Challenges for Rural School Leaders in a Developing Context: The Case of Solomon Islands

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Abstract—Thirty-eight rural school leaders in Solomon Islands responded to a questionnaire aimed at identifying their perceptions of work challenges. The data analysis points to an overwhelming percentage of school leaders feeling they face multifaceted problems in their work settings, including such challenges as untrained teachers, lack of funding, limited learning and teaching resources, and land disputes. The latter in particular is beyond the school leader's jurisdiction; addressing it needs urgent attention from the principal stakeholder(s). Such challenges, seemingly tangential to the business of schooling, inadvertently affect the provision of good-quality education. The findings demonstrate that contextual challenges raise questions about what powers leadership at school level has to deal with some of them. The suggestion is advanced for the significant place-conscious leadership development to help address some community and cultural challenges. Implications of this paper are likely to be relevant to other similar contexts in the Pacific region and beyond.

Keywords—Rural school leaders, leadership, challenges, Solomon Islands, contextual factors.

I. INTRODUCTION

SCHOOL leaders in all settings require suitable integration of leadership knowledge and skills to respond effectively to the many challenges that beset them in their day-to-day work. However, it is argued that the rural context creates additional and distinctive challenges for school leaders [1], [2] because rural schools have unique characteristics and traits that differentiate them markedly from those in urban areas [1], [3], [4]. These unique challenges, in turn, impede school leaders' attempts to carry out their multifaceted roles effectively. Sustained improvement in children's academic performance is placed more at risk, with an ever-widening learning outcomes gap between rural and urban children [5]. However, with effective leadership, schools in rural locations could be rescued from the downward spiral. Literature pertinent to rural education illustrates wide variations in how the concept rural is defined and applied in each jurisdiction. In fact there are contested views on what constitutes rural [6]. Some scholars claim about the confusion encapsulating the concept [7], [8] and others claim that the diversity of rural communities and rural schools the world over makes it

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difficult to arrive at a universally acceptable definition [9], [10]. Some studies have defined rural education as schools in sparsely populated areas [11]. Others have tended to use small rather than rural when referring to rural schools [6]; in sparsely populated areas school size is bound to be small, which appears to be widely accepted in the international literature [11], [12]. On the other hand, [3] pointed out that it is more than size of the school, low population density, and geography. Overall, the characteristics of rural schools are unique. In the case of Fiji, a small developing nation in the Pacific region, a rural school defined on the basis of its distance from an urban area. According to this definition, rural schools fall into one of the three categories: i) 10–20km from the town boundary, ii) equal to or greater than 20km from the town boundary and iii) very remote schools. As defining characteristics, distance from urbanized areas to isolated and remote parts of the country with low population density provide some indications about rural schools but they do not tell the whole story. Generally speaking, each rural school and community is unique and successful operation of a school in such circumstances warrants the exercise of best leadership practices.

In terms of socioeconomic factors, rural areas are vastly different from urban areas. People are dependent on subsistence economy and tend to have a communal life style. In such prevailing circumstances, rural schools may not receive the kind of support and resources schools in urban areas expect [13]-[15]. Because the communities tend to be economically stressed, if not outright distressed, the schools struggle for resources. Numerous negative impacts on the learning–teaching process could include suboptimal pedagogical practices [16] and schools' inability to implement the full range of the curriculum [15] and [17].

With regard to economic distress of rural communities, a glaring example is Fiji's case as highlighted by [18] who aptly points outthat because of their size, the socioeconomic status of the rural communities and their geographical location, rural schools are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to funding.

Another challenge for rural school leaders is establishing a healthy school–community partnership in the provision of education. The importance of family and community involvement for school improvement efforts is well documented in the literature particularly in support of children's performance in school work [8], [19] and [20]. However, rural education literature highlights difficult community relations [21], [22]. Ideally, a healthy and powerful relationship between the school and community is

based on the premise "that these stake holders should have some input in the educational programs and process that are initiated and implemented in their schools, especially . . . that are related to enriching learning and student behavior" [3]. Additionally, family and community involvement play important roles in rural schools' educational planning and development. However, most rural communities are uneducated and this could be a hindrance in their attitude towards and support of children's education. The general attitude of the parents is that teachers and schools are responsible for children's education and not them.

The single most critical challenge highlighted in various empirical studies is the lack of qualified teachers, seen as posing considerable challenges to school leaders in organizing learning and teaching [23]. This could be a reason why rural schools are often identified as 'underperforming schools' compared to urban schools. Lingam, in [24] conducted research in the Fijian context on preparation of teachers for work in rural primary schools bluntly indicated that for effective pedagogical practices in rural settings, "teachers need adequate professional preparation during their initial teacher education programs and also ongoing education and training whilst they are in service". Reference [25] also emphasizes rural-responsive teacher education programs. As far back as the 1990s, [26] cautioned the stakeholders on the need to understand the specific circumstances in Pacific Islands when designing strategies for teachers' professional needs.

Academic qualifications, pre-service and in-service training, experience, content knowledge and skills in learning and teaching are some strong indicators of teacher quality [27]. Available data from other developing contexts such as in Africa suggest that large proportions of rural teachers lack adequate training, qualifications and content knowledge. Likewise, a study analyzing staff qualifications of some rural schools compared to urban schools in Fiji indicated that fewer university graduates work in remote schools compared to urban schools. In contrast, more than half the staff, in all the urban schools, was university graduates. The inescapable conclusion is that a distinguishing feature of many rural schools in Fiji is their relatively high number of less qualified teachers. Teachers with limited knowledge and skills in teaching in rural settings are likely to have a negative impact on all children, but more so on the 'at risk' students [24]. In such circumstances rural school leaders struggle to improve the core business of learning–teaching in order to narrow the achievement gaps between rural children and their urban counterparts.

In rural areas, people's traditional beliefs and practices are still very much alive and valued and these may contradict what the school intends to encourage and promote [28]. Some traditional beliefs and practices may act as hurdles to school leaders if they do not have an awareness of the cultural environment in which they work. Religious and other interest groups can also have a powerful influence on various dimensions of the school organization [24]. For example, in rural areas people generally tend to have a close-knit

relationship with everyone. Since rural culture values face-to-face oral communication highly, a school leader's request, say for technological improvements, is likely to be misunderstood and likely to be unfunded. Further, vernacular-speaking residents with little or no English may preponderate in rural communities and they value their mother tongue. Meeting the educational needs of the children of contemporary times requires resources that hitherto were not needed. Consequently, the community's lack of understanding of modern day education can present a major challenge to school leaders working in rural settings where the community is not willing to keep abreast with latest developments in education.

As mentioned earlier, each school is unique in its combination of situational variables such as school size, school location, governance, parents, the nature and level of activity of the parent body, staffing, the experience and commitment of teachers and other staff and school culture. The values, beliefs, customs and rituals of the locations in which schools are, also contribute to some formidable challenges faced by rural school leaders. Reference [30] distinguished three major categories: a) cultural, b) community and c) economic challenges. Likewise [31] suggested three main categories of challenge: a) physical environment, b) social environment and c) school environment. It is essential to point out that while not all the challenges may be visible in a single school, they are generally associated with rural schools. A good understanding of the rural context will help school leaders appreciate the complexities and challenges of their leadership role [6] Adoption of a 'rural lens' can help achieve a deeper understanding of the situation in rural areas [32].

The literature reviewed illustrates a myriad of unique challenges that separately or in combination have the potential to "exert significant influence on the lived experience of [school leaders] in small rural schools" [6]. Emanating from the particular sociocultural environment together with the physical environment, these challenges can be a constraint on school leaders in the quality of the education they can deliver [33]. Interactively, the negative sociocultural environment and the physical environment can adversely affect school leaders' own attitudes, values and beliefs, as well as the communities' unresponsive practices towards education. [34] notes that the rural context has "its own set of community identifiers that make rural schools dramatically different from their metropolitan counterparts … [and the] goals and purposes of schooling and educational renewal processes appropriate for urban and suburban schools may be inappropriate for rural schools" . This appears to be an authentic assessment and in such communities the values and beliefs about the role of education can be very different from their urban counterparts. Some rural communities may even devalue education. As [33] aptly pointed out, the community's perspectives are "shaped by the socio-cultural context, moderated by the policy agenda and influenced by school leaders' own beliefs and expectations about communities". Even rural school leaders' negative views about ruralness itself could give rise to more obstacles than possibilities. This demonstrates that leadership

is context bound and that "…contextual adaptation of distinctive styles" is to be encouraged for the purpose of school improvement and effectiveness [35]. School leaders need to have a better understanding of the place, such as by reading the situation well and taking constructive steps to deal with the challenges professionally. Having an understanding of the mentality of a rural community is vital to ensuring school success. In a similar vein, the idea of place-conscious capacity-building of leaders would be step in the right direction [13] in the long-run to ensure school leaders cope with any complex issues faced in rural settings. To mount a leadership preparation program for the specific challenges of each school is not really feasible [36]. On the whole, effective school leaders engage continuously in reading and rereading the situation and evaluating how to adjust and adapt their behaviors to suit the context [37]. However, school leaders in rural locations are subjected to a complex set of challenges that may all too easily be beyond the scope of their professional preparation and this could hinder in the provision of sustainable quality education.

II. CASE STUDY

A. Context of Study

Solomon Islands is a small developing nation in the South Pacific, located between 5 and 12 degrees south latitude and 155 and 170 degrees east longitude, about 1,860 kilometers north-east of Australia [38]. The 922 islands are scattered across a vast area of ocean (about 1.34 million square kilometers) with a total land area of 28,369 square kilometers. The country is divided into nine provinces: Choiseul, Isabel, Western, Malaita, Central, Guadalcanal, Rennell and Bellona, Makira/Ulawa, and Temotu. The distance between the most western and the most eastern islands is about 1,500 km [39]. The Santa Cruz Islands are closer to the northern islands of Vanuatu and are the most isolated islands and this gives some indication about ruralness here in the Solomon Islands. The capital city, Honiara, is located on the island of Guadalcanal. The total population of the country is about 500,000 [40] most of whom live in rural areas [41]. Despite the scattered nature of the islands, the efforts of government and various religious denominations have established schools in even the most remote settlements to enable children to have easy access to education. Apart from teachers, no other public servants are found serving in remote and isolated communities. The country's economic resources are unevenly distributed and this appeared to be a cause for the ethnic conflict in 1998 [39]. Overall, Solomon Islands is not a rich country in economic terms, and it depends on overseas aid for most of its educational development projects. Also it is interesting to note that in the Solomon Islands there is a great diversity in the languages spoken and culturally, it has a strong want ok system (speaking same language) [42].

Because of the geography of the islands, government has decentralized education to the Provincial Education Authority. The Provincial Education Inspectorates look after all the schools that fall within their Province. This arrangement, though, by no means circumvents the considerable difficulties staff from the office face in visiting all the remote schools in their respective provinces. Air travel is possible in some cases but is an expensive option; domestic fares to some islands exceed the air fare to Fiji. In most cases, speed boats are used but during bad weather this a high risk to the staff.

In Solomon Islands promotion to a school leadership position is usually based on the recommendation of the Provisional Education Inspectorates but the final say rests with the Solomon Islands Teaching Service Commission. Populations in the Pacific Islands nations are small and people tend to know each other and have interdependent kin and other networks, which can make a minefield of the selection process and procedure.

Various educational reforms have led the Ministry of Education to realize the significance of leadership preparation and sought funding assistance from NZAID to help with the training of school leaders [43]. The University of the South Pacific (USP) was chosen for mounting the training program with a Diploma in Educational Leadership award. The training program consists of eight courses. The Ministry of Education selects about 30 school heads at a time to undergo the training, which takes almost 2 years to complete. Courses are run in face-to-face mode during school holidays and also through print mode during the semesters. At the time of this study, three cohorts of school leaders, each consisting of about 30 leaders, had completed the training program and received their Diploma in Educational Leadership.

B. Sample

For this study, the researchers considered it professionally sound to target a specific group – in this case, those school leaders who were enrolled in USP's leadership course offered during the winter flexi-school in July 2013, the third in the series in the integrated package of courses in the Diploma in Educational Leadership program for the cohort. The resultant purposive sample of 38 school heads was invited to participate in the study. Seven were females and the rest were males. At the time of this study, most (90 %) of these school leaders were still serving in rural locations; two of them had been transferred to urban schools on promotion. Thus all leaders had rural exposure and on average had five years of rural school headship experience.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire adopted for collecting the data consisted of both open-ended and closed ended questions relating to challenges facing the school leaders. It was designed on the basis of a synthesis of the literature reviewed, and the items were selected and constructed on the basis of the principal author's work experiences in the Pacific region. The questionnaire listed 11 contextual variables and the participants were asked to critically reflect on their rural leadership experience and rate each of the factors on a four-point Likert scale (1 = most challenging factor; 4 = least challenging factor), according to the impact of the challenges on their leadership practices. This provided the quantitative

data. In addition, the participants were asked to choose and comment on two of the most challenging factors experienced by them in their professional work. The feedback from this provided the qualitative data.

Analysis of the quantitative data used the common statistical mean. The items having means of lower than 2.5 were categorized as most challenging factors and those above the mean of 2.5 were rated as least challenging. Relevant quotations from the qualitative data, especially from the free response section, are presented to provide further insights into how the challenge was experienced and handled. As suggested by [44] with reference to qualitative data, "some statements carry a rich density of meaning in a few words".

The questionnaire was administered at the end of the flexi-school in Solomon Islands in July 2013. The principal researcher introduced the questionnaire by explaining its purpose and how the findings could assist educational personnel in the central and provincial education authorities. He distributed and collected the completed questionnaires personally, yielding a 100% return rate. Confidentiality of the details of the participants was ensured; that is, as had been explained to the participants who volunteered to take part in the study, the data were treated in a way that protected the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

III. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In this section the quantitative results are presented first, followed by the qualitative data.

A. Quantitative Data

The analysis of the quantitative data is presented in Table I. A perusal shows that out of the total of 11 factors, only four were rated as least challenging and the remaining 7 as most challenging factors faced by the rural school leaders. The table shows that most of the school leaders feel they are faced with some daunting challenges in their day-to-day work. These challenges, listed here in Table I in descending order, include untrained teachers, funding, teaching resources, parents, school boards, traditional leaders and land disputes. The least challenging factors in descending order are the Provincial Education Authority, communication, transport and discipline.

B. Qualitative Data

Asked to list and comment on two of the factors they faced, the majority of the school leaders highlighted untrained teachers as the most difficult challenge associated with rural school leadership. Inadequacies of funding and teaching resources, and other factors followed quite closely. Some of their comments are presented below.

A sufficient number of adequately prepared teachers of the desired quality can contribute positively to improvement in all facets of school organization. For all the school leaders (100 per cent) the posting of untrained teachers to their schools had proven a major challenge. The following extracts from their responses are indicative of the despair induced by the shortage of qualified teachers:

. . . untrained people . . . do not have appropriate skills and knowledge about the teaching profession.

TABLE I
CHALLENGES FACING RURAL SCHOOL LEADERS

Challenges	Group Mean	Standard Deviation
Quality of Teachers	1.5	0.43
Funding allocation	1.6	0.54
Availability of teaching-learning resources	2.1	0.33
Community engagement	2.3	0.47
Support from School boards	2.4	0.55
Traditional Leaders	2.4	0.23
Land Disputes	2.4	0.41
Provincial Education Authority	2.5	0.52
Communication	2.6	0.56
Transport	2.7	0.66
Discipline	2.8	0.33

They will not perform to the standard expected for quality learning and teaching and the children will suffer. Teachers are the most important resource and foremost, they lack competence in the subject areas they are teaching. In the case of Solomon Islands we have employed the highest number of unqualified teachers, we are destroying the future of children.

Most [untrained teachers] are finding it very confusing and difficult to teach some of the core subjects well, especially Maths and English . . . I find it challenging to delegate responsibilities to the teachers . . . Supervision and monitoring them has added extra responsibility for me as school leader to the existing roles. I have to conduct staff development programmes each fortnight for them. These activities require time, effort and in all commitment. The controlling authority should equally distribute trained teachers instead of untrained teachers, but they never live up to equitable and fair distribution of qualified teachers to schools in the rural areas.

In my school presently there are more untrained teachers than trained ones. Most classes are taught by these teachers and the standard of learning for the school children is academically poor... Due to this, most school children are still illiterate even though they reached class six.

Unless schools are in a healthy financial position, they are not able to provide better resources and facilities to enrich children's learning experiences. All the school leaders (100 per cent) indicated insufficient funds for their schools as a major hindrance to school improvement. Typical comments from this group of rural school leaders illustrate this:

The Government and the aid donor (NZAID) provide school grants to schools but do not allow schools to spend money according to their contextual needs. Instead, the Government (Ministry of Education) provides a school grant manual which strictly guides school principals/Head teachers to spend money according to eligible expenses only. For example, 50 per cent of funding must be spent on learning/teaching materials in contrast to 10 per cent for capital works and

infrastructure etc. This is suitable in New Zealand because they haven't got leaking roofs or poor facilities like poor rural schools in Solomon Islands. Thus, priority for spending of funds is not genuine and parental perception to school grants is a major challenge because of government funding.

Funds are most valuable resources; if the school is to run and function well there must be sufficient money . . . to pay for expenses such as learning–teaching resources, food in boarding schools, infrastructure and other operational costs. In the real-life situation, schools in the rural parts of Solomon Islands have very limited funds . . . not enough compared to the needs of school and the prices of things sold in shops are too expensive.

Availability of suitable resources can facilitate school work for both teachers and children. All these school leaders (100 per cent) indicated that their schools did not have all the educational resource materials to allow learning–teaching of good quality to occur. The problems related to inadequacy of teaching resources are exemplified in this comment:

There are lots of old text books with many pages missing and are not usable. Very few books have all the pages. This means teachers have to carry a set with him or her to a class then do the same to the next class. A lot of times students do not manage to copy all the exercises and they must try their best to check with others who might have completed copying the exercises. On the other hand, each set of text books [should] have a teacher's guide but to date, there is no teacher's guide for almost every single set of text books, therefore teachers have to cram on whatever they can do to use as a guide.

Parental support of school activities focused on children's education can be instrumental in bringing about improvements in the school. Most of these rural school leaders (80%) typically perceived, though, that enlisting and maintaining parental support and involvement in their children's education is a major and dispiriting challenge for them:

Parents' . . . foremost responsibility especially in very remote schools is to give the school as much community support as possible. For this school, however, parent support and involvement in school activities is lacking. They often didn't turn up for work. For example, the completion of a head teacher's house and repairing of a staff kitchen [had been] scheduled and announced for work since the beginning of this academic year, but was just ignored and held up to this date . . . In addition . . . home support and caring for their children [and their] work is further poor. Parents even use their kids' school exercise book pages to wrap with cut tobacco for smoking. They attach a very low value to education.

Land disputes force parents to neglect school support, but the degree of valuing education by parents with minimal educational background have worsened the level of parental responsibilities. The parents are lacking in areas such as payment of school fees, providing school uniforms, attending Parents Teachers Association (PTA) meetings, assisting in children's homework and the majority of rural children even go to school without breakfast. The attitude and behavior of parents concerning school participation and involvement is a challenge in my school.

Apart from the central office and the Provincial Education Authority, the school board of management plays an important role in the overall affairs of the school. Those people who make up the board should have a vision of continuous improvement of the school in all areas. However, a majority (80 per cent) of the school leaders had a lot of difficulties with their school boards. Indeed, the following sample of responses from the school leaders shows that the leaders became quite vocal on this matter:

The School Board of Management controls the affairs of the whole school; it has a very big impact on its decisions to the welfare of the whole school. In the context of my school . . . the Board becomes a barrier to the quality and development of expected standard of education for children. For instance, the Board did not accept some new and positive changes or ideas/practices . . . as a way of creating a sound and competitive environment. For example, the Board did not accept the idea of creating two separate committees (primary and secondary sectors), when the heads or leaders of both sectors are not working together. Further to that they hinder the chance of creating a sound and competitive environment which leads to quality learning, by ignoring strategies like formation of smaller associations (students association) within the school which can create competition within students themselves and thus, improve learning and the general standard of education in the school and for the children. Furthermore, the Board consists of many uneducated stubborn people. [Instead of fostering active involvement of catchment communities (community participation) in the school development; work programs, planning etc. . . .] this Board ignores community participation and entertains the use of money to pay contractors for any development in the school.

At all levels of education foresighted people are needed in order to help children receive the best possible education. Even people in the community are significant in this endeavor, particularly the traditional leaders, who have strong influence on all aspects of the community including the school. However, the responses show that school leaders (70 per cent) find the traditional leaders appearing on their lengthy list of difficulties, and it is by no means unknown for [the traditional leaders] to stir up cultural conflict at the school-community interface:

. . . In the context of my school, the chiefs seem to over influence (authoritative) the running and welfare of the school. For example, when there is death in the nearby village, the chief has to order the school leader to suspend classes until such time after burial . . . and that takes 2–3 days . . . what a waste of precious time! Further to that, the chief interferes in the activities of the school. For example, social activities such as dancing, indoor games that involve music and night movies are not allowed in the school compound. All these become major hindrances to the socialization of children. Instead chiefs want to interfere by imposing cultural values and practices; i.e. girls shouldn't wear trousers in the school

compound even during field trips and sports. When there are special meetings for chiefs, the school has to suspend classes because they will use the classrooms for meeting.

Ownership of resources such as land can also be a cancerous problem for all if the boundaries have not been clearly demarcated and customary land sales have not been properly executed. Most of the school leaders (70 per cent) expressed grave concern about dispute over the land on which the school is situated, as the following comments demonstrate:

Since the school is located on customary land, school development and expansion depends on the decision of the land owning tribe. Just recently the school chairman and I were conducting a second time negotiation with the tribe pursuing with the aim to expand the school area and confirm boundary marks to cater for the school's future developments but still other tribal members maintain their objections. Through important explanations and positive alternatives expressed but still stubbornness by the tribesmen remains. Meanwhile we are trying to create a good relationship with the tribe.

There are four tribes that are currently claiming the school land. The challenge is that when people of another party or tribe is actively involved in school-organized developments, the other tribe will not bother to collaborate, instead opposing school activities and to some extent these parents even disallow their innocent kids to attend school. Besides that, even though traditional leaders may sometimes try to resolve land issues, the sensitivity remains permanent, thus school environment does not allow enough freedom for external support or aid in its organizational efforts.

Other troublesome challenges faced by school leaders, though found manageable in their work were, in descending order, (a) provincial authority, (b) communication, (c) transport and (d) discipline. For example, comments relating to provincial authority included:

It is quite challenging and frustrating at times when it comes to the school issues and also teachers' issues. For example, sometimes it takes a long time for the school grant to be disbursed to the school account. There are other areas such as, probation and confirmation of teachers takes a long time. It takes time consuming to follow up with such matters. It can take a lot of money and resources of the school to meet the formalities and other incurred expenses.

Sometimes school visits by the ministry of education to the schools are not done at all during the year and confirmation of principal teachers on trial takes a very long time.

The next most difficult challenge reported by the respondents is communication. For example:

Communication is also a great challenge to teachers. Firstly, there is no communication coverage in the area though it is very close to the provincial headquarters. This means that there is no chance to operate internet or to make a [phone] call. Secondly, the communication from the school administration to the parents and other stakeholders is also a challenge.

[Communication] is a major setback . . . We usually face difficulties when it comes to urgent matters that need to be addressed by the Authority. Hence, such delay can prolong problems. Sometimes teachers claimed that head teachers are not doing their work effectively but however it is the communication that counts.

The other challenge is transport. For example:

Taking sick students to the nearest health centre is a problem. Bad weather, rainy seasons can cause severe flooding also a barrier for students to be at the school in time. To and from school to the provincial centre is also a challenge for leaders. They normally absent from classes. It can take 3 to 10 days for them to be absent from classes. Transporting of resources to the school is also a problem for students and teacher located 7 kms inland is a very great challenge when there is no actual transport available for use.

Transport is one of most hindrance to my school operation, more especially in the commencement of the academic year. Actually school starts two or three weeks behind actual date required by . . . the minister of education. Sea transport is only means of linking that services from urban centers to rural areas and the services of boats are irregular and are also too expensive which can drain the school finance.

IV. DISCUSSION

The study has exposed some of the ways rural school leaders feel about the challenges they face. The contextual factors in the rural areas of Solomon Islands are similar to as well as very different from those of other countries illustrated in the literature. Notwithstanding the differences, the overall findings lend support to the findings of various other studies well documented in the literature [30], [31]. The analysis of the quantitative data brings to prominence some difficult challenges faced by the school leaders, as the means for most of the factors are below 2.5 (Table I). The ratings of each factor shown in the table indicate that some challenges are serious to the point where they may have gravely affected the work of the school leaders; in turn, children may have suffered the most educationally. Even though there were four least challenges, the school leaders did not rate them highly. Bearing the differences in mind, some findings presented here that may not have been reported elsewhere are both disturbing and worrisome. Thus the data analysis presented here clearly suggests the peculiarities and difficulties under which school leaders are operating and functioning. The concordance between the quantitative and qualitative data is interesting to note, and the qualitative data reinforce the quantitative data.

A large proportion of school leaders in the present study pointed to the high proportion of untrained teachers (1.5) as one of the most difficult challenges in rural schools. This is a serious challenge to Solomon Islands in the provision of good-quality education. People who are recruited to teach without having any formal qualification in teaching are most likely to affect the qualitative aspect of learning–teaching. Their lack of pedagogical knowledge and skills relating to teaching may have serious effects on children's school work as well as on

the unprepared teachers' accomplishment of other teaching related work and responsibilities assigned to them [16], [24], [27]. The school leaders pointed out that it was not easy at all to assign them classes to teach. In some cases an exacerbating feature is the posting to some schools of more untrained than trained teachers. In Solomon Islands as well as in other Pacific Islands states, at the primary school level the head teacher is invariably a classroom teacher with the leadership role 'tacked on'. This further compromises the supervision of untrained teachers, who may find themselves left on their own to manage as best they can the work assigned to them. The school leaders find the double burden – of assigning them appropriate and manageable school work and providing effective and helpful supervision – onerous. That the education system is limited in its capacity to supply qualified teachers is consistent with the findings of well-documented studies in the literature [16], [24]. But the number of untrained teachers in the rural schools in particular cannot be regarded as anything except a serious situation. Some of the explanation for the disparity in the academic performance of rural children compared to their urban counterparts may not be hard to find. The intentional posting of untrained teachers especially to rural schools further militates against the work of school leaders as they grapple with their responsibility for provision of education of an acceptable quality to the schools and their communities.

In terms of funding, the quantitative (Table I) and qualitative data point out the difficulties of not having sufficient funds for school work. In terms of economic development, Solomon Islands is not an economically rich country and a high proportion of funds for educational development are sought from various overseas development partners. In other words, the Ministry of Education is not in a position to provide the necessary funding assistance to the schools and the worst hit schools are the ones in rural areas. Some rural communities may be willing to share and contribute to school development in cash, kind or labor but then this would require close and constructive relationships with them in order for them to develop a sense of commitment to the school. Generally speaking, parents cannot afford to help schools financially because most of them are subsistence farmers [18]. The funding constraints have direct and highly undesirable effects on other aspects of school work. The data analysis shows that rural schools are less favored in material resources. Without an adequate supply of educational resource materials such as curriculum materials it is impossible to provide enriching learning opportunities to the children [13]-[15]. A variety of educational resources available to the developed schools in urban areas should also be made available to rural schools. The central office, specifically the Education Resource Unit, should see that rural schools receive them on time, to ensure continuity of high-quality learning–teaching. As mentioned earlier, the issues of untrained teachers, compounded by limitations of funds and educational resource materials, are acknowledged as a mammoth struggle for school leaders in organizing the central learning–teaching task effectively and efficiently.

In all settings, various interest groups can, hypothetically, have strong positive and negative influences on school affairs. In this study, however, the findings show an entrenched lack of parental interest in school work (Table I). Some of the comments link this to the fact that most of the parents are themselves uneducated and do not appreciate the importance of education. This is consistent with the findings of other studies [18]. In most cases, they regard teachers as professionals whose capability of handling all the work can be assumed. There are, however, many other areas of work where parents' support is needed and without their active participation, school leaders and teachers are likely to have greater difficulty in improving the school. At the same time, the findings about the School Board (Table I) are alarming. This is consistent with what [29] has already argued that the school board may have a powerful negative influence. Most members in the School Board may be uneducated and have limited knowledge about developments in education. Because of the manifold changes in educational ideas, it is always wise to have educated people in the Board, for it should fully understand and support the school leaders' work. Similarly, traditional leaders (Table I) can act as a barrier in the work of school leaders. In Solomon Islands the most prominent of these leaders are usually chiefs and within the many Solomon's cultures, what they say is to be strictly followed. In such communities and cultures, traditional leaders still have great sway in a range of socio-political and other matters, so winning their support through improving interpersonal interaction based on professional and cultural competence would greatly help in various educational activities at school working in partnership with the traditional chiefs and communities may be essential for the common good of all. Such overt clashes of old and new custom are less common in the more multicultural urban areas. Familiarity with and attention to the socio-political context is therefore necessary for all school leaders, otherwise their good intentions in provision and practice may be interpreted by cultural conservatives as a mammoth challenge to the status quo. As the qualitative data show, traditional chiefs can and do mandate the closure of the school and these directives have to be respected as a traditional protocol. School leaders, through respectful and sympathetic interaction, could prepare the minds of the chiefs and people so that they better understand and appreciate the roles and work of school: this would be a valuable move toward a win–win situation.

Land disputes (Table I), endemic in Solomon Islands as elsewhere in the Pacific Islands region, pose another huge challenge. In most cases schools were built on land without any proper land titles. This is becoming a serious contemporary problem, particularly in areas where more than one clan or tribe claims ownership of the land. The assertion of contentious claims can be very threatening to the school leaders, staff and children. The tribes demand money and other things from the school leaders. Some threaten to burn down the school if their demands are not met. What can be seen here is the tension between professional practices of the school and the values, aspirations, interests and expectations of the community. This is a significant challenge to the school leaders. However, awareness programs and reaching out to the people of the community could slowly bring them to embrace

education and its benefits. This would require a critical sense of place to transform the challenges into possibilities.

Only four factors checked in as least challenging, all rating just barely above the mean (Table I). Despite the decentralization of the educational system, the delivery of service is still slow. The multi-island geographical context of Solomon Islands makes this understandable. Some outer islands are quite far from the provincial education authorities and inspectorates and the consequent delay in delivering prompt replies from educational personnel in these offices to the school leaders can have a variety of impacts on school leaders' work. Apart from this compromised service delivery from the PEA, the irregular transport services (mean = 2.7) especially shipping services, further compounds the leaders' difficulties. Communication services (mean = 2.6) appear to be better placed, perhaps because of the mobile phone network coverage in rural areas. The least challenging potential problem was student discipline (mean = 2.8). With good student discipline schools can achieve a lot but factors such as untrained teachers and lack of educational resources are formidable stumbling blocks in the way of maximizing children's learning outcomes.

Overall, the discussion underpins the claim that rurality in Solomon Islands is much different from rurality in the USA, the UK or any other country beyond the Pacific, because of the country's multi-island composition [26]. The feedback obtained from the 38 school leaders in the sample highlights ways in which the 11 factors investigated have posed great challenges to them in this geographical, economic and social context.

V. CONCLUSION

The important findings from this study warrant urgent attention from all with a vested interest in children's education, especially of children attending rural schools. Given that the school leaders have highlighted the challenges they face in their work, the authorities concerned cannot be complacent; they must try to take constructive steps to make rural education as attractive and effective as possible. Provision of teaching resources and supply of well qualified teachers together with adequate funding would make a significant contribution to facilitating the work of school leaders and in achieving school effectiveness and improvement. But continuation of the current practices will demoralize school leaders and ultimately, have undesirable effects on children's learning outcomes. It could be argued that responsive school leadership preparation may help address the situation but the nature of some of the challenges is such that intervention from education personnel higher in the authority chain, such as from those in the central offices of the Ministry of Education and the government, are required to deal with them. Land disputes, untrained teachers, funding and educational resources are glaring examples that call for government intervention. Here the application of leadership concepts such as mentality of the place or critical leadership of the place to address such challenges is inappropriate. Even though this study sampled only 38 rural school leaders, it

opens invaluable insight into the unique challenges faced by school leaders in rural schools of Solomon Islands. Replication of the study with a larger number of school leaders from an even wider spread of rural schools could shed more light on the diverse nature of rural areas in Solomon Islands. Future research could delve into the impact of the leadership program in developing the capacity of the current and immediately succeeding cohorts of school leaders in dealing with the myriad of issues and challenges in leading and managing rural schools.

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