴ As mentioned previously, *akson* choruses are religious songs usually sung in the local language, but sometimes English, performed with hand motions and simple dance steps. They are common throughout Solomon Islands.

¹⁰⁵ Traditionally, the skirts were made from grass, and the dancing sticks were made from bird feathers, but because these materials were harder to preserve, many performances used plastic materials to make replicas of traditional dance items.

me to print since she thought it was important to show the kastom clothes of Isabel.

Before a holy day celebration or community festival, the whole community spent weeks preparing food,¹⁰⁶ learning dances, designing costumes, decorating, and organizing for these events. Although not everyone participated in the preparations, everyone in the community came together to watch the performances and eat the food. While I was living in Isabel, it seemed like there was an event almost every month either in Buala or a nearby village where people were invited to perform kastom dances, sing songs, or prepare kastom foods. These events mostly centered around the church such as celebrations marking the coming of Christianity, ordinations, the opening and closing of Sunday school, holy days like Easter, and weddings. The hours and money spent working on these events were evidence of the intertwining of kastom and religion and the importance of relationships for people in Isabel. They also highlighted the importance of land and subsistence labor in maintaining relationships.

When I asked the youth why it was important to know kastom dances most said it was important to know or remember the kastom practices from before. When describing why she included Image 6.17 in our photo elicitation, Hope (H) said:

Example 6.11: Kastom of Isabel

H: Mifa tekem piksa lo Buala church lo fran. Whynao piksa impoten bikos hem som kastom blo Isabel
We took the picture at Buala church in front. Why the picture is important is it shows the kastom of Isabel.

[skipping a few lines]

RH: whynao diswan impoten fo som kastom?
Why is it important to show kastom?

¹⁰⁶ They actually spent months in preparation, planting gardens that would ripen at the proper time and tending to pigs for the sole purpose of contributing to the feast. However, the weeks leading up were especially busy harvesting the produce and preparing food, decorations, and performances.

H: Bikos hem wanfala kastom blo Isabel. **I mean if** kastom dans mas werem ting blo ota **traditional** blo Isabel.

*Because it is one kastom of Isabel. **I mean if** you do kastom dance, you must wear the **traditional** things of Isabel.*



Image 6.17 “Custom girls at Buala Church”, Photo by Hope, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

After grouping their photos together based on themes, the image of Hope and her friends in kastom clothes (Image 6.17) was by itself. I asked the girls why this picture was by itself, and they said because it was the only one showing “traditional kastom blo Isabel” and they wanted to show the culture and kastom dance. When I followed up by asking why it was important for them to know how to dance, Hope said, “Mekem mifa save hao nao kalsa blo yumi lo Isabel

olsem. Hemi **have to** save taem yu smol an **when** mi **big**.” (*It makes us know what our culture of Isabel is. You **have to** know this when you are small and **when** I am **big**.*) In this narrative, they were also identifying kastom dress as an island-wide Isabel identity. There were slight variations to kastom dress throughout Isabel, such as using tapa cloth instead of grass skirts. However, the identification of an island-wide kastom identity reflected the parts of their costumes and dance that have become iconic to Isabel and were important for claiming an ethnic Isabellian identity in multiethnic urban areas, as I explained in the previous chapter.

The government and church leaders were both committed to encouraging kastom practices among young people. In interviews, community leaders told me that young people no longer knew how to make kastom items out of natural materials and were forgetting traditional kastom practices such as clan interrelationships and feasts for special events. At the three-day youth workshop I attended in a village near Buala co-sponsored by the Anglican diocese of Ysabel (ACOM) and Isabel Provincial Government (IPG), local chiefs came and described the clan lineages and romantic relationships that were considered taboo. Each evening of the workshop was devoted to a different kind of performance. One night was kastom dance, one night was *akson* choruses, and one night was dramas that included kastom and Biblical themes. Some of the dramas modeled kastom feasts that were not being practiced as often, such as feasts for reconciliation and saying “thank you” to one’s parents. At first the answer from Hope about kastom being important because “you have to know it” might seem like a non-answer; however, it reflected the experiences of young people who regularly learned about kastom and history at church and government events. It also signified the value of history and kastom for establishing an identity unique to Isabel. White (1991, 3) writes in his book on Isabel history, “Histories told and remembered by those who inherit them are discourses of identity; just as identity is

inevitably a discourse of history.” From a young age, youth are taught the history and kastom traditions of their ancestors because it is key to their identity as Isabellians.

6.3.4 Festivals to preserve kastom

Kastom can encompass the cultural practices of a group, such as their rituals, arts, and dress, as well as their religious, political, and social structures and processes (Keesing 1989; White 1993). For this reason, kastom is essential to the identity, practices, and cultural heritage of Solomon Islanders. Kastom has a long history in Melanesia, developing from Indigenous ideas that are distinctly Melanesian (Keesing 1982). Anthropologists working in Melanesia first took notice of these self-conscious assertions of cultural identity around the time these countries were gaining their independence. Political empowerment opened opportunities for local assertions of identity that were useful in the multiethnic context of modernity and national unity (Tonkinson 1982). Similarly, in Solomon Islands and particularly Isabel, the importance of keeping kastom is emphasized by the national and provincial governments, as well as religious and community leaders. As I expressed in the previous chapter, kastom practices are a unique marker of an ethnic island-based identity throughout Solomon Islands.

Cultural performances have a long history in Isabel. Dramas are regularly performed to remember history, key events, and cultural practices (White 1991). During my time in Isabel as part of celebrations, I observed dramas about the coming of Christianity, the beginning of Mothers’ Union, traditional feasts, and current social commentary. Embedded in these dramas was a recounting of kastom practices. These dramas were usually performed for neighboring villages who came together for a Saint’s Day celebration, a workshop, or another similar event. July 2005 was the first island-wide cultural festival marking the twenty-first anniversary of

Isabel province. It was co-sponsored by the Church of Melanesia and the Council of Chiefs as a cultural celebration of Isabel province. White (2015, 80–82) suggests that it reflected elements of a “modern trade show” with food stalls, booths, and entertainment, but also served as a traditional feast, building relationships among chiefs across the island.

The more recent Kodili festival in Isabel and Grereo festival in Honiara put on by Isabellians reflected similar elements of this first cultural celebration. When discussing examples of kastom practices that were important to keep, the Kodili Festival and Grereo Festival often came up as examples of learning and preserving kastom. Both festivals brought together people from all the communities across Isabel to perform dances, showcase kastom clothing, and remember the history and kastom practices of Isabel. The first Kodili Festival, which was organized and sponsored by the Isabel Provincial Government, happened in Isabel province in 2016 and the second one occurred in June 2018, a few months before my fieldwork began. The 2018 theme was “Our living culture, our nature.”

The first Grereo Festival took place May 30 – June 3, 2019, in Honiara around the time of Isabel Second Appointed day (the day Isabel became a province). It was organized by the Isabel Provincial Youth Form, a Facebook group of mainly Honiara-based Isabellians but also people in Isabel and abroad. The festival was sponsored by the Isabel Provincial Government as well as successful Isabellian business leaders. It brought together groups of Isabellians who lived in Honiara to perform dances and showcase kastom clothing from their regions of Isabel. Although the event was Honiara-based, some people traveled from Isabel to Honiara to attend or perform at this event. I was able to attend this event, watch the performances, and listen to the speeches. The theme was “Preserving our identity embracing our heritage armed for the future.” At the festival, I chatted with many people who said the festival was important because it was a

great way to preserve the identity and culture of Isabel. The speeches also emphasized the importance of identity and unity both at the provincial and national level. The theme was submitted by a youth from Isabel as part of a competition organized by IPYF. In his summary of why he was suggesting this theme, the youth wrote:

The understanding that Isabel people are peace loving, communal minded, valuing our culture and traditions is well known around the country. These must be preserved because they are our identities. We inherit these values. Losing them means losing our inheritance. We must come to accept that we need to inherit them. Armed with these values we launch into the future. *Bikos* [because] if there is no foundation we can't be who we are today and where we are going to end up tomorrow. Isabel being a homogenous society is unique. We must get to where we want to be with a deep sense of value ingrained in each of us. (Reposted on the IPYF Facebook page, February 2, 2023).

This explanation highlighted the importance of knowing one's culture and traditions to preserve one's identity. He suggested that valuing peace, community, culture, and traditions was what prepared them for the future. These values were also what made Isabel unique, creating a powerful statement about the island-wide Isabellian identity in the larger Solomons context. My conversations with students at Jejevo CHS also identified these same elements as the important parts of life in Isabel.

In my conversation with Josef (JS) and Wade (W), they said that the important part of kastom was that it was kept and recognized, which is why the Kodili and Grereo festivals were so important. These were the big days when everyone came together to celebrate and remember the culture of Isabel.

Example 6.12: Kastom important to keep

RH: yutufala watnao yu ting **most** impoten pat of kastom or kalsa blo Isabel? Ting ting blo yu nomoa
*You two, what do you think is the **most** important part of kastom or culture of Isabel? Just*

your thinking.

JS: Lo saet lo kastom and kalsa blo mifala olsem hem nao olsem fo mifala kipim fo
For our kastom and culture, it is for us to keep and to

recognize baek nao samfala kastom an kalsa blo mifa hem nao risen apim disfala
***recognize** again some of the kastom and culture. This is the reason why they put on this*

Kodili Festival
Kodili Festival.

W: wanfa tu yu bae go kasem, Grereo
One too where you will go to, Grereo.

JS: den wanfala kastom tu blo mifala Grereo Festival ia olsem kastom blo mifala nao
One of our other kastom Grereo Festival, it is the kastom of us too.

W: hem olsem ota bik des fo mifa **celebrate and refer back** lo kastom blo mifa. Hem nao
tufala Grereo festival an Kodili
*They are the big days to **celebrate and refer back** to our kastom. This is these two Grereo
festival and Kodili*

[skipping a few lines where they discussed how they participated in the Kodili festival and
danced with a kastom axe]

W: Isabel **always** kipim kastom blo hem gud, mifala lo Isabel. Garem gud **organization**.
*Isabel **always** keeps our kastom well, us in Isabel. We have good **organization**.*

Wanfa nao Isabel **youth forum**. Hem nao apim Grereo festival
*One is the Isabel **youth forum**. They are the ones putting on Grereo festival*

There had been plans to continue organizing these festivals every other year, but the pandemic which began in 2020 stopped all preparations for the Kodili festival in Isabel. The Grereo Festival finally occurred again in June of 2021 with the theme of “Bridging our Diversity through Unity, Culture and Behavior.” Another Grereo Festival occurred in 2023 with the theme “Unified through cultural art where our identity lies.” As reflected in these festival themes submitted by young people each year, culture, unity, and identity continue to be key values promoted by IPYF and the young people organizing these events. This reflects the historical

discourse of kastom being important to Isabel culture, a discourse which now spans Isabel and Honiara.

In a post on Facebook after the first Grereo in 2019, the chairman of IPYF said that the Grereo festival was a “creation of the Youth of Isabel Province, who out of love and passion for their homeland, as well as being proud of simply being from Isabel Province, pulled off the biggest celebration of Isabel youth and people outside of their beloved Province.” This description showed the pride of an Isabellian identity and a connection to home. When describing the history of the Grereo Festival, he said the inspiration came from the Kodili festival in Isabel, which sought to promote “the values, culture, and interests of the people of the Province.” He said that IPYF created the Grereo Festival to promote these things among Isabellians who live in Honiara, which, once again, highlighted the importance of values and culture in Isabel, values that extend beyond the rural/urban divide.

Just as performances at school bring unity for the diverse population in Honiara, performances for other Isabellians encouraged unity and developed a sense of connection to one another. They embedded the performers and the observers in relationships with one another through a connection to home and identity. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, performing dance was a way to mark ethnic identity in a diverse city. However, the Grereo Festival, which happened in Honiara and brought together Isabellians from around the province, was more than just a way to claim an identity. The importance of the event was also in coming together as a community and maintaining together the kastom values of Isabel. For Isabellians, whether performing in Isabel Province or elsewhere, kastom performances are a way to develop connections to one another and maintain “historical connection” with one’s ancestors, which shapes identity and builds community. White (1991, 4) describes how “historical discourse locates both self and

community within a nexus of relations between past and present, self and other.” Although kastom dances do not recount histories in the same way speeches and dramas do (see White 1991), they still connect Isabellians to the past, present, and one another. The language of the songs, kastom dress, and dances performed often reflect historical events and traditions such as paddling canoes and fighting in battle. During Grereo, some of the groups introduced their dances with short stories to orient the observers to the historical relevance of the dance. Sometimes the language sung or kastom costumes worn connected people to a specific part of Isabel, but more importantly for young people, learning these dances ensured a continuity of traditions. It ensured that young people were learning kastom and history in a way with which they enjoyed engaging. As Wade and Josef stated, the important part of kastom was making sure that it was remembered, particularly by the community doing the remembering.

6.4 Changes to kastom and respect

This emphasis on kastom and culture through church and community events is important in a world that seems to be changing quickly. In a conversation with one of the local priests, Father Isaac, about youth in the Buala community he said that some people think that modernization has spoiled kastom and culture. People are “*seke*” (shocked, eyes-opened) to all the new things and try to become like white people. Multiple people, including youth, said that “copycat behavior” caused major problems among youth. They saw what their friends were doing or what people were doing on videos and copied them without thinking about the potential consequences. The youth admitted to me that sometimes “social life” or “influences,” like drinking and DJ style dancing at night clubs, distracted them from school and caused pregnancy among young girls. Overall, there was a sense that young people were changing because of the

influences introduced by globalization and a lack of respect for elders and parents who did not know how to discipline their children. These influences were the reason why church and community leaders organized competitions over holidays and youth rallies to teach young people kastom and to provide them with fun alternatives to drinking and dancing. Although changes were occurring, as I explain in this section, young people still thought kastom values were important, but they were combining them with modern influences.

6.4.1 Respecting elders and wearing trousers

Example 6.13: Kastom to show respect

Wade: Den wanfala samting impoten tumas tu lo mifala fo kipim nao kastom an kalsa.
One very important thing for us is to keep kastom and culture.

Mifa mas kipim. Kastom an kalsa blo mifa respekt. yeah? Lo kastom blo mifa olsem
We must keep it. Our kastom and culture is respect. Yeah? Our kastom is that

girls used to fo no werem trasis **but these days** ota stat fo werem trasis nao.
girls used to not wear trousers, but these days they are starting to wear trousers.

Many people expressed to me that kastom was changing. When I asked both young people and community leaders for examples of the ways kastom was changing, the main thing that came up was showing respect. Youth described showing respect in two ways: respecting elders and not wearing *trasis*¹⁰⁷ (trousers/shorts), as seen in the conversation with Wade (Example 6.13). In my conversation with Father Isaac, he said that the youth no longer respected or listened to their elders or parents. He blamed this disobedience on the human rights discourse taught by international NGOs, which he said admonished parents not to spank or slap their

¹⁰⁷ *Trasis* in Pijin can mean any style of pants, capris, or shorts; however, what most elders were critical of during my research was females wearing shorts above the knee. Males were allowed to wear shorts or pants without critique.

children but had not taught them alternative forms of discipline. As a result, the children did not listen. Other church leaders, elders, and parents similarly stated that child rights had caused children and youth to follow their own “*tingting*” (thinking/ideas) instead of listening to their elders and parents. These views revealed that the commentary about changing *kastom* and wearing trousers is not just about the clothing per se, but about the broader conflict over gender roles and the advance of modernity.

Throughout 2019, I had many conversations, especially with priests, but also other community leaders about “human rights” or “child rights.” They blamed young people’s bad behavior on the introduction of human rights because parents could no longer discipline their kids through spanking. Church leaders told parents to talk sternly with their children, but parents said that children did not listen. They said that young people thought human rights gave them the freedom to do whatever they wanted and therefore they no longer listened to their parents and elders. I asked my interlocutors where this conversation about child rights originated. Some said “child friendly” schooling had been recently introduced and told teachers they could not spank children. Others said the government had instituted “child rights” as part of their policy and given workshops on it, but the parents still did not understand. The Solomon Islands Government through the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs instituted the first National Children Policy in 2010 and a new version in 2023. These documents discuss protecting children from abuse among other things (Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs 2023). Wherever these conversations originated, they reflect concerns from community leaders that outside ideas were shaping and changing the youth.

This lack of control over the youth and the resulting disrespect was connected to the second way my interlocutors said *kastom* was changing – women and girls wearing trousers

despite elders admonishing them not to. Prior to missionaries introducing Western styles of clothing, females went topless and wore skirts made of grass, tapa, or other natural fibers. Since the introduction of Western styles of clothing, women have been expected to wear fabric skirts that reach to their knees or lower and cover their breasts. However, in the past ten years there has been a rapid shift of young women wearing shorter skirts, shorts, and pants. When I first went to Solomon Islands in 2009, women in their teens or older all wore skirts to their knees. When I returned to Honiara in 2019, it was common for young women to wear shorts of various lengths and even older women to wear capri style pants or shorts to their knees. This change had moved from Honiara into the provinces. It was very common to see young women wearing shorts around Buala, even though elders in the community told me this was not appropriate. They said it was considered acceptable for women to wear trousers in their home, when swimming, or when playing sports, but if they went out in public, to show respect they should wear a skirt or *lavalava* (wrap-around skirt) over the trousers. Long pants or capris were still looked down upon at certain times, like church, but were more acceptable for women to wear, especially in Honiara. For community elders and church leaders, this rapid shift to wearing trousers was a tangible example of the fears about young people disrespecting and forgetting kastom.

I tried to explore what was meant by respect through conversations with multiple community leaders and youth, such as the Isabel Youth Council President, a man in his fifties. The Youth Council, which is under the National Youth Congress, a part of the government, carried out the activities determined in the provincial youth policy. He said that the youth policy had two main objectives: educating youth about crime and reviving culture through festivals and youth rallies. When I asked him why these were important policy goals, he said that young people were forgetting their culture, and did not respect old people or others. They were

forgetting their culture because of their “Western life or modern life,” which he said was seen through women wearing trousers even though the chiefs told them not to. In nearly every conversation I had about kastom and respect whether with adults or youth, trousers were the main example of the way youth were changing and showed disrespect. However, this statement by the Youth Council President once again revealed that the lack of respect was about more than trousers themselves, it was about the changes brought by “Western” or “modern” life as he described it.

When women are admonished against wearing trousers, it is reflecting both Christian and kastom moral values. Cummings (2008, 134) writes about the “trouble with trousers” in Vanuatu. In Vanuatu, trousers “are considered inappropriate and foreign, both in terms of kastom and Christian sexual morality” and stigmatize a woman as being sexually available or opening them up to gossip about their sexuality. Women are admonished not to wear trousers to protect themselves from unwanted attention from men. Because trousers are seen as “being ‘modern’ rather than ‘traditional’ dress, foreign rather than indigenous,” when women wear trousers they are blamed for a loss of kastom (Cummings 2008, 134). As described in Chapter 1, Christianity and kastom have become interlinked in the Solomons and the church is one of the biggest proponents of kastom practices (Allen 2013, 17; McDougall and Kere 2011; Timmer 2008; White 1991). From the perspective of community leaders, a shift among young women to wearing trousers instead of skirts reflects both a loss of kastom and Christian values, increasing the anxiety among elders that young people no longer have respect.

Over the past decade, not only have women started wearing trousers, but they have also gained more access to education and employment. During this time, “Western influences” have increased through access to the internet, popular films, and social media. Cummings (2008, 146)

argues that trousers not only signal women's sexual availability, but their "increasing access to education, money, and mobility" and their desires for rights and freedom, which "stake a claim" against male power. Blaming women for a loss of *kastom* because they wear trousers, but shaping the discourse to be for their own protection, is a way of controlling women's bodies (Cummings 2008). Although community leaders and families in the Solomons encouraged upward and outward mobility of young people through education and work, they did not seem to accept the consequences of this in other areas of life, such as the shifting forms of dress and lifestyle.

In Vanuatu, trousers have similarly been blamed as a loss of *kastom* and a sign of women disrespecting elders and tradition. In 2001 chiefs from around Vanuatu, tried to ban women from wearing trousers outside the privacy of their homes (Brimacombe 2016; Cummings 2008). Although parliament did not approve of the ban, trousers continue to be a point of controversy incorporating the discourses of modernity, *kastom*, Christianity, gender equality, and human rights (Brimacombe 2016). Women wearing trousers are evidence of the changing gender roles in society as women attain equal rights to education and work. Jolly (1997, 158) suggests that women in Vanuatu first learned about "improvement and enlightenment" through international human rights projects seeking to reshape marriage and family life and bring an end to domestic violence. These discourses align with the already accepted Christian principles of peace, love, and faithfulness, but also mobilize women's groups to work together for women's rights and change. In Solomon Islands, Mothers' Union and other church groups regularly discuss the importance of respect within the family and ending domestic violence, along with fighting for a greater voice for women in politics. Jolly (1997, 160) argues that women need to claim they are "women of the place" through the "changing character of local cultures, and especially

Christianity” while also “indigeniz[ing] the language of human rights” so it is not dismissed as a foreign influence, as was happening with the child rights I described above. This moves the discussion away from a dichotomy between tradition/modernity and male domination/female liberation to a more nuanced understanding of the changing role of women in society.

Although young women in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were choosing to wear trousers and other foreign styles, they were not doing it out of disrespect. Gooberman-Hill (1999, 216) describes how wearing trousers in Honiara was a way for urban women to show they were “modern” and distinct from their rural home. Cummings (2013, 45) suggests that young women in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, still care about the past and tradition, but they are also encouraged to look toward the future as they pursue jobs, which makes them prioritize clothing that makes them feel modern and good about themselves. In Vanuatu, the *aelan dress*¹⁰⁸ (island dress) is a symbol of national identity, *kastom*, and “looking good,” specifically being a morally good woman and mother. Cummings (2013, 57) says that when young women wear trousers instead of *aelan dress* they are “trying to make these clothes their own and to mark a new sense of youthful, urban, modern-yet-respectful collective identity.” They still want to be seen as modest and good people who respect *kastom*, but in *aelan dress* they do not feel good about themselves both in the modest and modern sense, since the dress easily blows up in the wind and signifies a mother instead of a modern working woman.

Like the young women in Vanuatu, the young women I spoke with in both Honiara and Buala still wanted to show respect and learn about *kastom*. They wore skirts at the appropriate times, such as church and school, but they wanted the freedom to be themselves and claim a modern young identity in their free time. They were inspired by female teachers, politicians, and

¹⁰⁸ Aelan dress is a colorful loose-fitting dress made of lots of fabric originally introduced by missionaries, but now ni-Vanuatu consider it the *kastom* dress of Vanuatu (Cummings 2013).

athletes who were creating a new definition of what it meant to be an educated woman.¹⁰⁹ In the matrilineal society of Isabel, this took a particular form of imagining their role as leaders in and beyond their family. These young people wanted to do well in school and find well-paid jobs so they could support their families, while also having the money and freedom to buy modern things, like clothes from second-hand stores and the latest electronics. Through their photo projects and participation in community and cultural events, they showed me that they still valued *kastom*, history, and connections with their home communities. However, they also wanted to engage with modern practices and the upward mobility they thought modern lifestyles brought.

6.4.2 Combining values

The shift to more women wearing trousers is one example of how youth are choosing to integrate modern lifestyles. Another way this is happening is through dance and celebrations. When discussing with Jesi why her photo of the family meal (Image 6.13) was important, first she mentioned that Easter was the “resurrection of God.” Since I attended this meal, I followed up with more questions about the larger Easter celebrations, which included the church service, a feast, a family meal, dance performances, and DJ dancing. As seen in Example 6.14, Jesi (JE), Cami (C), and Heather (HT) said that they enjoyed the dancing that happened after the meal, which was a shift away from the religious parts of church Jesi had initially identified as important. The dialogue below began with me asking their favorite part of the Easter celebrations, which for all of them was dancing.

¹⁰⁹ See Chapter 2 for examples of women leaders from Isabel.

Example 6.14: DJ and kastom dancing

C: dans
Dancing

RH: **which** kaen lo dans? DJ dans o taem yumi dans?
***Which** kind of dancing? DJ dancing or when we danced? (referring to kastom dance)*

C: Taem yumi dans an den DJ
When we dance and then DJ

(All laugh)

RH: yu JA **which** wan? watnao fevarit pat blo yu?
*You, Jesi, **which** one? What is your favorite part?*

JE: Dans tu
Dancing too

RH: DJ dans o taem fo kastom dans?
DJ dancing or when kastom dance?

JE: Kastom dans
Kastom dance

HT: hem laea. DJ nomoa. (said in a teasing tone)
She's lying. Just DJ.

(All laugh)

RH: whynao yufa everiwan **prefer** DJ dans?
*Why do you all **prefer** DJ dancing?*

JS: Mi kastom dans mi nao laekm bikos hem kastom blo mifala.
Mi, I like kastom dancing because it's our kastom.

RH: (To JA) yu save lo kastom dans?
Do you know how to kastom dance?

JS: yeah

RH: why nao yufala **prefer** DJ dans? hao nao yu Heather? yu laek fo dans? yu save hao fo dans?
Why do you all prefer DJ dancing? How about you Heather? Do you like to dance? Do you know how to dance?

HT: Mi save. Mi no save DJ. Mi kastom nomoa.
I know. I don't know DJ. I just kastom.

(All laugh)

HT: Mi save DJ. Kaen dans wetem boe (claps hands, laughs, and rolls body)
I know DJ. The kind of dance with a boy.

Cami and I were both part of a group that performed dances at the community hall. After the feast in the morning, we performed two versions of *sa'ale olo* (a kastom dance of Isabel) and two *akson* choruses (Christian songs with actions). Then after the family meal in the evening, we performed a Zumba dance we learned from a video and country line dance that they asked me to teach them. A few other groups had also prepared dances including Mothers' Union members performing *akson* choruses in the morning and some youth doing a hip-hop style dance in the evening. Once the performances were completed in the evening, people began dancing freely to DJ dance – dancing to popular music that was being controlled by someone from a computer or phone – late into the night.

Music has always had an important role in the social life of Isabel. Isabel is known for its “Island Style” music, which is “similar to reggae, but has a very distinct beat and relies heavily on synthesizers” (Hægland 2010, 42). There are many bands hailing from Isabel that have become popular throughout the Solomons and elsewhere in the Pacific. Sisirikiti, one of these bands, was a “string band” group based out of Buala whose music was mostly played on guitars and ukuleles, but also included synthesizers. The music by performed Isabellian groups was upbeat with the classic 1, 2, 3 beat iconic of Isabellian music. The music of these Island Style groups was popular among young people, but they also enjoyed modern groups that played songs with more of a hip hop or R&B style influence. The DJ music mentioned by these young people

was almost always music from various Solomon Islands groups. The DJ music was performed in a mix of vernacular languages, Pijin, and English and the lyrics described romantic topics and other elements of Solomon Islands society. In Image 6.14, people are dancing to DJ music behind Cami and her friends.

When I asked the girls what kind of dance they preferred, they initially said *kastom*, but then also joked about how they enjoyed DJ dance. Throughout the conversation in Example 6.14, Heather was teasing everyone about how they liked to dance to DJ music. When I asked her what kind of dancing she knew, she first denied knowing DJ dancing, but then admitted to knowing how to do it, rolling her body to demonstrate some of her moves. There was also the suggestion that when dancing DJ style, females and males could dance together, part of why this type of dancing was considered unacceptable by church leaders and elders. The mixing of genders did occur some during these dances, but more often groups of females danced together separate from the males. The DJ dancing at the end of Easter night was a place to relax and connect with friends and participate in a type of dancing that was not usually condoned by the church but was considered acceptable on that night.

Youth considered *kastom* practices, particularly dances, important because they were part of the tradition and culture that had been passed down from previous generations. This importance was reiterated to them at community celebrations where elders told stories and emphasized the importance of *kastom*. *Kastom* dances were also fun for youth – a chance to learn something new and visit other villages to perform, as seen through all the travels for Saints' Day celebrations described above. Additionally, as shown in Chapter 5, performing dances from one's home is a clear marker of an ethnic identity and helps youth to remain connected to home and those who came before them, especially if they move away.



Image 6.18 Students playing Ludo in class, Photo by Selah, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

The importance of *kastom* as emphasized by the youth in their photos was contrasted with what youth do on a day-to-day basis. The topic of what students did in their free time often came up as part of our photo elicitation conversations. As described in this first section of the paper, many youth took photos and discussed playing in the ocean or rivers. A few also took pictures of places where they liked to sit and talk with friends. Selah took a picture of young women playing Ludo¹¹⁰ at school while waiting for a teacher. Playing sports like soccer, netball, and volleyball were mentioned in many conversations. Wade took a picture of some young people playing soccer in one of the fields in Buala (Image 6.19) because he wanted to show what

¹¹⁰ Ludo was a phone game popular during my research with rules like the Parker Brothers boardgame Sorry. Usually small bets were placed when playing the game.

youth his age did.



Image 6.19 Youth playing football, Photo by Wade, Form 5 Jejevo CHS

Other elements of what young people did in their free time were not represented in the photos. They enjoyed listening to popular music from Isabellian and other Solomon Islands groups. When they danced for fun it mimicked dance moves common to hip hop, Zumba, and occasionally other island groups like the hip movements of Polynesian dance. Since my time in the field, Tik Tok and Facebook have become more popular and accessible, so I have seen posts of young people mimicking dances popular on social media and giving them their own Isabellian flair. On Fridays, youth loved to go dancing to DJ music at the “local club,” a small covered concrete area in one part of Buala village. These dances were usually a part of “fundraisers” where people sold beer and played cards to raise money for an upcoming family or community

event, such as a wedding, baptism, or burial. Many people got drunk at these events and often “*fren fren*” (hook up/have sex) with people of the opposite sex after the event, behaviors that elders and the church considered immoral and inappropriate.

Dancing of all kinds was enjoyed by Isabellians young and old. As described above, many hours were put into learning kastom dances before a big event. Other times, the women in Buala could be found doing Zumba dances in the evening for exercise, which is why we performed one for Easter. During our conversations, Friday night DJ dancing came up many times, both as something people looked forward to and something which was slightly problematic because of the drinking and sex that occurred there. Cami told me her parents did not allow her to join the DJ dancing that usually happened on Friday nights, so sometimes she would watch, but not dance. For this reason, Easter was a chance for her to engage in modern practices, like DJ dancing, without disobeying her parents, since it was a “church” celebration. The pictures of the DJ dancing at Easter also allowed us to discuss dancing and behaviors that were not generally condoned by elders in the community.

The dancing that was mentioned in the photo project and most of our conversations was kastom dance, but as in the example of Images 6.13 and 6.14 by Jesi, these photographs often had a deeper meaning that was only revealed through the conversations that photo elicitation enabled. Jesi’s photos showed that church was not only important for prayer and connection with God, but for connection with community and a chance to have fun, like dancing to DJ music. Students chose to highlight their homes, community, church, and kastom because these things were important to them, but the photo elicitation did not stop at just the visual representation. Our conversations around the photographs revealed other elements that young people found important.

What this photo project shows is that for youth engaging with kastom and modern activities is not an either/or. This finding parallels the discussions by anthropologists regarding Christianity and kastom as both oppositional and continuous in religious thought and experience (Robbins 2007). Young people can enjoy watching movies, listening to popular songs, and playing phone games, but still consider their kastom dances and practices to be important. When community celebrations and kastom performances occur, everyone comes to watch. Youth eagerly learn kastom dances and traditions of their past but are also excited to learn and perform modern dances when given the opportunity. Youth have found a way to merge Western influences with kastom values in their everyday life. Young women can wear trousers, but also appreciate the importance of wearing skirts and kastom clothes for special events. Youth enjoy popular music and videos, but also have fun performing kastom dances. Students can long to travel overseas for education while still being grounded at home and in their community.

Although many elders say youth are not listening and are changing because of outside “influences,” youth are choosing to engage with the practices they find useful to them when they want. Besnier (Besnier 2011, xiv) argues that the forces of “history, tradition, and locality” and “the present, modernity, and the global” create “modern anxieties” for Pacific Islanders as these forces influence one another. In describing the experience of Pacific youth more broadly, Lee and Craney (2019, 12) say these anxieties cause elders to think that youth will “reject ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ for the perceived benefits of global modernity.” However, Lee and Craney (2019, 12) found that these anxieties are often unfounded because many Pacific youth have a sense of pride as they find creative ways to merge “traditional elements of their culture with new forms of expression.” This sense of pride was evident among Solomon Islands youth as they spent hours practicing dances and preparing costumes for kastom performances. At the same time, they

enjoyed learning hip hop, line dance, and Zumba style dances. They were not rejecting kastom as they chose to engage in “modern” practices, but instead, they found ways to combine these various elements. This reflects what Bernard Narokobi identified as “The Melanesian Way.” Instead of seeing modernity as a threat to Indigenous practices, he “understood Melanesian indigeneity as agentively engaging the foreign, seeking and welcoming it” while being “grounded in Indigenous cultural forms” (Bashkow 2020, 189–90).

Like the young women in Vanuatu, young people in the Solomons are encouraged by their parents and community to pursue upward mobility through education and work. With this comes an introduction to new influences and ideas. Youth in the Solomons are creating a particular youth identity that is open to new ideas but is still rooted in the values of home. Kabutaulaka (2015, 126) says that Melanesians claim an identity based on “complex experiences and cultures that are rooted in centuries of traditions while at the same time adapting to new and dynamic futures that draw from within Melanesia and beyond.” This is what kastom has always been – a transformation of tradition in response to new influences.

The photo project and conversations alongside my other interactions with Isabellian youth show that they are rooting themselves in tradition while taking up aspects of modern influences. The photos show that youth value land and sea for the resources they provide, but also the fun they have with friends. They value church for connection with God and prayer, but also as a place for connecting with friends and community celebrations, which sometimes include modern styles of dance. They recognize the importance of learning kastom practices and their history, even as they adopt new styles of dress, new forms of dance, and build connections beyond their village. These photos are representations of things young people found important, but the importance of it extends beyond the image to what they revealed in our conversations.

Despite the engagement with modern influences, home and the identity of being Isabellian remains an important place of grounding and connection for young people. These students valued connections to home and kastom because they helped establish relationships and shape their identities as young, educated Isabellians who were rooted in the past while engaging with the future.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter and the one before it both show the importance of home, land, community, and kastom practices for young people in Solomon Islands. For youth in Isabel, land and local waterways provide them with nourishment – food to eat, water to drink and bathe in, and resources they could sell to buy the other things they need. These young people lamented the ways that parts of the environment had been spoiled because the beauty of the land and waterways also provided them with moments of peace and fun. The fun at home always happened through relationships and interactions with other community members. Islands, beaches, and rivers were useful for their resources, but were also a place of celebration, playing games, and spending time with family and friends. This leads to the importance of community at home, a kind of community that is uniquely Isabellian where connections between family, kastom, and religion all intertwine. The larger community of the village is there to support each other in times of need. Members of Mothers' Union and the Companions regularly visited, provided gifts of food, and prayed for new parents, the elderly, and the sick. The church was a place to turn to for prayer when times were hard or when students needed help with upcoming exams. The church and community also came together for the celebration of holidays, festivals, and other special events. These events were filled with food and dancing. They were a chance for

youth to learn the kastom dances that had been passed down for generations and perform them for the rest of the village. They were a time of storytelling and drama to pass down the stories of those who have come before. They were also a place where it was acceptable to perform “modern” dances and dance to DJ style music without disrespecting elders. These events became a way to unify the community, embed people in relationships, and establish an identity unique to Isabel province.

In my conversations with Honiara-based youth, many of them longed for the things that the youth in Isabel highlighted as important. They missed the “free” and abundant food, clean free water, and places to swim. Some remarked how they missed their families back home and how the community celebrations were always so much better at home, which was why they longed to go home for Christmas – a time of year filled with dancing, sports, food, and lots of fun. All these elements of home and community remain important for migrants who have moved to Honiara, but they are often harder to develop because resources are scarce, and community is scattered.

The Buala community in Honiara has a Facebook group where they regularly post updates from home and announcements of events for the Honiara community. Like what is done at home, they arrange visits to families with new babies and those who have lost loved ones. They come together for celebrations that are also happening at home, like the Saint’s Day celebration for St. Paul’s church in Buala. Since they cannot join the feast at home, the Honiara community holds a small prayer service and shares a meal. They host fundraisers to send money home to help with community and church projects. Festivals like Grereo bring together Isabellians to remember the cultural practices and histories of home and establish an Isabellian

identity in the multiethnic community of Honiara. These celebrations help Isabellians maintain a connection to home and their extended family networks and recreate home in Honiara.

Although young people in Isabel enjoyed the land, waterways, peace, food, and community available in Isabel, they knew that if they wanted to pursue education or well-paid jobs then they would have to leave home at some point. This push toward upward mobility encourages them to intertwine modern, urban influences with *kastom* practices. As young people move away, the connections they have developed to home and kin are what keep them going when times are tough. Chapter 7 shows the importance of these relationships for doing well in school and finding jobs. The knowledge that young people have gained of their history and *kastom* helps them maintain an Isabellian identity in their multiethnic surroundings, even as they choose to engage with modern influences and practices. The connections youth form to land and community at home builds a social security network throughout life, which motivates young people to seek jobs where they can send money home while grounding them in their community and identity even when they live far away.

Chapter 7 The Importance of Relationships and Social Networks for Success in Schooling

After having discussed their photos individually, I asked a group of four Form 5 students at Jejevo CHS to arrange their photos in groups that were similar. I then asked them to explain why they put a selection of six photos together. They said that all the photos were taken in the classroom. They included pictures of one of their teachers and many of their friends from school.

I then asked, “whynao skul impoten lo yu?” (*Why is school important to you?*)

Selah started to answer, “Skul impoten bikos...” (*School is important because...*)

Then Beth spoke over her, “yu skul gud tekem waka den bae yu helpem parens blo yu.” (*You do well in school, find work, and then you help your parents*).

Finishing the thought she had previously started, Selah said, “go lo **future** laef blo yu” (for your **future** life).

Beth then expanded on her response, “Sensim nao. Bikos momi blo yu spendem skul fee lo yu so yu **have to** skul gud fo tekem yu waka den yu sensim selen blo parens wea hem spendem taem yu lo sekanderi.” (*To return/reimburse. Because your mom pays school fees for you, you **have to** do well in school to find work. Then you can return/reimburse your parents’ money that they spent when you were in secondary school.*)

“O praemari” (*Or primary school*), Selah added.

Throughout this dissertation I have shown the challenges youth faced in schooling and the parts of life outside of schooling that they found important, which were key to their cultural values and identities. One of the things I identified was that youths’ connections to home were key to their identity, sense of belonging, and likelihood of success during and after schooling. Essential to these connections were the relationships youth value – the people who supported

them financially and emotionally. Through the photo project and social network analysis,¹¹¹ youth identified relationships that were important to them. Although in the epigraph above the students only highlighted their parents, throughout my research students also identified as important other caregivers (grandparents, aunts, and uncles) who nourished, guided, and importantly, paid the school fees that enabled them to stay in school, as Beth suggested in this opening narrative. They also included friends, siblings, and cousins, who provided them with companionship, helped with school and chores, and with whom they had fun. Additionally, a few young people mentioned the teachers and spiritual leaders who mentored and supported them in their education. This chapter will elaborate on the relationships that were important to youth and argue that dense social networks with lots of connections to other people meant youth were more likely to do well in life during and beyond schooling. Although this chapter has implications for all youth in the Solomons, most of the data in this chapter comes from the social network interviews I completed with twelve young women.

I begin with the example of Ruth, a young Malaitan woman who grew up in Honiara, to show the importance of an interwoven web of relationships and support for young people to do well in school. Ruth had what I call a dense social network with many strong ties – she identified on her social network map many relationships (nuclear family, extended kin, schoolmates, friends, and teachers) who were important to her. A combination of all these relationships provided her with the financial, academic, and emotional support she needed to do well in school and eventually find a job to contribute to her family. Ruth’s experience illustrates how intertwined education can be in a young person’s social network and how these are amplified when that person shows educational promise and determination.

¹¹¹ I explain the methodology used for photo elicitation and social network analysis in the Introduction of this dissertation.

After Ruth's example, through an examination of the social networks of Isabel young women, I elaborate on the significant role that caregivers, especially parents, have in young people's lives through the ways they teach, love, and guide their children. I give the example of two young women in Buala who relied on their parents and extended family for support in schooling and work while, as young parents themselves, they were caregivers to their own children. I also provide a counter example of a young mother who dropped out of school and now focused on caregiving for her son.

Young people in Honiara relied on caregivers, but they also relied extensively on extended family and *wanskul* (schoolmates) for support in education. In the second section, through an example of a tertiary student who was from Isabel but was attending university in Honiara, I show the importance of a dense social network that incorporates relationships in Honiara and at home. For this urban-based young woman, her social network included non-kin relationships who supported her education in Honiara. Although young people in Isabel considered relationships with students and teachers at school to be important, many of these people were also related to them in some way, making the reliance on non-kin relationships more of an urban phenomenon. Additionally, through shorter examples of three secondary students (two from Ridge CHS and one from Jejevo CHS), I emphasize the importance of friends, both relatives and schoolmates, for success in education.

These sections lead to the last section where I give examples of two young women with families from Buala who faced "family problems" and how their social networks enabled or inhibited their ability to continue in schooling. Through all of this, I argue that relationships are important for all youth, but those with dense social networks had more opportunities to pursue schooling and find employment than those without. Additionally, relationships were a key

motivation to do well in school so that young people could give back to the family who financially supported their education and in so doing mutually invest in the relationship.

7.1 Importance of Relationships in Melanesia

It is well known throughout Melanesia and the greater Oceania that social relationships are important to the Pacific way of life. Epeli Hau'ofa, the well-respected Indigenous scholar from Tonga, describes Oceania as a “sea of islands” interconnected by the peoples and cultures who for centuries have moved across the ocean for trade, adventure, and to expand their social networks and relationships (Hau'ofa 1994, 192–94). Hau'ofa says that in the past Oceania included not only the land but the underworld and ancestors, connecting relationships in the past to those in the present. Similarly, Emalani Case, an Indigenous scholar from Hawai'i, explores the interconnectedness of all people through her discussion of “*Kahiki*,” the “ancestral homeland for Hawaiians and the knowledge that there is life to be found beyond our shores” (Case 2021, 3). Case (2021, 6) suggests that the concept of Kahiki is similar across Oceania: “islanders knew that their life in a particular group of islands was dependent on other places and peoples, that no matter how distant, remained an integral part of them.” The importance of relationships in Oceania connects ancestors to the present and people across distant islands to one another. In Solomon Islands, this interdependence is especially seen through the interisland connections between rural and urban kin.

When reflecting on the success of the Grereo Festival in 2019, which I mentioned in Chapter 6, the chairman of IPYF emphasized the importance of belonging, community, and connection to Isabel that this event brought. He wrote:

Perhaps our reward is on the realization that our children can smile and have that

sense of pride and a sense of belonging. Perhaps our reward also comes from our realisation that we have made it possible to commune with each other and re-establish our sacred connections with each other. Perhaps we may be satisfied with the comforting thought that the Grereo indeed brought us together as one family. For indeed we are one family. As a family, we are comforted by the thought that we as people from our beloved Isabel know the meaning of bonding that lasts our lifetimes. (Posted on the IPYF Facebook page, June 10, 2019).

This description of the people of Isabel as one family was reiterated many times and highlights the importance of relationships so integral to the kastom practices and identity of Isabellians. As described in Chapters 5 and 6, Honiara-based Isabellians, particularly those from Buala, maintained connections with home by raising and sending money home for events, celebrating the same church holidays, and returning home for holidays. Successful Isabellians also supported young people who were pursuing education by providing them with housing and financial resources. All of this created a sense of family that spans the rural/urban divide and embedded Isabellians in relationships that were integral to who they were.

Within Melanesia, relationality is important in community connections, but also in one's sense of self. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1988, 13) posited Melanesians as "dividual" persons composed of the many "relationships that produced them," meaning that an individual is a "social microcosm" of all the meaningful relationships in their life. For dividual persons, exchange is not just the sharing of items, but giving a part of oneself (Jolly 2016; Mosko 2010). When extended family supports young people to pursue their education (as I explain in this chapter), the young people are embedded in relationships of reciprocity while creating an identity tied to home and clan. So Beth's statement about needing to "*sensim*" or reimburse her family was about more than just the money spent, it was about maintaining and investing in relationships that were a part of who she is as a person. These expectations motivated them to do well so eventually they could give back to their family, sharing resources and part of themselves.

In this sense, the young people I worked with were straddling two different worldviews – the relationality important to dividual personhood and their *kastom* practices and the possessive individual created through Western individualism and encouraged by education. Many scholars have written about the tensions and contradictions between individualism and relationality as it influences religious practice and the possessive individual (for example see McDougall 2009; Mosko 2010; Robbins 2004; Sykes 2007). Understanding Melanesian personhood as comprised of all one’s meaningful relationships is important when examining the dynamics of family and community (White and Kirkpatrick 1985), especially how they influence educational opportunities, as I explore in this chapter.

The importance of relationships becomes apparent when looking at the interactions among extended family members in Melanesia. Most of Melanesia, including Solomon Islands, is a community or family-oriented society “where status and power are linked through a person’s membership in the group – clan, lineage, extended family” (Chapman 1991, 285). Within the village, families usually live near one another, taking care of each other’s children and sometimes tending the same garden plots. For example, writing of the Gao speakers in Isabel, Johanna Whiteley (2017) shows how the maintenance of gardens and the exchange of food forges connections among members of matrilineages and between individuals and the land. With the introduction of capitalism, the roles of clan and nuclear family have shifted. Writing about Papua New Guinea, Bettina Beer (2022) says that clans continue to be important for claims to land, but nuclear families have risen in importance for things like paying school fees. There is a similar shift throughout Solomon Islands where young people rely most heavily on their nuclear families and extended kin for support during and after schooling.

Isabel is a matrilineal society where identity and the right to land is passed through the mother. A “*kokholo*” or “matriclan” identity is “received from the mother at birth” and remains the same throughout one’s life even into death. Buala village follows a matrilineal pattern, with families living near one another on their mother’s land (Whiteley 2017, 78).¹¹² In this way, mothers become leaders in the community providing a connection between the land and the people (Maezama 2016, 53). As I will explain in this chapter, nearly every family member who young people from Buala mentioned as important came from their mother’s lineage. This reflects the importance of matrilineal relationships for support as well as the fact that young people lived in communities surrounded by their matrilineal kin. It also highlights a difference between living at home, where family members comprised most of a young person’s social network, and living in Honiara, where relationships were a mix of family and non-kin.

Throughout the rest of the Solomons, lineage can be matrilineal, patrilineal, or bilateral, and relationships in urban areas like Honiara often center around extended kin and *wantoks*, meaning someone from the same language group (literally “one talk”). In multiethnic and multilingual places, sharing a vernacular language becomes another marker of identity, drawing people from the same language group or island together. Essential to the idea of a *wantok* is “relationships and looking after each other as people who are related through kinship, language, island, and region” (Kabutaulaka 2015, 135). Gordon Nanau (2011) emphasizes that the *wantok* system is “a network of cooperation, caring and reciprocal support, and a shared attachment to kastom and locality. It consists of a web of relationships, norms and codes of behavior,” which he refers to as *kastom* (Nanau 2011, 32). In this sense, *wantoks* are those who someone is

¹¹² This is a simplification of a complex connection of relationships and ancestry that shapes Isabel society. I describe this a little more in depth in Chapter 2. Whiteley (2015; 2017) and White (1991) provide a much more extensive explanation of these relationships.

attached to because of reciprocal relationships and a shared sense of home, cultural practices, language, and beliefs. *Wantoks* are particularly valuable connections for people living abroad, but in Honiara some language groups are so large that kinship networks are more essential for community support (Moore 2015). Participating in family and community activities and maintaining relationships also provides a social safety net when financial or social troubles arise since there are always kin available for support (McDougall 2017 discusses this at the time of the Tension).

In addition to relying on *wantoks* and extended kin, urban-dwellers build kin-like relationships that can be just as or more important than kin. Fiona Hukula (2017, 162) explains that in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, people build kin-like relationships with non-kin based on “reciprocal sharing” and “place-based connections such as *wanlotu* (one church), *wanskul* (school mate), and *wanstrit* (neighbours).” In this chapter, I identify the variety of relationships that young people in Solomon Islands rely on for support while in school and after leaving education. These relationships included, but were not limited to, *wantoks*, nuclear family, schoolmates (*wanskul*), and other friends and family members. Although young people who lived in Isabel had *wanskul* relationships in their social networks, these individuals tended to also be family.

7.2 Relationships for success in schooling

Example 7.1: Important people help with schooling, Ruth, Form 6 student, Honiara

So taem mi lukim ota helpem mi insaet lo skul so mi se, “oh diswan **most important** *So when I saw they helped me with school I said, “oh these are the most important* ting nao.” Bikos olsem skul wanfa **priority** nao... [skipping a few lines] *thing.” Because school is a priority...* [skipping where she compares schooling to sports]

So ating ediukesin nao bara helpem **person** lo futur. So yu skul gud
*So I think education really helps a **person** in the future. So if you do well in school*

waka gud. So taem mi lukim ota helpem mi lo skul, mi se, “oh yufa impoten wan nao.”
you find good work. So when I saw they helped me with school, I said, “oh you all are the important ones.”

Throughout this dissertation, I have mentioned Ruth as a student driven to do well in school and find a decent job to support her family. I met Ruth in 2018 when she was a Form 5 student at Ridge CHS in Honiara. Ruth has a mother from Malaita province and a father from Temotu province, but Ruth had grown up in Honiara. In addition to joining my photo elicitation project, she was the first student I asked to draw a social network map. When we did the social network interview in 2019, she was a Form 6 student studying science at a different secondary school in Honiara. Ruth’s ability to do well in school was dependent on her own intelligence and drive, but also a dense network of people supporting her education.

A social network is a “group of actors who are connected to one another through a set of relations or ties” (Daly 2010, 4). Ties can form through similarities (such as shared membership in groups), social relations (such as kinship and friendship), interactions and events over a period of time, and flows of “tangible and intangible things” (Borgatti and Ofem 2010, 19–20). The formation of a tie as defined by Borgatti and Ofem reflects the way Melanesians have developed and maintained social networks for millennia. Alan Daly (2010, 4) suggests that ties can “support or constrain opportunities for resources (information, knowledge, innovation, etc.)” that are shared across a system like a school. Discussing the social networks within education, Daly (2010, 4) says that “*strong* ties” allow for the sharing of “complex knowledge; joint problem solving; and the development of coordinated approaches.” In the context of my research, young people with dense social networks were those who identified many strong ties that were important to them and with whom there was a flow of resources. Most of the relationships were

social relations of kinship, but some formed through similarities like attending the same school or church. These strong ties created opportunities for the flow of knowledge, resources, and emotional support. A dense network of ties was essential for success in school, because if one person was unable to support a student, there were always other people available for support.

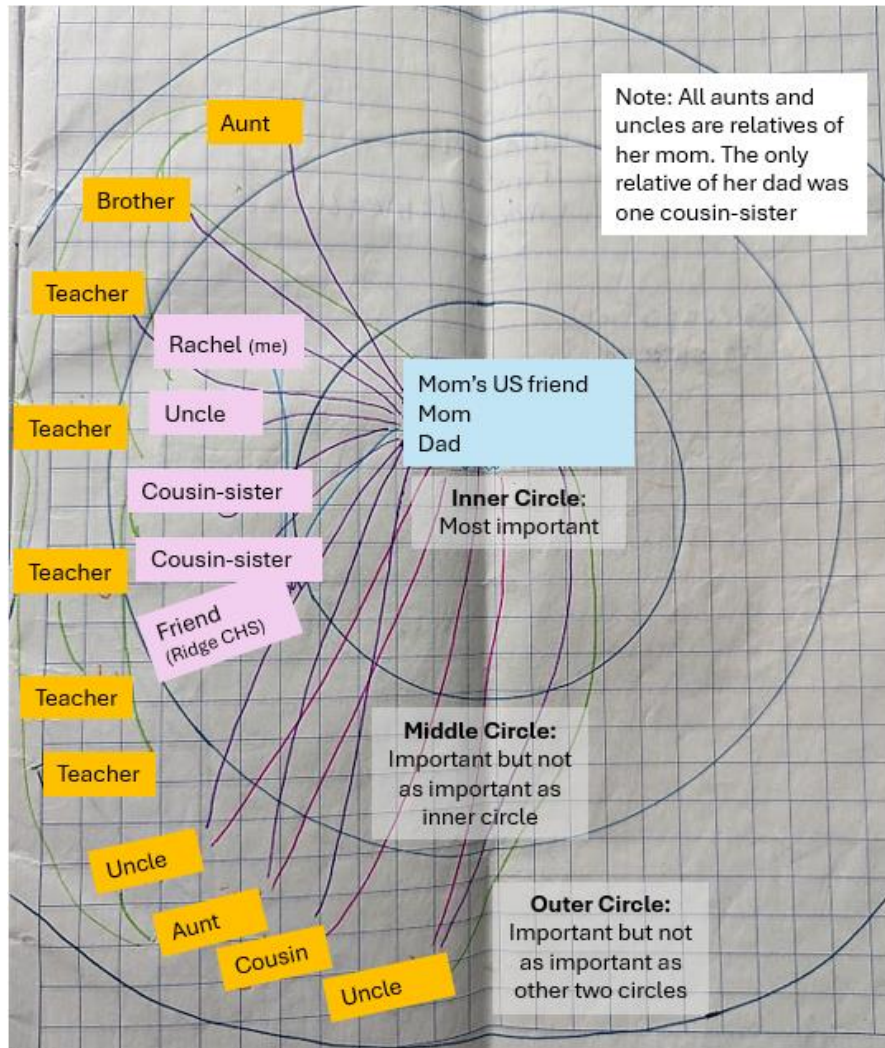


Figure 7.1 Ruth's social network map

Even though I had not prompted her to think about people along these lines, nearly everyone Ruth listed on her social network map was someone who helped her in schooling.

When I mentioned this to Ruth at the end of our interview, she responded with the statement in Example 7.1. She said that school was particularly important in Solomon Islands. If she wanted a chance to be somebody and have a good future, she needed to do well in school. Because school was so important, the people that were the most important to her were the ones who helped her with school. Ruth's social network map reveals how intertwined education and relationships are when a young person shows promise of doing well in school.

On her social network, Ruth listed her parents, relatives from her mother's side, teachers, friends, cousins, and the woman who paid her school fees. Ruth's inner circle included her parents and a friend of her mom who lived in the United States and paid Ruth's school fees throughout primary and secondary school. Ruth lived in a small two-bedroom house with her parents and brother. Both her parents worked to bring in enough income to meet their daily needs, but because they did not come from a wealthy family nor did her parents have high-paying jobs, they needed help from others to pay Ruth's school fees. In addition to meeting her physical needs, Ruth said that her parents supported her emotionally, encouraged her, and taught her things.

The part of Malaita where Ruth's mother is from is a patrilineal society and the part of Temotu where her father is from is matrilineal. Although Ruth occasionally called Temotu "home" because her father is from there, she had never visited Temotu. Every aunt and uncle she listed as important were somehow related to her mother – some as true siblings and others as cousins of her mother.¹¹³ Despite growing up in Honiara, whenever Ruth told me about where she was from or described her "home," she referred to Malaita – her mother's home village

¹¹³ The lack of important relationships on her father's side (outside of one cousin-sister listed) could be because of the distance to Temotu or because as a male in a matrilineal society her father may not have rights to land in the Reef Islands where he is from. Or he may have simply lost connection with his family during his long tenure in Honiara.

where Ruth had visited family and hoped to return and build a house one day.¹¹⁴ Even though Malaita is patrilineal, Ruth told me that in her mother's village it was expected for fathers and brothers to reserve a small share of land for sisters and their children so that they could remain connected to their home and not lose their culture. Because of this, she said that one day when she is married her uncles must contribute to her bride price to solidify her relationship and connection to them. Ruth's close connection to her Malaitan kin embedded her in relationships that created her Malaitan identity and gave her access to the land she hoped to return to one day.

In the middle circle, Ruth listed her uncle who helped her with assignments and four friends, two of whom were also cousin-sisters. Cousin-sisters are female cousins who are like sisters because they are grow up together and have a close relationship.¹¹⁵ Young people often referred to cousins they were close to as just sister or brother because the relationships were often closer than one's actual siblings. Ruth's two cousin-sisters, whom she just called sisters, helped her with school assignments. She also listed me since I am a friend and brought her a computer back from the United States that she bought from me to use at school. At the end of our social network discussion, she realized she forgot another friend, Julie, who was not related to her but was a friend from Ridge CHS. Ruth and Julie encouraged one another to work hard so they would have a good future.

Ruth's outer circle included teachers and extended kin who supported her schooling in numerous ways. Ruth listed five teachers from Form 6 whom she said were helping her learn things that were important for her future goal of becoming a pharmacist. She said her science and

¹¹⁴ I elaborate on this connection to "home" and the importance of identity for Honiara youth, including examples from Ruth, in Chapter 5 and in my article in *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* (Hicks 2022).

¹¹⁵ Likewise, a cousin-brother is a male cousin. Because of gender dynamics in Solomon Islands, females tended to be closer to their cousin-sisters and males tended to be closer to their cousin-brothers, but cross-gender cousins were still called cousin-sister/brother.

math teachers were important because they helped her with subjects related to pharmacy. She also identified her English teacher as important because she helped her improve her English, which she would need for university. The outer circle also included her brother, two aunts, two uncles, and one cousin. All the people in the outer circle, except her brother who had dropped out of school, helped her with school, whether by helping with assignments, providing money for bus fares and school fees, or helping her with typing and printing.

As of 2024, Ruth was well on her way to achieving her goals. Because of the support of her dense social network and her own personal determination, she had finished Form 6, Form 7, and a diploma degree at Solomon Islands National University (SINU) to be a pharmacy technician. She was working as a pharmacy technician at a pharmacy in Honiara while she saved money in hopes of pursuing a bachelor's degree in pharmacy in the future. Despite coming from a low-income family, Ruth's dense social network provided her with the financial and emotional support to continue in schooling. Since her brother had dropped out of school before finishing secondary school, she felt extra pressure to do well in school and find a respectable job to support her parents one day.

I began this chapter with the example of Ruth to show how education-centric a social network could be and the many relationships that were required to enable someone to do well in school. They need people to support them financially with major expenses like school fees and smaller costs like bus fares. They need caregivers to support them emotionally and help them learn new things. They also need people their age to provide them with companionship, help with school, emotional support, and fun. The following sections elaborate on the relationships young people identified as important and how they are essential for success in schooling and life

more generally. Most of the examples come from the social network maps and interviews with Isabellian youth, but a few examples come from the photo project of youth in Honiara.

7.3 Caregivers in Isabel: Teaching, loving, and guiding

As mentioned previously, the nuclear family is becoming increasingly important for Solomon Islands young people. Every youth I interviewed included family members in their social network analysis. Similarly, nearly every student in the photo project took pictures of a family member that was important to them. In both these projects, as they discussed their family, they reflected on the way that their caregivers (parents, grandparents, or aunts and uncles) showed them love, taught them skills, provided for their needs, and guided them as they made decisions about their future. For young people with children, the role of caregiving now fell to them as they needed to love, guide, and support their own children, often while still attending school or looking for well-paid jobs.

Youth recognized their parents as the people who paid for school fees, worked hard to support the family, and provided love and support. In Isabel, most often men had the official jobs and women earned money through the informal economy selling betel nut, fish and chips, homemade bread, or produce. However, many men in Isabel supported their family solely through the occasional odd jobs, helping with subsistence farming, and fishing. In these situations, the women's informal labor activities provided the families with steady supplemental income, which could at times surpass the income men earned.¹¹⁶ This division of labor reflects

¹¹⁶ I did not ask people out right how much they made as this would have been inappropriate. However, the 2019 census stated that more females than males were involved in agriculture such as subsistence farming and selling of crops. I similarly observed women selling crops at the market, tending the garden, and preparing other food to be sold. The census also stated that the main source of income for 46 percent of houses in rural areas was agriculture (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 175). So it can be extrapolated that in cases where neither spouse was employed in the formal economy, women brought in more household income.

the larger gender dynamics throughout Solomon Islands where paid employment was held by men and informal unpaid labor, such as caring for the family and subsistence farming fell to women (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023). Young people identified their mothers as someone who taught them important household skills and someone with whom young women could talk with about anything while doing chores. Additionally, because of matrilineal descent, the mothers were leaders of the family, connecting the ancestral ties of land to their descendants.

Ida, a young mom in Buala who had finished school at SINU and returned home to live with her parents when she became pregnant, listed her parents as the first people in her inner circle. She said they were important because they had cared for her since she was a baby. Her mom taught her how to do things like sewing and cooking. Ida said that she and her mom were close – they talked about lots of things and any time Ida asked for help, her mom would help her. At the time of my research, neither of her parents had official paid employment. According to Ida, her father looked after them by providing them with food and selling fish at the market. He also protected them and guided them when she and her siblings were disobedient. Financially, Ida’s mom supported the family through selling buns, beer, and items she sewed. Ida also did occasional jobs (like working during the election and census) when the positions were available.

Ida used a phrase I heard from many youth when I asked why parents were important: “Bikos if no momi o no dadi mi nomoa” (*Because if I didn’t have a mommy or daddy I wouldn’t be*). There was an intrinsic sense that parents were important because they gave birth to, raised, and provided for their children, which motivated young people to do well in school so that they could support their parents as they aged. This intrinsic importance may also be connected to the importance of knowing one’s lineage and clan. Johanna Whiteley (2015, 185), describing the lineage of Gao speakers in Isabel, suggests that “the mixing of the blood of both the mother and

the father that occurs during the ‘containment’ of the child in the mother’s belly/womb” is essential for the “‘growth’ of the family and the ‘widening’ of the matrilineal clan.” In Isabel, it is through their matrilineage that young people established their identity as belonging to a particular clan and retained rights to land in the home of their mother. So in addition to caring for them, a young person’s parents determined their identity and future access to resources.

A few of the young people I interviewed, including Ida, already had children. I include them in my discussion of youth because age-wise they were between ages 15-34, the age of youth as defined by the National Youth Policy (Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs 2017). Even though having children can lead to a social recognition of being an adult (Craney 2022), these young women still relied heavily on family support for raising their children, especially as they pursued schooling, classifying them as youth because of their limited authority and lack of financial responsibility.

Most of the young women with children who I interviewed were not officially married. Marriage in Solomon Islands was recognized through a civil marriage, religious or church ceremony, and traditional or customary marriages (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2023, 85). In Isabel, to be officially married, couples went through a religious ceremony blessed by a priest and then signed legal paperwork. Sometimes when a couple cohabitated and had children together it was called a “bush marriage” because they lived like husband and wife but had not gone through a legal or religious ceremony. Many of the young women I knew in Buala, such as Ida, were raising their children as single moms and others cohabitated with their child’s father.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ The reasons for not marrying the father of their children varied. Many of the mothers lived with the fathers for a while but left them because of unfaithfulness or abuse. Some couples were not officially married because they were “backsliders,” or not following the ways of the church, so they could not have a ceremony blessed by a priest.

No matter if the child was born in or out of wedlock, young mothers described their children as some of the most important people in their lives. It was the responsibility of the mothers to care for their children, to provide them with what they needed, and to ensure they had a good future by sending them to school in hopes that they would find work someday. This meant that the parents needed income to pay school fees and buy the things the children needed. It also motivated these young parents to continue in school as long as possible to find better jobs and create a better life for their children. When describing her four-year-old son, Ida said everything she did was to provide for his future:

Example 7.2: Everything parents do is for their children

Ida: Hem impoten lo mi bikos **future** blo hem lo han blo mi tuya. Mi mas putum hem
*He's important to me because his **future** is in my hand. I must put him*

*olsem mi mas prioritizem hem nao bikos **future** blo hem lo han blo mi so evriting mi
like this I must prioritize him now because his **future** is in my hand so everything I*

*duim fo gud lo hem lo **future** blo hem.
do is for his good for his **future**.*

In addition to her parents, Ida's siblings and cousins were essential to her ability to attend school and care for her baby. For Ida, all her siblings and her closer cousins were in her middle circle. They were important to her because they grew up together. Even though some were technically cousins and some of her siblings were raised by her aunts and uncles, she considered them all to be like brothers and sisters to her. Her older siblings and cousins took her to school when she was young and helped her with homework. Once she was away from home for secondary school and university, her older siblings and cousins helped pay her school fees, gave her pocket money for food and bus fares, and at times she lived with them. She also described

multiple older siblings as giving her advice about the future such as how to do well in school and find decent work. Ida also included her younger brother and two cousin-sisters in her middle circles. Since they were closer in age than her older siblings, she said they would “*stori an laflaf*” (talk and laugh) together and help each other with schoolwork and chores. After Ida had a c-section with her son, these cousin-sisters came over and helped take care of her baby. Since having her baby, Ida still did not have regular work, but instead was often hired for short-term positions such as during government elections. Whenever she had a job that took her away from Buala, Ida’s cousin-sisters and parents watched her son. Since Ida’s siblings and cousin-sisters covered a wide range of ages, some played the role in her life of a caregiver and provided financial support for schooling, while others became her close friends.

Eva was another young mom from Buala who was attending SINU in Honiara. Like Ida, Eva also put both of her parents and her daughter in her inner circle. She also listed her husband and younger brothers and sister in her inner circle. Eva said her parents were important because they provided for the family and guided them. Her dad provided food for the family and helped with typing and other things. Her mom did work in the garden and cared for the children, including Eva’s daughter when Eva was in Honiara for school. Eva’s parents were raising her daughter in Buala while Eva finished her schooling at SINU and her husband worked in Honiara, but Eva regularly came back to be with her daughter. Eva’s husband supported her and their daughter through buying food and clothes for their family, cooking, and driving them around Honiara. Eva’s younger sister also had a job in Honiara and would give money to Eva for bus fares and school supplies. When Eva and her sister were both in school, they would study together, but now Eva’s sister worked full-time. All these relationships enabled Eva to stay in school even though she was also a mother. Eva said her daughter was important because it was

her responsibility to help her daughter with school so she could have a good future, which motivated Eva to finish her education at SINU so she could further support her daughter.

Continuing in education once someone had children also required the mother to be self-motivated. Another young mother I met in Isabel, Elly, dropped out of school during Form 1 (Grade 7) because she engaged in what she called “social life” such as smoking and drinking, which the school did not allow. Despite her mother’s admonishment, after returning home Elly continued to be involved with “bad influences” and was “crazy crazy” as she described it. She became pregnant at seventeen. At the time of our interview, she was unmarried but lived with her baby’s father who had a job working for the provincial government. They lived in her mother’s house since her mother was often overseas for work. His income plus the money she made selling betel nut and running a small shop supported them financially. Although she said she would like to go to a rural training center someday, her current focus was her son’s education. She said that he “*mas skol gud*” (must do well in school) because she did not want him to follow her footsteps. Because of this, as his main caregiver, every day she took him to kindy and taught him things like ABCs when at home. She did not allow him to attend the dances and other events in the village with “bad influences.” Elly did not want to do a social network map with me, but based on our conversations, she had a dense social network for emotional and financial support. In her case, it was not a lack of social network or finances that prevented her from continuing in school, but a lack of desire to pursue schooling when she was young, something she regretted, which is why she focused her attention on raising her son well.

These examples show the importance of parents and caregivers in the lives of youth and children. They are the ones who trained their children, taught them what is right and wrong, and provided for their needs. Caregivers paid school fees, bought supplies, and fed students, making

them essential for the success of youth in schooling. For many young people, one of their caregivers was also someone they could come to for advice, laugh with, and have fun together, providing them with emotional support while caring for their physical well-being. Once young people became parents, they shifted to being caregivers themselves. For those who chose to continue their education, they relied on their extended family, especially their matrilineal kin, to watch their children while at work or school and provide them with support. Without the robust system of support from parents, siblings, and aunts and uncles, young parents would not be able to continue in school, find work, or support their growing families.

7.4 Kinship and *wanskul* relationships

As introduced at the beginning of this chapter, *wantok* and kin relationships are an important part of Melanesian sociality. Taking care of one another through reciprocity is key to *wantok* relationships (Brigg 2009; Kabutaulaka 2015; McDougall 2017; Nanau 2011). However, kinship relationships also come with obligations to take care of family members and share resources, especially for Honiara-based Solomon Islanders who have steady income (Jourdan 2017). Urban *wantoks* help facilitate movement between rural and urban areas by providing housing, help in job seeking, and material support (Schram 2015). These obligations can cause economic challenges. For example, family members often asked their relatives who owned a store to give them items for free or on “credit” but never paid them back (Craney 2022, 103 and my own observations). Likewise, many youth who migrated to urban areas for school stayed with extended kin, but because so many people lived in one household, the finances of the urban family were often stretched thin. Students who were able to attend many years of education had a network of *wantoks*, kin, and other relationships on which to rely for financial and emotional

support. In Honiara, many of the relationships also included non-kin, such as the *wanskul* relationships described by Fiona Hukula (2017), in which young people formed kin-like relationships with school mates. For young people who lived in Honiara, relationships with people at home and in town were important for success in schooling.

Kari was a student at SINU who I met during her holiday in Buala while visiting her parents who lived there. Her mother was from Buala, her father was from Malaita, and Kari was the youngest of their six girls. Kari's social network map revealed how social ties tend to revolve around family and extend between Buala and Honiara. Following the pattern of many Isabellians, all the family members Kari included were from her mother's side of the family. In her inner circle, Kari put her mother, father, and grandmother who all lived in Buala. She said they were the most important because they cared for her, prayed for her, and supported her financially.

In the middle circle, Kari listed all five of her sisters and one cousin-sister, some of whom lived in Buala and some in Honiara. Her oldest sisters helped pay her school fees while the middle sisters helped her with schoolwork and occasionally gave her money for bus fares. Her family supported each other in whatever way they could, whether that was paying school fees, giving a little money here and there for bus fares, loaning their computer, or providing advice and help. In return, Kari helped her sisters with their kids, did chores around the house, and helped her parents with their store when she went home. She was not a *haosgel* (house girl)¹¹⁸ where it was required for her to work for her housing in Honiara, but she did it because she was willing and wanted to help her family when she could. In this way, Kari was engaging in

¹¹⁸ Haosgels or house girl is the name for someone who helps clean the house, cook, and take care of children. Often, but not always, they are a relative who is staying with the family and is helping with chores in return for room and board. Sometimes they are paid money. See Jourdan (2017) for a nuanced discussion of the role of haosgels in Honiara.

reciprocal exchange relationships with her family. One of Kari's Honiara-based sisters also played the role of a mother in her life since Kari's mom was in Buala. This sister took Kari to see the doctor when she was sick and looked after her, which Kari said her sister had done since Kari was small. Each of these family members was essential to Kari's ability to continue at university in Honiara while her parents resided in Buala.

In her outer circle, Kari included the three people on her social network who were not family. All three women were friends from school, and with two of them she had formed kin-like relationships, like the *wanskul* relationships described by Hukula (2017). Kari had known one of her friends since secondary school and they treated each other like sisters. One of the other friends, who was a little older, treated Kari like a daughter. These friends helped each other with school and gave each other money when one was short on bus fares. The friend since secondary school was a close friend and they encouraged each other to reach their goals of going to school and finding work before getting married. The friend who treated Kari like a daughter made sure that Kari did not get into trouble. For Kari, these friends were important because of the emotional support and academic help they provided for her schooling. As Hukula (2017, 162) describes, the relationships were important not because they met at school, but because of the "sense of relatedness" that they "feel towards each other" when they shared food, thought about one another, and helped each other.

The importance of friends for young people was evidenced by the numerous friends listed on social network maps and included in the photo elicitation projects. Sometimes close friends were people youth met at school, and other times they were extended family members or siblings. Many youth took pictures of the cousin-siblings with whom they grew up. Cousins and true siblings were people that students turned to for emotional support. They talked with each

other about their lives, mourned and celebrated together, helped each other with schoolwork and chores, and just generally had fun and “*laflaf*” (laughed) together. They became best friends.

One difference in the friendships between Honiara and Isabel based youth was that often the friends listed by young people in Isabel were also relatives, whereas friends of those in Honiara came from many places, such as school and church. Cami, a Form 5 student at Jejevo CHS, was a clear example of the closeness of cousin-sisters. She included four girl relatives on her social network. One was her true sister who was three years younger and the other three were cousin-sisters of various levels of closeness, one of whom was in Form 5 with her at Jejevo CHS. For all of them she said they were important because they helped each other with chores and homework, they had fun together laughing and telling stories, and they shared food and clothes with one another. These are the same young women she took photos with at Fera Island for the photo project and reflected on the fun they had fishing and picnicking together (see Image 6.6 in Chapter 6).

The most common thing that students said about their friends was that they helped them through tough times whether in school or their personal lives. Youth described their friends as providing emotional support and help with schoolwork, both of which were essential for success in school and life. Hannah, a Form 5 student from Ridge CHS who participated in the photo elicitation project, took pictures of herself and four friends from school (Image 7.1). She said on her worksheet that her friends helped each other with school and work and provided cheer and comfort.



Image 7.1 Students and friends forever, Photo by Hannah, Form 5 Ridge CHS

Example 7.3: Support of friends at school from photo elicitation worksheet by Hannah, Form 5 Ridge CHS

Who/what is in the photo?

[Lists the names of her friends]

Where is it taken?

[Ridge CHS] school ground

Why is this important?

We are students and friends forever. We can help each other in school works and other lives necessities, cheer in times of happiness, comfort in times of sorrow, kind, share, love and trust each other in every ways of life as we journey on.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ All spelling and grammar mistakes were in the original. I kept them to highlight the voices of the youth.

This eloquent description shows the importance of *wanskul* friendships in Honiara. Similarly, another Form 5 student at Ridge CHS wrote on her worksheet that her friends helped her with things in and out of school. In our interview discussing her photos, she explained this included helping each other with the school subjects they struggled with and giving each other money when bus fares were short. These examples show that friendships served many purposes in Solomon Islands. Friends were there for fun, but also provided emotional support and helped with school. These friendships, whether or not they were also relatives, became important for student success in school and life more broadly.

7.5 Dense and sparse social networks

One of the things that became apparent through my interviews and time spent with youth was that those who had dense social networks were more likely to do well in school and have greater opportunities for employment after education than those with sparse social networks. Young people often lived with their parents or siblings and turned to them for help with financial needs. Among the common problems that were identified as challenges for youth in education were “family problems,” such as divorce, death, and becoming pregnant. When parents divorced or died, many youth no longer had someone to pay their school fees. Those who had a strong family network might live with an aunt or grandparent who had steady income to pay school fees. However, some youth lacked these networks. Other youth became pregnant in high school, which meant they were kicked out of school. If this young mom had a family member who could raise or help care for her child, then she might be able to return to school, but more often these young women were left with incomplete education and few prospects for making money. Many returned home to live with parents and continued to rely on them for support. Even young people

who made it through school, like Ida and Eva, remained reliant on their families as they looked for jobs and raised their children.

Abbi and Marta were two young women who both came from divorced families. Through looking at a comparison of their lives, it is apparent how a dense social network is essential for young people when they come from a background with “family problems.” Abbi had many strong ties she could rely on when her parents divorced (extended kin, schoolmates, and her nuclear family), whereas Marta had a small network (her grandparents, her brother, and three friends). When her grandfather died (her strongest tie), Marta was left without the financial and emotional support needed to stay in school.

Abbi had a dense family network consisting of family in Honiara and Buala who were supporting her schooling. Her parents separated when she was young, but her parents, grandmother, aunts, and uncles all worked together to provide her with what she needed for school and success in life. Abbi’s mother had a well-paid job in Honiara, which met their daily needs, but they also relied on their extended family for support. Abbi’s grandmother who mainly resided in Honiara but also had a house in Buala raised her while her mother attended university in New Zealand and continued to be a caregiver in her life. Her grandmother taught her practical things, like how to cook, make necklaces, and sew skirts as well as guided her emotionally and comforted her when she was upset or sick. Abbi’s uncle, her mother’s oldest brother, paid for her and her brother’s school fees, took them out to restaurants, bought them clothes and school supplies, and paid for transport when Abbi needed to get back to Honiara from Buala. He also helped Abbi’s mom with the expenses for their new house. Abbi described him not as nurturing, but kind. In addition to being the most financially successful of her grandmother’s children because of his job in Honiara, this investment by her mother’s brother in the life of Abbi and her

brother highlights the importance of a mother's brother and a sister's son in the matrilineal society of Isabel (White 1991, 33). Abbi's biological father was still involved in her life as he lived near them in Honiara and helped pick her up from school and cared for her on the weekends. Through her grandparents, parents, and uncle, Abbi had a dense social network to help her even when challenges arose.

Abbi also relied on her relationship with her brother and friends from school for emotional support. Abbi had one sibling from the same father, a brother who was two years younger. Her brother was her friend – they played things like tennis, tag, and video games together. They helped each other with school and with chores around their house like caring for their puppy and cleaning. They also supported each other emotionally. When people teased Abbi, her brother stood up for her. In her middle circle, Abbi also put two friends she knew from school. One friend she had known since elementary school and one she met in Form 1 (Grade 7). They all helped each other with schoolwork, strolled and had fun together, and shared food at school. Abbi said that the friend she had known since elementary school was her best friend – they shared secrets and helped each other with chores at their houses. Abbi had established a sense of “relatedness” with her *wanskul* friends through the sharing of food and emotional support (Hukula 2017).

Abbi's situation could be contrasted with Marta, whose parents were also divorced. I met Marta in Buala. Marta lived with her mom when she was young, but around the age of six after her parents separated, her grandparents who also lived in Buala adopted her. Her mom remarried and Marta said when that happened her mom changed so that she was no longer kind. Marta's grandparents became like parents to her. They took care of all her needs, taught her how to do things, and loved her the same way that parents love their children. For this reason, Marta put her

grandparents in the inner circle of her social network, while her mother was in the middle circle. After her grandfather died, she had no one to pay her school fees because she had lost a key part of her social network and had no close extended kin to take his place. Despite her friends describing her as a “bright student,” because of a lack of financial support she dropped out of school after Form 4 (Grade 10) and helped take care of her grandmother and other elderly relatives. Caring for family members, both aging grandparents and children of siblings and relatives, was a common way for young adults to continue relationships of reciprocity when they could not contribute financially. At the time of our interview, Marta was unmarried and had recently found out she was pregnant. Her boyfriend, who lived in Honiara, helped take care of her through sending supplies and food on the ships and sending money. He wanted to marry her and help pay for more schooling since she had been forced to drop out, but at nineteen years old she felt she was too young to be married, and she also had concerns about his treatment of her.

Marta had emotional support from her brother and friends, but as young adults themselves they were limited in their ability to support Marta financially. Marta put her brother, who is three years younger, in the inner circle because he is her only sibling. They did chores together, laughed together, and went everywhere together. If one of them had money, they shared it with each other. Recently her brother went to live with her mother in another province, and she missed his friendship. With his move to another island, Marta had lost another important part of her social network and support system.

Naomi and Jana were in the middle circle because they were Marta’s close friends, and they had grown up together. Jana was technically Marta’s aunt, but they grew up together like cousin-sisters since they were similar in age. They helped each other with chores around the house and would sit down and talk together. Naomi had also been a good friend since Marta was

small. Even though Naomi was older than Marta, they always did things together. When they were kids they would go swimming, get coconuts and firewood, hunt for shells, and more. Now that they had grown up, they still went to the island together for picnics, sat together when Naomi was selling betel nut, and helped each other with chores. Naomi shared money and things with Marta and helped her find small jobs, like cooking and catering for events. Marta admitted that at times, both Naomi and Jana were bad influences – Jana liked to smoke, and she and Naomi often drank together – but this did not outweigh their importance as friends. These relationships provided emotional support for Marta and helped with small expenses, which was especially important after her mother left her and her grandfather died, but these friends were unable to help with large expenses, like school fees, for Marta to continue in schooling.

The example of these two young people who both came from divorced families shows how someone's social network is essential to success in schooling and life. Abbi's network was strong and big. Even though her parents had separated, she had other aunts, uncles, and grandparents to care for her. Because of this dense social network and her own drive, as of 2023, Abbi had made it into senior secondary school. Marta, on the other hand, had a small, sparse social network. Once her grandparents passed away, Marta was left without anyone to rely on for financial support to continue in school, except a boyfriend she was uncertain about. In our interview, Marta was very uncertain about what the future held. She wanted to continue in schooling at a vocational training school, but with a baby on the way and lack of financial support, she was not sure how this would be possible. At the time, her main income was from the odd jobs she did with her friend Naomi. As of 2021, she had given birth to her baby, was raising her as a single mom, and living in a shared house in Honiara with other young women, but she had not returned to school, nor did she have steady employment.

As explained in Chapter 3, young people who left school or could not find a job right after secondary school followed various pathways. Some youth stayed around the village, drinking in the evenings, and doing odd jobs during the day for money, which they usually spent on beer. These young people were the ones community leaders worried about since they did not listen to their elders, engage much in community activities, or invest much in relationships. Young women often helped their parents or extended family with younger children during the day, which gave them a small way to give back to their families and invest in relationships. Other young people tried to find more consistent work, which usually entailed first attaining certificates through additional schooling at rural training centers or through the SINU second chance education program in Buala, but these programs cost money that they did not always have. In interviews with a few of these young people, they still saw the importance of contributing to their family who helped them in their education. Once they had children of their own, as in the case of Elly, they were motivated to help their children succeed in school and follow different paths than they had done, so they found ways to make money to pay school fees and support their children's education.

All of this shows how important a dense social network is for young people to be successful in school, especially if they live in or continue their education in Honiara. They need family to live with, people to help pay school fees and bus fares, and friends for emotional support. Doing well in school is never just an individual's accomplishment, it is truly the work of a family and a community when a student succeeds.

7.6 Conclusion

Strong relationships are essential for youth to do well in school. As these examples show, multiple types of relationships can meet these needs. Sometimes support comes from one's parents, other times it is from siblings or extended kin, and sometimes it comes from friends. Many of the relationships highlighted by youth fall into the category of a *wantok* and *wanskul*, though most are closer than a *wantok* as they are the immediate friends and family who support youth emotionally and financially. Caregivers in Isabel and Honiara are essential for guidance, love, and financial support for young people. Eva and Ida were both young mothers trying to pursue schooling and work. With the help of their parents and siblings to watch their young children and pay school fees, they could continue their educational and career pursuits.

In Isabel, community, family, and friendship all overlapped. This reflects the close relationships between members of a matrilineage and the fact that nearly everyone in Buala was related in some distant way. It also highlights the importance of ancestral connections to land and the ways family, *kastom*, and religion intertwined throughout Isabel, as explained in Chapter 6. The relationships explained here provided young people with the support they needed for education, but they also embedded them in relationships that tied them to their Isabellian identity and home.

In Honiara, connections with *wantoks* and kin were essential because they provided support when young people were away from home. Relationships in Honiara also extended beyond kin to other people that youth interacted with regularly, whether their neighbors, schoolmates, or fellow church members. The family youth lived with, especially cousins and siblings, were important because they were the ones young people spent the most time with, and they supported each other emotionally and with schoolwork. As explained in Chapter 5, in

Honiara, these connections to family and kin at home were also important because they created one's ethnic identity in the urban space where there were so many different identities that could be claimed. At the same time, youth in Honiara established relationships with other young people they met at school (*wanskul*) and these friends filled kin-like roles in the young people's lives. This was especially important for students who were attending school in Honiara away from their family.

The families of the young people I interviewed still supported them financially. In both Honiara and Isabel, extended family members were the ones who paid school fees and provided money for other expenses. However, for everyone there was an expectation that one day, especially once they got a job, they would give back to their families. This reflects the relationality so important to Melanesia. As family members gave parts of themselves to support students, in return, the students would give part of themselves once they found a well-paid job. Ruth, who I described at the beginning of this chapter, mentioned that in her family there were only two kids. Since her brother had dropped out of school, she said it was her responsibility to support her family. This motivated her to get good grades, stay in school, do well in university, and find a well-paid job after school. Other young people, especially if they were the oldest sibling, felt similar pressure to support their families. Lindstrom (2011, 6) says that deep connection to kin and island villages motivated people in Vanuatu to move to Vila, the capital, so that they could care for their kin especially through paying school fees for siblings, children, nephews, and nieces. These exchange relationships also embedded young people at home, even when they lived far away. This deep connection to family and home similarly motivated youth in the Solomons to do well in school so that they could get a decent job and financially support

their family who gave so much to them, which meant eventually moving to Honiara for schooling or work while remaining connected to their kin at home.

All these examples show the importance of social networks and community for youth. Youth without these connections, like Marta, were unable to stay in school. Youth with connections and support, like Abbi, Kari, and Ruth, made it further in schooling. All these young people were motivated to do well in life so that they could give back to their family who gave so much to them, but some had more opportunities to do so because they had a dense social network on which to rely. For those who were unable to find a high-paying job after schooling or left school early, they still invested in these important relationships in different ways, like caring for aging family members and young children. A student's success in life was not just an individual achievement, it was the success of their family and community who supported them through the obstacles they faced in schooling and employment. This success was important because eventually the young people would give back to the community and family who supported them, continuing the important relationships that shaped their identity.

Chapter 8 Conclusion: Continuing to “*skul gud*”

“*Watnao aim blo yu?*” (What is your aim?) I asked Julie during our group photo elicitation in 2018. “Lawyer,” she replied quietly. This was the same answer she gave me when I had met her three months before. Julie was a leader among her Form 5 peers at Ridge CHS. Her friends said she set a good example for them to be smart, brave, and kind, and her teachers recognized her through an award at graduation for her leadership and character. Julie was driven to “*skul gud*” (do well in school). One of the things she took a picture of as part of her photo project was her school notebooks because she said that they had everything she needed inside to help her study for her upcoming exams (see Image 3.2 in Chapter 3). And a month later, Julie did well on those exams. Not well enough to attain a spot in one of the prestigious secondary schools as she hoped, but well enough to earn a spot back at Ridge CHS for Form 6 without pushing in. As one of eight children, Julie was doing her best to *skul gud* in hopes of giving back to her family one day.

As I sat working through data, listening to interviews, and perusing notes to write this dissertation, I reflected on how my original fieldwork was in many ways just a glimpse in time. A moment where students and teachers let me into their schools and their lives. A moment where a community welcomed me as part of their own and a family adopted me like the daughter of their former anthropologist. Four years have passed since I collected the data. I have tried to stay connected to the community in Solomon Islands through Facebook messenger, but people’s accounts come and go, and the connections are different from when we sat together, shared food, and spent time in *tok stori*. Life has continued for all of us since I left the field. Babies have been born and people who opened their hearts to me have died. Some students I collaborated with, like

Julie, graduated high school and went on to university, while others have followed pathways between school, work, and staying at home. And for many, I have no idea what is happening in their lives now. As I listened to interviews, I returned to what felt like a moment in time that had been on pause through a worldwide pandemic and my own personal life events that kept me from returning to the Solomons. In actuality, life has continued for me and the young people I met as we all pursued our own educational and life journeys. Much has changed over the past four years, but much has also stayed the same.

I wrote this dissertation to share the stories of young people – stories of determination, community, and connection. Stories of young people seeking new opportunities through education while also valuing the *kastom* and community which guide and ground them. As stated in the introduction of this dissertation, the voices of young people are missing from much of the literature on youth. However, I found that if young people are given the space and time to share their stories, they have much to say. I found that when I took the time to talk with youth, I learned a lot about linguistic and social change, the enduring appeal of education for a better life, the strong connections to land and community, and the continuing importance of *kastom* and culture in their lives. Throughout this dissertation, I centered the stories of young people to show the drive they have to *skul gud* even when schooling was challenging and there was no guarantee that they would be able to attain the upward mobility schooling promises. Their motivation to *skul gud* was strong because it was rooted not just in Western individualism, but in relationality and the ability to give back to and remain a part of the community and family who supported their educational journeys.

8.1 Summary of main arguments

This dissertation explored two main questions: First, to understand the educational system in Solomon Islands and how it prepared young people (or not) for life after schooling; and second, to understand what motivated young people to stay in school when there was no guarantee of a job after they finished schooling. Throughout this dissertation, I argued that a connection to home and the relationships therein were a grounding place for youth as they pursued educational opportunities. When challenges in education arose, those with dense social networks and strong ties had support from family to stay in school. Connections to home and kin shaped their identities, motivated them to *skul gud*, and provided a safety net when youth were unable to attain the opportunities that they thought education would bring.

To address the question about what students were learning in schools, I situated my research in two community high schools where I gained a glimpse into what students were learning and the challenges they faced. The specific knowledge students were learning in school would require investigation outside the scope of this project. For those interested in this data, the Ministry of Education regularly publishes evaluations of their education system based on testing and enrollment (such as MEHRD 2016; 2019b; 2022).¹²⁰ Instead, I chose to focus on the underlying things students were learning that were not always obvious in the curriculum, particularly how their knowledge affected their community connections, cultural values, and identities.

In the first half of the dissertation, I examined how the structure of education and the languages used in schools influenced student performance. Chapters 2-4 shared my evaluation of

¹²⁰ These documents are available on the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) website. Previously these could be found at www.mehrd.gov.sb but SIG is redesigning their websites. <https://solomons.gov.sb/ministry-of-education-and-human-resources-development/> may become the new home for these documents if they continue to be shared publicly.

the schooling system in the Solomons, particularly the obstacles students faced to learning and the ways they and their teachers persisted despite these challenges. In Chapter 2, I presented the historical, societal, and linguistic background that was important for understanding the educational system and opportunities for youth, specifically the ways the colonial legacy continued to impact education and the languages spoken. In Chapter 3, I presented the cycle of obstacles to student educational success that I observed. These obstacles included, but were not limited to, exam-centric education, overcrowding, absenteeism, pushing in, the cost of education, and the languages used in education. I also gave examples of the aims of young people and why they were motivated to pursue education despite these obstacles, explaining the non-linear pathways they followed in and out of education. Chapter 4 then zoomed in on one of the obstacles, the languages used in education – English and Solomon Islands Pijin. I examined this obstacle because throughout my fieldwork many of the challenges young people faced in school could be traced back to a lack of English knowledge. In this chapter, I showed the challenges of English immersion education and argued that the colonial legacy impacted the use of both languages in schooling. I also discussed how through translanguaging English teachers were able to use students' full language repertoires to support their learning.

The second half of my dissertation answered the second question of why students remained in school despite the challenges they faced. Cultural values and identities can be hard to observe and difficult to address through interviews alone. The photo elicitation project allowed me to explore these topics through photographs of tangible things that the students identified as important. This alongside participant observation, interviews, and social network analysis helped me to understand the relationships, cultural values, and identities that were most important to young people, and which motivated their educational journeys.

Chapters 5-7 centered on the voices and stories of young people as I explored their ethnic identities, connections to home, and the relationships they valued the most. In Chapter 5, I showed how young people in Honiara claimed an ethnic identity tied to their Indigenous home, even if they have never lived there, through the dances they performed and the jewelry they wore. This connection to home and the fact that each province was considered to have such a connection was an important part of the unity in diversity narrative encouraged by the government and was a grounding place for young people in multiethnic Honiara. Chapter 6 showed the experiences of Isabellian young people and the things they most valued. These included a connection to land, church, community, and *kastom*, which gave them an identity and grounded them as they pursued their education. In this chapter, I also showed how young people intertwined connections to *kastom* and modern influences as they pursued upward mobility. Chapter 7 presented the relationships that young people found most important, particularly those of their caregivers, extended kin, and friends. I explained how a dense social network was essential for the financial and emotional support young people needed to do well in school.

Through all these chapters I showed why young people in Solomon Islands wanted to *skul gud*. Schooling provided them with the possibility of upward mobility through finding a well-paid job, which would allow them to tangibly give back the resources their family had invested in their education. Even if the chances of them doing well in school and finding a decent job were slim, it was the only path they knew to be able to give back to their communities. Although education introduced individualized aims, the relationships with family and home remained a grounding place for young people. Through the financial support of family members, young people were embedded in relationships that connected them to their ancestral land and communities. These connections to home and *kastom* practices also gave young people an ethnic

identity to claim in the multiethnic milieu of Honiara. Although young people in both Honiara and Buala enjoyed modern influences, such as DJ dancing and wearing trousers, they still valued their *kastom* practices and sought ways to engage with both. *Kastom* has always been a resource for the creation of cultural values and identities that value the past but look to the future as the ways of the ancestors blend with new ideas, institutions, and opportunities. These young people were looking to the future and the opportunities they hoped schooling would bring for them and their families, but as they moved forward, their connections to home, *kastom*, and family grounded them and shaped the identities of whom they were becoming. These connections also provided a place to return to when they were unable to attain the promises of education, such as academic success and well-paid jobs.

8.2 Dissertation Contributions

As Lee and Craney (2019) suggested, much of the literature on youth in the Pacific is missing the voices of the young people. For this reason, one of the goals of my dissertation was to share stories and experiences of young people whose voices are often marginalized. I asked young people about the challenges they faced in school, and they talked about the stress preparing for exams, the uncertainty of finances, and the lack of confidence speaking English, among other things. I asked them about their aims and motivations to *skul gud* and they shared dreams to continue in school and find good jobs so they could return the investment their parents made in them. I asked them about the parts of life they found important, and they reflected on their *kastom* practices, their connections to home and land, and the relationships that provided them with support. By providing a glimpse into the lived experiences of youth, this dissertation contributes to recent conversations about youth in the Pacific and more broadly and enhances it

through the specific stories young people shared (for some recent discussions see Amit and Wulff 2022; Craney 2022; Evans 2022; Hicks, McDougall, and Oakeshott 2021; Oakeshott 2021a). The focus on ethnographic narrative, photographs, and stories of young people provided tangible examples to make the dissertation arguments accessible to a wide audience who might be interested in improving the opportunities for young people in the Solomons and elsewhere.

The first half of this dissertation may be of particular interest to anthropologists of education and to educational practitioners in Solomon Islands and similar contexts where they are seeking to improve their schooling systems. The cycle of obstacles I presented in Chapter 3 is difficult to address without finances, time, and comprehensive changes to the education system in Solomon Islands. Yet as the narratives at the end of Chapter 3 showed, students were determined to stay in school because they saw education as the pathway to their futures and finding a well-paid job as the best way to give back to their families. I found that young people desired education that would equip them with the skills needed for employment, but because of a lack of training in technical skills or soft skills like critical thinking, they struggled to find job opportunities when they finished schooling. As a result, like the findings of Munro et al. (2021) in West Papua, once they left secondary school young people moved in and out of various types of schooling, employment opportunities, and periods where they “*stay nomoa*” (just stayed) at home without a particular goal. As such, this chapter also provided insights toward global conversations about the purposes of education for university preparation and vocational training (some examples include Gottfried and Plasman 2018; Guile and Unwin 2019; Maebuta 2008) through considering the skills young people need to attain in secondary school.

Likewise, Chapter 4 is important for international conversations about the role of English in education, particularly in places where English is not the dominant language. Building on the

work of Lanelle Tanangada (2013), Li Wei (2018), and Bonacina-Pugh et. al. (2021), in Chapter 4, I argued that translanguaging was a useful tool for the students and teachers to build on their multilingual repertoires in order to understand school subjects. However, because teachers were not trained in TESOL or other multilingual pedagogical practices, it limited students' success in school. For this reason, I suggested that teachers in Solomon Islands should be trained as TESOL teachers since that is what they are. These findings also contribute to theoretical discussions on linguistic ideology, global and world English(es), and teaching English in international and second language contexts (see Alsagoff et al. 2012; Pennycook 2007; Phillipson 2017) through presenting a case study of educational languages in Solomon Islands. Additionally, many conversations are happening within Oceania about the importance of using Pacific languages in education (McDougall and Zobule 2021; Tanangada 2013; Vandeputte-Tavo 2013; Vernaudon 2015). This chapter is useful for thinking through the importance of using Pacific creoles, particularly Melanesian pidgins, in schools.

The second half of the dissertation contributed to conversations about *kastom*, youth values, identity, and relationships in the Pacific. In all these chapters, I centered the voices of the young people who participated in my project by drawing my analysis out of the photographs and social networks they shared with me. These chapters contributed to two major bodies of work within Melanesian anthropology – that of *kastom* and Melanesian personhood. In these chapters, I show how *kastom* and relationships remained important for young people even as they engaged with modern influences. Prior to the Tension people in Honiara were distancing themselves from their island-based identities and the obligations of kin at home in order to claim a more urban identity (see Goberman-Hill 1999). Chapter 5 provided a perspective of Honiara youth post-Tension and emphasized the way young people claimed ethnic identities as part of national unity

through their kastom practices. It also contributed to the many discussions about the ever-changing urban Pacific and the young people who are shaping urban life (Lindstrom and Jourdan 2017; Kraemer and Stern 2022).

Chapters 6 and 7 showed how land, kastom practices, Christianity, and community relationships were inextricably intertwined for young people from Isabel province. Even though young people were pursuing upward mobility and the modern influences they brought, they remained connected to their home and kastom. As such, this dissertation contributed to the ongoing discussions about kastom (such as Brimacombe 2016; Jolly 1997; Keesing 1982; Lindstrom and White 1993; Lindstrom 2008) by showing how young people were engaging with and transforming it. Relationships with kin provided young people with the emotional and financial support to do well in school. Being able to give back to their family who supported them was what motivated young people, which reflected the importance of dividual personhood and reciprocal relationships in Melanesia. The literature on Melanesian personhood is vast, but my dissertation builds particularly on the classic work of Strathern (1988) and the writings on Christianity and relationality (such as McDougall 2009; Robbins 2004) to show how education provided opportunities for individualism while also investing in important relationships.

If the voices of young people are missing from the literature, when designing research projects it is important to find a way to create conversations where youth are comfortable sharing their stories. The photo elicitation methodology I used presents ideas for scholars hoping to create participant-led research projects, particularly with young people. The photo elicitation project allowed young people to reveal topics that were of importance to them, instead of me directing the whole conversation. This helped remove the power differential between me and them and opened the door to insightful exchanges grounded in the young people's lived

experiences. In this way, my research presents a contribution to the growing body of literature on Photovoice and photo elicitation among young people and marginalized populations (Cappello 2005; Castleden, Garvin, and First Nation 2008; Johnson, Pfister, and Vindrola-Padros 2012; Strack, Magill, and McDonagh 2004; Wang 1999). This methodology was particularly useful in educational contexts as it provided a way for young people to express themselves outside of the institutional context. In the article I co-authored with Villavicencio Miranda (2024) we explain how we used this method in two different contexts and the important insights it provided, as well as areas for further research.

These findings may inform further research and curriculum development in contexts where policymakers and teachers seek to honor local practices while equipping students with the skills needed in an ever-globalizing world. On a local level, my findings can help Solomon Islands policymakers and teachers understand the struggles youth face in education. This understanding will help them design curriculum and policies to be student-centered and to recognize the skills and knowledge needed for local livelihoods as well as upward mobility. More broadly, these findings contribute to conversations about the purposes of education and the ways that global models of education impact local knowledge and cultural values.

8.3 Areas for future research

In many ways, this dissertation could have been two separate dissertations – one looking at the obstacles of schooling and one looking at the lives of young people. I chose to intertwine them both because it gave a fuller picture of the experiences of young people as they pursued education and opportunities after schooling. Because my dissertation covered a large scope, there are many avenues of further research that could delve deeper into my arguments. This

dissertation provides a starting place for further conversations and research about the educational systems and young people in the Solomons and the broader Pacific.

Each of the obstacles I presented in Chapter 3 could be an in-depth study. My dissertation laid a framework for understanding how these obstacles interconnect to affect student success. More detailed classroom observations, further interviews with teachers and students about the topics, and examination of test results could provide a more comprehensive perspective of the challenges of education in Solomon Islands. Additionally, there is room for comparison with other schools in Solomon Islands. I presented examples from two community high schools because often more prestigious secondary schools are prioritized in research (such as Oakeshott 2021a). However, comparison of the schooling situation in rural contexts, in other provinces, and at other schools within Honiara is necessary to understand the schooling situation more broadly and to develop plans to improve education. Another area of study would be a longitudinal study of students, five, ten and fifteen years later, evaluating the opportunities and challenges they faced and how their education prepared them for this.

Similarly, Chapter 4 on the use of English and Pijin addresses a topic I pursued for only the last few months of my research. My analysis was metalinguistic; I focused on what the teachers described happening in the classrooms and compared this to my own observations. To really understand the language use in classrooms, more classroom interactions need to be documented and analyzed at a wide variety of schooling contexts. Since I completed data collection, there have been changes in the education policy to incorporate Pijin and vernacular languages into education (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2023; MEHRD Press 2024b). A follow-up project could examine how these changes are being implemented in schools and if these policies have improved student learning. Additionally, the language ideologies affecting

the use of Pijin and English extend beyond the classroom, so there is room to build on my work and existing scholarship (such as Jourdan 2013; 2018; Jourdan and Angeli 2014b) to continue exploring these in other contexts.

8.4 Concluding Thoughts

“Me try best tumas for balancem school n take care lo parents” (I am trying my very best to balance school and take care of my parents), Julie wrote to me via Facebook messenger in September 2024. It had been a few months since we had messaged and I saw on Facebook that her father had been in the hospital, so I reached out to see how she was doing. Julie said that both of her parents were extremely sick, and she was doing her best to take care of them since her older siblings were away working in the provinces. After we discussed her parents’ health, I apologized for messaging her so early in the morning, since it was just after 5:00 am in Honiara. She said, *“no worries me wakeup for duim study lo lelebet lo early morning.”* (I woke up to do a little bit of my studies in the early morning). I had not wanted to ask about school given her family situation and I was surprised she was still pursuing schooling when she was now responsible for taking care of her parents.

After finishing Form 6 at Ridge CHS, Julie took classes to “upgrade” and improve her scores so that she could apply for a bachelor’s in business at SINU. There had been semesters where she could not attend school or take very many classes because her family did not have enough money for the fees. She had struggled to attain a scholarship, but because her father had steady work, they were able to afford her university training. As of September 2024 she was in her third year of the program at SINU and hoped to graduate in 2025. Her older siblings told her

to take a break from school while caring for her parents, but Julie was determined to finish the degree she started even with the family problems she was facing.

Julie is another example of the drive young people have to “*skul gud*,” which is always intertwined with relationships. Because she had a dense social network that included people to support her financially, she had been able to continue in schooling even without a scholarship. When her parents became ill, Julie focused her attention on caring for them but was determined to still finish the degree she had been working so hard to attain. There was no guarantee she would have a job when she finished school. And there was no guarantee she would still be able to afford school with her parents’ illnesses. However, Julie had made it past so many obstacles already – learning English, doing well in overcrowded classrooms, studying for exams, improving her knowledge so she could apply to university – that she was determined to continue to *skul gud* for herself and her family.

My hope is that this dissertation will not be seen as a prescriptive or a definitive answer to the challenges facing youth. As with anything, the challenges are complicated and intertwined and require nuance and understanding to bring change. There are structural obstacles that make it difficult for young people to *skul gud*, but these challenges cannot be separated from the relationships that young people find important. As in the example of Julie described above and other young people throughout the dissertation, even if someone is bright enough to do well in school, the support of family can make or break opportunities for success. The knowledge taught in school is interconnected with the values and identities young people learn at home and from their families. Even as schooling introduces individual incentives for success, relationships with family motivate young people to *skul gud*. Likewise, as schools encourage national unity and

upward mobility, this attainment is only possible when one is embedded in relationships and identities of home.

My goal in this dissertation has been to increase understanding of the experiences of young people in Solomon Islands. As such, I hope this dissertation serves as the beginning of a conversation and opens the door to further *tok stori* – a *tok stori* I can continue with the teachers, schools, students, and educational officials I have met, as well as one they continue among themselves. My dissertation provides a glimpse in time, but it is a starting place for conversations about schooling practices on a local and national level. My findings have the potential to help Solomon Islands teachers and policy makers address the challenges facing Solomon Islands youth during and after schooling. I hope they see in this dissertation the creativity of teachers, the determination of youth, and the potential of Solomon Islanders more broadly.

I have tried to tell the story through the eyes of Solomon Islands' young people since their voices are often marginalized and ignored, yet they are the future of the country. Through telling the stories of young people, my hope is that students are inspired to continue in their education and *skul gud* while remaining connected to their communities. Similarly, I hope teachers are encouraged to keep doing their best to overcome challenges and see their students succeed. Finally, my hope is that the findings stir education officials to continue the *tok stori* and re-evaluate the educational structures in place to consider what will bring the best opportunities to young people in Solomon Islands.

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21. What don't you like about Honiara? _____
22. Anything else you want to tell me? _____

Student Survey Jejevo CHS

1. What Form/Year are you? _____
2. What is your gender? _____
3. What is your age? _____
4. What province are you from? _____
5. Which provinces have you lived in? (circle all that apply)
 Central Choiseul Isabel Malaita Makira Temotu Western
 Rennell-Bellona Guadalcanal province area Honiara Other _____
6. What village/community do you live in now? _____
7. Who do you live with? _____
8. If your mother or father live somewhere else, where do they live? (If they live with you, write "parents live with me") _____
9. List all the languages you know and who you speak them with (Ex. Meringue with mother, Pijin with siblings) _____
10. List the schools you have attended during secondary (Include the Form, name, and province)
11. Why did you come to Jejevo CHS? _____
12. What is your aim when you finish school? _____
13. How will you reach this aim/goal? _____
14. Where do you want to live when you finish school? _____
15. What is your favorite subject and why? _____
16. What do you like about life in Isabel? _____
17. What don't you like about life in Isabel? _____
18. If you could say or ask anything to leaders in your church, school or community, what would you say or ask? _____
19. Anything else you want to tell me? _____

Grereo Festival Surveys

In person survey

I am from _____ in Isabel Province. Being Isabellian means

Watnao most important part of identity or heritage blo yu?

Watnao bae helpim yumi fo future?

Your Age _____ Circle: Male or Female

IPYF Facebook Survey

Where are you from in Isabel Province?

What does it mean to be Isabellian?

Watnao most important part of identity or heritage blo yu?

Watnao bae helpim yumi fo future?

Where do you live right now?

Are you male or female?

How old are you?

Appendix B: Sample interview questions

Note: I conducted all interviews in Solomon Islands Pijin. As the interviews were open-ended, these questions represent a sampling of the questions asked but are not an exhaustive list. I began with questions like these but allowed the conversation to develop naturally and used these as a guide.

Life History

Where were you born? Where did you grow up?
Where are your parents from?
Are you married? Do you have children?
What are some challenges you have faced? How have you overcome?

School History

What year are you in school?
Where did you go to primary/secondary school? Why did you go to school there?
Why did you leave school? Will you go back to school?
After you finish school, what do you want to do (go home, stay in Honiara, go to university, find work, etc.)? Where do you want to live?
What is your aim? How will you reach your aim?
What is your favorite subject in school? Why?
Do you prefer going to school at home or somewhere else?

Home Life (especially for youth who left school)

Why did you come home after school? Did you have any struggles when you returned home?
What do you do while at home? (Work, help with church, help with family, etc.)?
What do you like to do in your free time?
What do you like about life at home? What do you like about life in town (Honiara)? Where do you prefer to live? Why?
Anything you think would be good for students to learn in school?
What is something that is important about your home or culture? What is something that you think is important for children to learn about your culture?

Language

What was the first language you learned? Do you still speak and understand that language?
What other languages do you know? How well do you know them? Who do you speak them with?
What languages do you use in Honiara (at school, with friends, where you live...)?
What languages do you use at home (at school, with friends, where you live...)?
Do you find English hard or easy? Why?

Appendix C: Photo elicitation instructions and worksheet questions

Photo Project Instructions

Note: Given to the students in English and Pijin, only English provided here as an example.

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of the Photovoice project. During the next week, please take pictures of places, people, and things that show what your life is like and what is important to you.

If you take a picture of a person's face or something that could identify the person, you must ask their permission and ask them to sign the consent form. If you take a picture of someone under 18 years, you must also ask permission of their parents and ask the parents to sign a consent form.

As a reminder, do not take pictures of people in any place that is considered private such as: in a toilet or shower, in a medical office, clinic, or pharmacy, at a bank or ATM, or at any other place that could reveal confidential information or bring shame to the subject of the picture. If someone asks you to turn off the camera, do not take pictures in that place. If by accident, you photograph something considered private, please delete the photograph immediately. If you or someone you photograph has questions about the project, I (Rachel Hicks) can be contacted any time at ph. 7505770 or rdhicks@ucsd.edu.

Photo Elicitation Worksheet Sample

Note: The students were asked to answer the following questions for each of the photos they chose.

For each picture, please describe who or what is in the photo, where it was taken, and why this represents something important in your life.

Picture Code _____

Who/what is in the photo?

Where was it taken?

Why is this important to you?

Appendix D: Glossary of select Pijin words

This is a quick guide to definitions of the Pijin words I refer to most frequently in the dissertation. I have also included citations and definitions throughout the text. It does not include all the words used in the transcripts and examples. For a comprehensive dictionary see: Jourdan, Christine., and Ellen Maebiru. 2002. *Pijin: A Trilingual Cultural Dictionary : Pijin-Inglish-Franis, Pijin-English-French, Pijin-Anglais-Français*. Pacific Linguistics; 526. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University.

Akson chorus – dancing to modern Christian music with actions and movements

Hom – home; the place or village of origin; usually used to refer to the place where someone’s ancestors are from, or extended family still lives and which the speaker has rights to land; See Section 1.1.1

Kasol – someone who does odd jobs to make money

Kastom – the cultural practices of a group such as their rituals, arts, and dress as well as their religious, political, and social structures and processes; See section 1.1.2

Laflaf - laugh

Liu – from a Malaitan word for wander around; used to describe someone who is unemployed with nothing to do

Lokol – local; used to describe an unsophisticated person from a rural area, but used in my dissertation to describe the dance club in Buala

Masta liu – a young person who lacks a job and wanders aimlessly around town; See Section 1.1.1 and Jourdan 1995a

Ples – the place of origin or home village where someone is from

Sa’ale olo – a kastom dance of Isabel involving a three-count beat, quick footwork, and a dancing stick for women; the dance name is from an Indigenous language of Isabel

Sem – shame; shyness; ashamed; See Section 4.2.1

Sensim – return; reimburse; give change; See Chapter 7

Skul gud – do well in school

Stay nomoa – just stay or stay at home without anything to do; used by youth to describe what they would do if they did not pass to the next level of schooling.

Stori or stori stori – chat; casually talking with one another; tell a story

Tok stori - a form of conversation reflective of the oral traditions of Melanesia where a problem is raised, and people reflect on and dialogue about the problem together; See Section 1.4.2

Wanskul – school mate

Wantok – literally one talk; someone who shares the same language; member of the same ethnolinguistic group; who is identified as a *wantok* shifts depending on the context; See Section 1.1.1