Seeking a Panacea: Attempts to Address the Failings of Fiji and Solomon Islands Formal Education in Preparing Young People for Livelihood Opportunities

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High youth unemployment rates have become a characteristic of many Pacific states, and there is scant evidence that increasing levels of formal schooling will lower them in the near future. In Fiji, for example, numerous scholars have recognized that there are far more prospective workers for white-collar roles than there are white-collar jobs (Curtain and Vakaoti 2011; Duncan 2014; Kidd 2012; McMurray 2006; Nilan 2007; Nilan and others 2006; spc 2009; Veramu 1992; Woo and Corea 2009). At the same time, however, there are ongoing shortages of suitable applicants for skilled labor and vocational positions. As Jai Narayan, former director of Secondary Education at Fiji's Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, observed, "If you go around some parts of the country, you won't find a qualified plumber, you won't find a qualified electrician, yet you will find unemployed degree holders at home with accounting, economics, and other degrees" (interview, 15 May 2015, Suva). Similarly, in Solomon Islands, employers report difficulties in filling vacant positions requiring skilled labor despite entrenched unemployment (Close 2012; Evans 2019).

For decades, states in the southwestern Pacific have sought to address problems of high youth unemployment and skill shortages. One long-standing approach to these problems has been to expand access to technical and vocational education and training (tvet), though this has had limited success because of social attitudes that place greater value on white-collar work (Maebuta 2011; Sharma 2001). More recently, livelihood programs—often containing an entrepreneurial training component—have proliferated in the region with support from governments and

funding from aid donors. Although livelihood programs carry some promise in helping young people to address economic challenges, I argue that the growing focus on entrepreneurialism in these programs is founded on faith in the free market as a solution for social and economic problems rather than on evidence that large populations of young people can create greater opportunities for themselves by generating new markets.

In this paper, I examine how TVET and entrepreneurialism have been promoted as panaceas for a range of deep structural problems. These programs assume that more formal training can somehow bridge the substantial gap between education systems that produce graduates qualified for white-collar employment and a labor market that has few such jobs. However, Fijian and Solomon Islander youth refuse to engage deeply with either TVET or entrepreneurship programs. The two approaches reproduce the folly of imposing systems designed without consideration of local customs associated with learning and working, which is also evident in the missionary and colonial origins of and continued foreign influence over mainstream formal education. Moreover, attention directed toward these approaches, despite their recurrent failures, draws attention away from the fundamental questions Pacific Islanders have been asking of their education systems since before they took control of them. Despite decades of evidence that education programs based on a schooling-to-employment logic are not providing young people with suitable livelihood skills, they persist. This pattern represents the challenges Pacific governments have experienced in resolving questions they have long been asking of their education systems: What is their purpose, and how can they be designed to equip young people with skills to help them actualize their full potential?

This article draws on fieldwork conducted in Fiji and Solomon Islands in 2015 to better understand the livelihood and civic-engagement barriers faced by young people. As part of this research, I interviewed activists and advocates, and I also engaged with communities in urban, peri-urban, and rural locations to examine differences and similarities between the two countries and between different regions in each country. In all of these communities, unemployment was the most commonly identified issue facing Fijian and Solomon Islander youth. It was also identified as the single most important issue facing Fijian and Solomon Islander youth in twenty-four of the thirty-seven interviews that I conducted with youth activists and advocates. Research participants regularly connected the issue of unemployment to their conviction that the formal education systems in each country were failing young people in two ways. In their view, educa-

tion systems were neither adequately preparing young people to secure livelihood opportunities nor helping them to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to create such opportunities and imagine alternative developmental futures.

In this article, I first describe some of the ways in which the contemporary education systems of Fiji and Solomon Islands produce overqualified but unemployed young people. Second, I describe why, despite apparent local support, TVET is not a panacea solution to youth unemployment. Third, I analyze an almost entirely donor-imposed initiative, entrepreneurialism, which is particularly disconnected from the social structures of Fijian and Solomon Islander societies. If entrepreneurial approaches are to continue in the region, they will require both thorough evaluations of achievements and a rethinking of the logic of entrepreneurialism. I conclude that attempted panaceas like these detract from the questions Fijians and Solomon Islanders have been asking of their education systems for some time. Rather than searching for an exogenous silver bullet, governments and development organizations would be better served by examining successful endogenous education examples in the region and designing curricula to reflect local social norms and epistemologies.

Educated for What? Overeducated and Underemployed Youth

Throughout Oceania, youth unemployment is an issue of serious concern that reaches across divides of rural, urban, and island locations—for highly educated and early school leavers alike. Although formal education systems should not be evaluated purely on their capacity to provide students with skills for employment opportunities, the structure of education systems actually compounds the employment challenges Pacific youth face. As demographer Chris McMurray noted over a decade ago, high rates of both youth unemployment and disengagement from formal schooling are partially attributable to "inflexible education systems" (2006, 8). Rather than positioning students to create and take advantage of social and economic opportunities, the fixation on training students for service-sector careers that have historically been in limited supply has boxed them into narrow education and employment pathways.

While examining Fiji's negotiation of sovereignty and dependency as a developing state in the 1970s and 1980s, Asesela Ravuvu noted the problematic disconnection between the processes of formal education and the

needs of the community (1988). He critiqued a curriculum that replicated European models and paid scant attention to local social, environmental, and economic realities: "The school system in Fiji has long been so narrowly academic that it has become increasingly irrelevant to the cultural, social, economic and political development in the country" (Ravuvu 1988, 168). Here, Ravuvu was not only referring to the lack of connection between the outputs of the Fijian formal education system and the needs of broader Fijian society but also questioning the utility and purpose of the system. In his view, for the system to be fit for purpose, it needed to engage and create knowledge that helped people to understand and improve the systems and structures that shaped their lives in ways that made sense to them culturally, socially, economically, and politically—that is, not simply reproduce foreign knowledge and power systems.

Ravuvu's observations were echoed nearly thirty years later in my conversation with Narayan referenced in the introduction to this article. Interestingly, as Narayan suggested, a peculiar feature of the entrenched youth unemployment in Fiji and other Pacific states is that there is actually a shortage of eligible applicants for jobs in vocational fields. In 2006, Pamela Nilan and coauthors found that employers were recruiting people from outside of Fiji to fill vacancies in roles as diverse as "skilled garment cutters, pattern-makers and embroiderers, building construction managers, qualified dive instructors, beauticians, chefs and air-conditioning technicians" (2006, 897). More recently, in October 2019, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Fiji's current attorney-general, stated that the country was importing tilers from "Bangladesh, the Philippines and Indonesia because we have a shortage of people who know how to lay tiles professionally" (RNZ 2019). This has recently extended to low-skilled employment areas, too. In 2018, Fiji's sugar industry—sugar being the country's largest export product—announced a plan to engage in large-scale importation of cane cutters for the first time due to worker shortages in recent years (Boyle 2018), though details of the plan and whether it has been implemented are unclear. According to Salote Kaimacuata, child protection specialist with the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Pacific and former youth magistrate, the education system deserves some of the blame for the situation. As she told me, "Our education system also fails our young people. There is not a link between the government development plans, doing an assessment of what the needs are in five years' time so that we can prepare our labor forecast now, so that we influence our education system. We are still bringing engineers from New Zealand

and Australia. [Meanwhile,] we have an oversupply of lawyers. Big deal!" (Kaimacuata, interview, 26 May 2015, Suva).

A World Bank report from 2012 indicated that a similar situation exists in Solomon Islands (Close 2012). As Stephen Close explained, local businesses claim that "if they could find employees with the right skills they could add over 50 percent more jobs" (2012, 1). These claims were echoed by Daniel Evans, who noted that "despite high levels of unemployment, employers anecdotally report difficulty finding people with the right skills to fill their vacancies" (2016, 3). Although there is less clarity in Solomon Islands than in Fiji regarding which fields would offer such employment opportunities, Close claimed that "new economic opportunities are emerging at home in exploitation of natural resources and tourism, and for work overseas, including through seasonal employment schemes" (2012, 3). Close also argued that a focus on transferable skills "broader than reading and writing," including "cognitive and technical skills; behavioural skills; [and] general and specific knowledge," would provide the widest scope for impact (2012, 31). In a country where the disconnection between education outputs and employment opportunities has been apparent for decades (Bugotu 1986), and where youth unemployment has been considered a contributing factor to civil conflict (Allen 2005), it is jarring to learn that employment opportunities are present yet unfilled.

Data relating to educators indicates that teaching is one vocation in which this lack of training is evident. David Abbott and Steve Pollard found that in Solomon Islands in 1996, more than 80 percent of teachers had "no more than a Form 3 (Grade 9) education" (2004, 38). Figures from 2017 reported by the Solomon Islands government indicate a vast improvement, with 64 percent of teachers across early childhood, primary, and secondary levels holding both a qualification in their subject area and a general teaching qualification (MEHRD 2017, 65–66). The exact nature of such qualifications is unclear, and this still means that roughly one in three teachers have minimal occupational training. In Honiara in 2015, a former secondary-school teacher undertaking undergraduate studies in education told me that his sole qualification for being hired for his job was that he had "almost finished High School." In other words, there have been far too few Solomon Islanders pursuing tertiary education in a sector of the economy that will almost certainly provide them employment once they graduate.

This disconnection between education and employment results from

a broader mismatch between formal education and local social, environmental, and economic realities. Education systems in Fiji and Solomon Islands today are structured in ways that reflect not only contemporary orthodoxies of international development but also their colonial origins. In both countries, formal education systems were primarily established by Christian missionaries, with official responsibilities later transferred to British administrators following colonization (Jourdan 2013; White 2007). In Fiji, after the British administration assumed responsibility for formal schooling, less attention was paid to mass public education. Instead, attention turned to the establishment of flagship schools designed to educate elites in the etiquettes and epistemologies of the European upper classes—largely with the support of chiefly families who wished to improve opportunities for both employment and political influence with the colonizers (Tavola 1991; White 2007), a phenomenon mirrored in Solomon Islands (Jourdan 2013). Government-administered public education provisions increased in the twentieth century, largely motivated by the desire to produce new cohorts of potential employees for government and industry (Cavu and others 2009; Nilan 2009).

Public education was never intended to result in widespread training in critical thinking or to acknowledge Indigenous knowledge, let alone prepare Fijian and Solomon Islander populations to consider how to reflect localized needs and worldviews in their education systems. Local school curricula were derived from European models, reflecting subjects and content taught in Britain and other colonies and with English as the language of delivery (Jourdan 2013; McDougall and Zobule, this issue; White 2007). The imposition of foreign-designed curricula was common throughout Pacific states. Wayne Fife described the "hidden curriculum" of education in Papua New Guinea that insidiously undermined locally produced and locally relevant knowledge by presenting it as inferior to the supposedly enlightened knowledge of the colonizers (1994). Christine Jourdan wrote that in Solomon Islands, as in other Pacific states such as Kanaky/New Caledonia, "it can be argued that the purpose of this education system was not so much to form citizens but to form subjects" (2013, 274). 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 (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992; White 2007). As early as 1973, Solomon Islands public servant and educationalist Francis Bugotu noted that "the gulf between village Solomon Islanders

and 'educated' urban dwellers is widening. The new elite have tended to become imbued with European values and aspirations. They have become exploiters of their own people" (1973, 79).

In the postcolonial period, the influence of outsiders on education systems and structures has continued, now in the form of international development discourse rather than through missionaries or colonial governments. With the successes of developmental states—such as Japan, Korea, and China—considered to be at least partially attributable to investment in public education (Saraswathi and Larson 2002), the international development industry has extolled the virtues of expanded education systems as a necessary factor in improving social, economic, and health outcomes for individuals and states. Indeed, Eric Hanushek's overview of the economic case for providing education for all as a driver for development demonstrates that increases in populations' cognitive skills are correlated with increases in economic growth (2013). This way of thinking has been absorbed by Pacific regional development organizations in the belief that a better-educated populace will result in societies with improved health, innovation, resilience, and civic engagement (Curtain and Vakaoti 2011). But such lionization of education overlooks more critical reflection on the purpose and quality of education and the ways in which it can meet localized needs or impose hegemonic structures. Hanushek argued that too often the international development community has substituted education completion rates for improvements in cognition (2013). In a similar vein, former member of the National Youth Council of Fiji, Elisha Bano, told me, "Having free tuition for all is just ticking the quantity box. It's not necessarily checking the quality box" (interview, 18 May 2015, Suva). Honiara Youth Council president, Harry Olikwailafa, offered a similar observation of formal education in Solomon Islands, saying, "The curriculum is not empowering young people. It's just numeracy and literacy and not giving young people an understanding of 'This is the world'" (interview, 8 Oct 2015, Honiara).

This problem is not exclusive to the Pacific. Lamenting a lack of reflexivity in the design of formal education systems all over the world, education philosopher Gert Biesta observed that few curriculum designers pay attention to what quality education actually looks like. He wrote that "the absence of explicit attention for the aims and ends of education is the effect of often implicit reliance on a particular 'common sense' view of what education is for" (Biesta 2009, 37). This "common sense" approach aligns with early designs of formal education systems that centered on

creating a subservient workforce in which it is accepted that the value of education is connected to the value of employment (Coleman 1968). This approach is underpinned by two assumptions: first, that providing an education offers individuals the ability to become self-reliant and, second, that it provides benefits to wider society through increased economic growth. The experience of the many educated unemployed demonstrates the folly of such assumptions when applied in the Pacific—the sluggish economies in the region are more constrained by structural challenges than a lack of educated citizens.

The use of education to create citizen-subjects was furthered when formal education provision spread to non-elites, within and beyond the Pacific, and curriculum shifted to a focus on training a willing and able subservient workforce. In her article explaining how traditional and colonial stereotypes of how women should behave continue to influence iTaukei women's education and career paths, Pamela Nilan observed that "the early model of education for Fijian children was one that would 'prepare a workforce that would occupy subordinate positions in factories and offices'—one that indicated low academic expectations" (2009, 33, citing Tuinamuana 2007). This system deliberately created and perpetuated the notion that the purpose of schooling was directly connected to the attainment of paid employment.

The education systems of Fiji and Solomon Islands are heavily skewed toward promoting the success of students identified as being "book smart." Fiji's education system is narrowly focused on providing homogenized training for students in skills aligned with white-collar and public-service jobs, regardless of their individual skills and interests. This approach responds to societal associations of white-collar employment with success (eg, Cavu and others 2009; McMurray 2006; Nilan 2009; Nilan and others 2006). Akanisi Kedrayate suggested that a combination of factors shapes this focus in the education system: the continued colonial influence on curriculum, an overemphasis on the importance of exams in sorting capable and incapable students, and the social value of white-collar work (2011). Far from being relevant only to Fiji, the pressure for students to be academically successful is more ruthless in Solomon Islands, as students who fail end-of-year tests are regularly dismissed from continuing their education (Jourdan 2013, 274; see also Oakeshott, this issue). Summarizing the impact of expulsion-by-failure, John Firibo, a church youth group leader from Honiara, explained to me, "Failing means you don't get a chance" (interview, 20 Aug 2015, Honiara). Cresantia Frances Koya has

argued that the standardization of systems that focus on results over learning is an issue to be addressed throughout Oceania (2008, 17).

The need to move away from standardization models of education is a direct challenge for the Fijian and Solomon Islands education systems. Multiple young people I spoke with in both Fiji and Solomon Islands told me explicitly that the biggest problem with the education systems of their countries is that all students in a class are expected to learn the exact same content at the exact same pace. Commenting on the Fijian education system, social justice activist and former political candidate Roshika Deo told me, "One of the . . . big problems with the education sector is that it doesn't recognize multiple [kinds of] intelligence. People come with different intelligence levels and respond differently to different forms of teaching. It marks and grades them all in the same way" (interview, 13 March 2015, Suva).

The challenge of creating an adaptive curriculum is compounded by inadequate resources. Physical infrastructure can be of poor quality, particularly in rural and island locations (Solomon Islands Government 2002). Teacher quality and oversight present an even more pressing issue, with the challenges again being greater outside of urban hubs. Isimeli Tagicakiverata, president of the Pacific Association of Technical and Vocational Education and Training, informed me that many rural and island schools in Fiji are run on an ad hoc basis according to teacher whims: "If you have a school in a remote rural area and the committee is not active, whoa, the teachers are going to have a good time! I've heard of teachers who spend more time fishing and farming than with their students in the classroom" (Tagicakiverata, interview, 1 April 2015, Suva).

Searching for a Panacea: Vocational Education

In the past two decades, tvet has received significant aid-donor support in Oceania through the auspices of development programs within the Australian government, the European Union, and others (Maebuta 2011; Tagicakiverata 2012). The European Union provided the tvet in the Pacific program with €6.1 million (approximately us$6.8 million) in funding between 2014 and 2019 (EU PacTVET 2016). On a much larger scale—and demonstrating that tvet is not a single-donor space—between 2007 and 2015 the Australian government spent a$278 million (approximately us$190 million) on its flagship Australia-Pacific Technical College (Johanson and others 2014). Rebranded to become the Australia Pacific

Training Coalition, the program has secured support from the Australian government until at least 2022, and funding will likely continue well beyond that date.

TVET is being promoted as an immediate response to upskilling citizens in fields in which skills shortages currently exist. It also offers an alternative education pathway for those disengaged from the mainstream system. In light of identified employment gaps in low-skilled and vocational industries, TVET appears to offer low-hanging fruit for development organizations and Pacific governments where young citizens can be trained to fill these job vacancies, with the hope that lower unemployment levels will boost local economies. The transferability of vocational skills between formal and informal employment sectors has also been used to justify support for TVET throughout Oceania due to the importance of the informal economy in Pacific states (Neal 2011). This approach positions TVET provision as a response to an identified need to provide further education to young people that will assist them in making and sustaining their own livelihoods. Although it can be argued that such framing simply entrenches previously held beliefs by colonial authorities that local peoples were better suited to vocational work than intellectual pursuits—whether through prejudicial considerations of their natural capacity or as a strategy to enforce their subordinate worker status—Carmen White (2007) and Bugotu (1973) have documented local desires for increased vocational education provision in Fiji and Solomon Islands, respectively.

Despite documented support for TVET as a response to education and employment deficits in both Fiji and Solomon Islands, its effectiveness as a solution is constrained by widespread negative social perceptions of vocational training and work. Efforts to embed TVET within or as an alternative to mainstream secondary schooling within Pacific states go back decades. Jack Maebuta documented repeated efforts in Solomon Islands to include vocational curriculum in mainstream schooling in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, before a shift to promoting TVET as alternative schooling in the 1990s due to limited success with this approach (2011). Maebuta argued that the failure of these multiple attempts to embed TVET in mainstream schooling was at least partially because mainstream schools were ill-equipped to teach the practical skills required and partially because parents have consistently favored academic curricula over vocational learning (2011). Akhila Sharma noted similar patterns of integration and separation of vocational training from mainstream schooling in the Fiji context, again attributing the lack of uptake to social attitudes

and also to the fact that civil servants earn significantly higher salaries than tradespeople (2001).

Despite its long history in Pacific states such as Fiji and Solomon Islands, vocational training has failed to significantly reduce youth unemployment rates. Multiple authors have agreed that in both Fiji and Solomon Islands, the primary reason for this is the negative public perception of TVET as inferior to academic schooling (Maebuta 2011; Sharma 2001; Tagi-cakiverata 2012; Tagicakiverata and Nilan 2018; Woo and Corea 2009). Maebuta argued that in Solomon Islands, "TVET is still regarded as the 'second best' form of education" (2011, 170). Similarly, Tagicakiverata found that in Fiji, TVET is considered as an option only for those who have failed or dropped out of school (2012). Such a perception discourages students who may be better suited to vocational education and employment from pursuing this line of education, particularly if they are competent students within mainstream education systems.

A flow-on effect of this is that the occupations that TVET trains for carry lesser status in these communities. Many young people would rather have a qualification in a high-status field such as law and be unemployed than be employed in a skilled trade. So while the employment opportunities that exist in vocational spaces suggest TVET is a natural, if only partial, solution to challenges of high youth unemployment and limited economic growth, the continued devaluation of skilled labor means that TVET institutions are unable to address structural employment and economic growth issues. TVET programs also perpetuate patterns in which young people seek formal training and qualifications in fields that are less likely to result in improved individual economic outcomes. As Narayan and Kaimacuata identified for Fiji, educated youth typically prefer to be unemployed than to work in manual trades (Narayan, interview, 15 May 2015, Suva; Kai-macuata, interview, 26 May 2015, Suva). Further, as Jenny Munro, Lyn Parker, and Yohana Baransano demonstrate (this issue), both the stigma associated with TVET and manual labor and the social status associated with white-collar work are recurrent across the Pacific more broadly.

It should also be noted that because education and employment have both social and economic impacts, no single approach can conceivably solve all issues. TVET could only ever be a partial solution. This has been recognized by some in the international development sector. For instance, in 2012, the World Bank specifically warned that developing robust education and employment systems that positively reinforce one another would

require building skills and capacities "in a number of areas, and not only Technical and Vocational Education and Training" (Close 2012, 3). This has not stopped people from suggesting that TVET should be the center-piece for addressing issues of limited applied education and unemploy-ment, despite evidence of its poor sociocultural fit within Pacific states. Rather than heeding the lessons learned from TVET's lack of success as a panacea, Pacific governments and aid donors are now displaying an incli-nation to promote youth livelihood opportunities through a more recent approach that has even less grounding in the interests and social realities of Pacific peoples: entrepreneurialism.

ENTREPRENEURIALISM: THE LATEST PANACEA

In recent years, government and development organizations in Fiji and Solomon Islands have invested heavily in programs to equip youth with entrepreneurial skills. As Evans has discussed with specific reference to Honiara, states such as Solomon Islands provide a fertile "ground zero" for the testing of initiatives to help young people identified as "ranging somewhere on a spectrum from delinquents in the making to future lead-ers" to achieve their individual and collective potential (2019, 87). Evans argued that rather than being based in any evidence of success, the alterna-tive education provided by development organizations, which is focused on life skills and entrepreneurialism, is based in the belief that young peo-ple's lives can be improved by "building [their] capacities" and "empow-ering" them (2019, 87).

Given that small populations and geographic isolation negatively impact the ability of Pacific states to grow their economies and work-forces through preferential and reciprocal trade deals (Yang 2014), a strong argument can be made for the need to generate domestic economic products through formal and informal markets. Former Solomon Islands Country Director for the Pacific Community Mia Rimon used this ratio-nale when explaining to me the value of expanding the Honiara-based youth life-skills and employment program Youth@Work to include an entrepreneurial component. As she explained, "There are not enough for-mal employment positions in Honiara, so the Youth Market and Youth Entrepreneurship Program are there because there are not enough jobs in Honiara, so we have to create self-employment opportunities, which is great for the economy as well" (Rimon, interview, 24 July 2015, Honiara).

Foreign-funded organizations and overseas development agencies are not the only entities propagating entrepreneurialism as the latest response to providing youth with an alternative to formal education that improves their livelihood prospects. In fact, entrepreneurialism—framed as "self-employment"—has become one of four focus areas for Fiji's National Employment Centre, the others being formal employment, foreign employment, and volunteering (nec nd). Traveling between Nadi and Suva to attend the Pacific Update conference in July 2019, I was struck by the number of prominent billboards—on exiting Nadi airport, on entering Suva city, and at the crest of the busy Laucala Bay Road between Suva's business and entertainment districts—advertising Fiji's Young Entrepreneurship Scheme, which supports "young and budding entrepreneurs who have innovative and bankable ideas/projects which financial institutions are not willing to support due to lack of collateral" (Fiji Government nd). The approach of the Fijian government mirrors that of development agencies searching for new solutions to entrenched problems of perpetually high levels of youth unemployment and poor correlation between the intended outputs of formal education systems and economic and livelihood needs at individual and state levels. As Evans has argued, this approach appears to be based more in faith than in evidence (2019, 85–87).

I have firsthand experience working on one of these projects. In 2012–2013, I worked for the Fijian arm of an international development organization aimed at improving the livelihood opportunities of urban, peri-urban, and rural youth. The project was designed to deliver life-skills training—ranging from critical thinking to cultivating a positive self-image to the importance of promptness—to sixty young people over a period of four to six weeks. After this initial training, the cohort was divided into two groups. One group undertook two weeks of training in job-seeking skills including producing a curriculum vitae, applying for jobs, and interviewing. The other group was trained for four weeks in the microenterprise development skills of financial literacy, identifying market viability for a proposed business, and creating a business plan. The microenterprise training was delivered by a contracted agency specializing in the field. Once they approved each business plan, the individual participant was eligible to receive a small, low-interest loan from a major bank.

Joining the project during its recruitment phase, I was concerned that the project did not appear to have been designed in response to evidence indicating its appropriateness. I was informed by colleagues that local staff

had determined the project's focus on recurrent and entrenched youth unemployment. This was based on evidence they had accumulated over a period of some years facilitating other youth-focused projects. However, my colleagues told me that the focus on microenterprise as a medium to address unemployment was not based on the success of this approach in the past but on an identified trend in the type of projects that donor agencies were supporting. It was evident that the same approach was in vogue in Honiara when I visited for fieldwork in 2015 and identified at least five development organizations within the city running similar projects.

What most concerned me about the abundance of microenterprise-focused training programs was not just that they appeared to be popular and well-supported despite no evidence of their likely success, but that there seemed to be little consideration for how entrepreneurialism aligned with social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. Entrepreneurship scholars Andreas Rauch and Michael Frese identified six personal characteristics required of entrepreneurs: a desire for high achievement, an appetite for risk-taking, innovation, autonomy, locus control, and self-efficacy (2012). Although these traits, in the terms Rauch and Frese defined them, are not unattainable for Pacific youth, cultural norms that minimize young peoples' agency limit their abilities to demonstrate the full autonomy of choice and action that Rauch and Frese stated as fundamental to entrepreneurial success (see Craney 2019).

Interviews with people who had worked on projects incorporating a microenterprise focus in Fiji and Solomon Islands indicated that such training overlooks the social pressures for young people to operate their businesses with an emphasis on communal obligation rather than individual economic success. Sina Suliano, project manager of the Fijian project I worked on, told me that evaluations of the project indicated significantly greater success for those who participated in the job-seeking stream as opposed to the microenterprise stream. When I asked her why this was the case, she suggested that it was primarily related to cultural norms of reciprocity conflicting with the need to operate at profit: "One of the main issues we picked up from our monitoring, especially with the businesses that have failed, they have all failed because of that—always giving things out on credit and not being able to collect that back" (Suliano, interview, 31 March 2015, Suva). Patrick Mesia, who oversaw a similar program in Honiara, echoed this in his overview: "We tried doing some small income-generating activities, but very few have entrepreneurial thinking. There

are others that, even if you provide them with the best skills training, if they are not in the mindset to do that . . . [they cannot be successful]" (interview, 13 Aug 2015, Honiara).

All four interviewees in Fiji and Solomon Islands who had worked as designers, managers, and frontline staff in these projects agreed that, despite their best intentions, entrepreneurial projects were not a panacea for the problems of high youth unemployment and limited applied education. Furthermore, they admitted that such programs were actually a waste of resources unless embedded within a suite of programs aimed at broader social change. The implementation of entrepreneurial-focused projects appears to represent both a desire for a quick fix to education and employment issues and a lack of commitment to evidence-based and creative solutions to effect social change. The irony of development organizations reproducing interventions without reflecting on their likely utility in individual situations was not lost on Georgina Cope, a Fiji-based Australian development worker with experience in the region supporting adaptive and innovative development interventions designed by local peoples. As she commented, "The culture of the development community and civil service is geared towards finding flaws, and [it is] not very entrepreneurial and trying to address things in a creative way" (Cope, interview, 13 May 2015, Suva). The isomorphic mimicry of such development interventions affirms the limits of "intentional" development interventions and again points to the need for projects and programs to reflect local social and cultural needs and practices (see Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2005; Cowen and Shenton 1996).

Conclusion: Remaking Education Systems that Reflect Local Epistemologies

Two things become clear when examining institutional responses to high unemployment and limited applied education outputs in Oceania. One is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to cure all ills. The second is that approaches to social and economic issues need to reflect local social beliefs, understandings, and desires. Neither condition is new, as evidenced by the decades of implorations by esteemed Pacific thinkers for education systems to reflect local epistemologies and livelihood realities and for Pacific people to envision and drive their own developmental futures (Bugotu 1973; Hauʻofa 1994; Ravuvu 1988; Thaman 2003; Wendt 1976). As Debra McDougall and Alpheaus G Zobule demonstrate in this special

issue, education can also serve to anchor people to their cultures, histories, and identities. Those seeking to decolonize Pacific education would do well to consider not only how young people are expected to be educated—whether through formal systems, lived experiences, or other means—but also the aims and purpose of education. Just as what is considered work is not always captured in conceptions of employment (Munro, Parker, and Baransano, this issue), neither is education limited to the realm of formal schooling.

Tanya Wendt Samu has posed questions for Pacific researchers to guide their thinking about how they respond to these challenges: "Who is at the helm? Who sets the course? Who reads the sky and searches the horizons for signs? Is it us? Or is it someone else? Who are we? Are we satisfied, even conscious of the way we are going?" (2010, 9).

Without expressly identifying—and regularly revisiting—what out-puts are intended for young people and broader society by putting them through formal education, it is nigh impossible to establish what an appropriate structure looks like for formal education systems at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. For Pacific states that continue to operate education systems with structures and curriculum orientations put in place by colonial governments—more than three decades beyond both Bugotu's and Ravuvu's reflections on their lack of suitability—an ever-present risk remains that such systems will reflect neither local sociocultural values and epistemologies nor the livelihood needs of local peoples.

One idealistic view of the purpose of education that extends beyond economic impact is that it is about creating a base of knowledge for criti-cal thinking and perpetual learning (Dewey 1910; Engel 2015). This per-spective takes as its starting point the idea that curiosity is natural and good for the individual and the community. In this context, education is about the pursuit of learning first and foremost, with tangible gains, such as economic growth, understood to flow from thought and discovery. Though this approach to education seems to be out of favor, it still bears consideration. As Biesta stated, "At least in democratic societies, there ought to be an ongoing discussion about the aims and ends of (public) education" (2009, 37).

The utilitarian view that the purpose of education should be to cre-ate citizens who can take care of their own needs and contribute to their national economies informs the structure of the education systems of Fiji and Solomon Islands. This is reproduced in the structures of formal edu-cation, in the attitudes that ordinary people have about more and less

worthy qualifications and careers, and, recently, through donor-sponsored life-skills and entrepreneurship programs. Persistent youth unemployment, however, indicates that these systems are failing in their design. Academic streams produce educated unemployed, TVET remains socially undesirable, and entrepreneurship stands as a promised solution with little substance.

Underlying the problems with the education systems of Fiji and Solomon Islands is the fact that they lack a sense of connection to place. Teaching styles do not reflect the circular conversational nature of social engagement, individual endeavor is promoted in cultures that are rooted in communal life, and local approaches to meaning making are practically absent. Until and unless the education systems of these countries more accurately reflect their cultural, social, economic, and political characteristics, it is difficult to imagine that they will help to improve young people's opportunities and meet their livelihood needs.

Of course, education is power—not just in the trite cliché that "knowledge is power," but in that the design of education systems dictates how knowledge is reproduced and operationalized (Fife 1994; Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2001; Meijl 2019). Systems that eschew local languages, ignore Indigenous epistemologies, and fail to connect curriculum outputs with community needs do not simply result in outsized populations of overqualified and underemployed young people. They also promote perceptions that foreign approaches to knowledge creation and reproduction are more valid, and they project ideas of success that do not necessarily represent local values systems.

Remedying the problems inherent in education systems that attempt to impose universal approaches on diverse communities requires local solutions. Approaches to learning and understanding differ throughout the region, thus the education systems of the Pacific must be adaptive to the needs of diverse populations. Designing education systems in a responsive manner could draw inspiration from Elise Huffer and Ropate Qalo's references to the construction of Samoan fale (house)—namely, that "it must first and foremost be of use to the community it is designed for. It must provide shelter from the outside elements and bring comfort to those inside. It must not shut out the world but be able to invite the world in, on its own terms" (2004, 89).

Similarly, the three rationales offered by Konai Helu Thaman for the need to decolonize Pacific studies read as equally appropriate reasons (and starting points) for rethinking how formal education can be improved in

Pacific states: "(1) It is about acknowledging and recognizing the dominance of western philosophy, content, and pedagogy in the lives and the education of Pacific peoples; (2) it is about valuing alternative ways of thinking about our world, particularly those rooted in the indigenous cultures of Oceanic peoples; and (3) it is about developing a new philosophy of education that is culturally inclusive and gender sensitive" (2003, 3). The universities of the region are uniquely placed to challenge contemporary approaches to education in the Pacific, and they provide examples on which decolonial education structures can be modeled. The National University of Samoa emerged in the 1980s in recognition of the idea that a decolonized education system requires localized institutions of higher learning. The Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the Laucala Bay campus of the University of the South Pacific, established in 1997, roots its pedagogy in philosophical interpretations of arts and cultural practices (Wood 2006), affirming trans-Oceanic fraternity while celebrating regional heterogeneity (Jolly 2007). For example, the university's "Pacific Worlds" course is offered regionally online and employs the metaphor of mat weaving in relation to research with the aim of enabling graduates to engage in research practices that "critically demonstrate 'Pacific Consciousness'" (Lingam and others 2017). This illustrates how technology and tradition can be harnessed to further challenge Western normative ontologies and affirm those indigenous to Oceanic cultures. And the New Zealand–funded Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative (Nabobo-Baba 2012), which embeds Pacific epistemologies in teaching and research in Pacific Island and New Zealand universities, demonstrates that donors can play an important role in supporting these efforts. Peter Walters, Adrian Benavides, and Kristen Lyons have even suggested that TVET institutions in the Pacific can be sites for decolonization of the education system not only by connecting training to locally identified areas of need but also by offering "a space for people to cultivate the foundations needed for transformative social action" (2020, 12).

While these examples do not necessarily lead to the job creation and economic growth that are the implicit aims of current education systems, they offer alternative ways of being and knowing that represent and recreate local realities. Rather than searching for an elusive panacea that simultaneously provides a quality education to the masses, slashes unemployment, and boosts economic growth, Pacific governments would do well to learn from local examples of innovative, effective, and applied teaching and learning. Local development plans can inform and be informed by the

restructuring of education systems to address social values and livelihood needs and by the embracing of local pedagogies and epistemologies to create an approach to education that has real and meaningful impacts on students and broader society.

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Abstract

High levels of youth unemployment have been a recurrent problem for decades in Fiji and Solomon Islands, including for those who complete secondary and tertiary education. In this article, I investigate structural issues within the formal education systems of each country and how these contribute to ongoing high unemployment. I also interrogate approaches designed to complement main-

stream schooling in addressing unemployment. What emerges is a picture of education structures that are poorly designed and targeted, having little alignment with local needs and sociocultural values. I argue that envisioning the purpose of formal education from both social and economic perspectives will allow for curriculum that better identifies the skills and capabilities of individual students and prepares them to take advantage of livelihood opportunities. Philosophical and practical approaches to addressing these issues that are endogenous to Oceania are offered as guiding principles for creating more effective education systems.

KEYWORDS: Fiji, Solomon Islands, education, entrepreneurship, TVET, livelihoods