"Just Something in History": Classroom Knowledge and Refusals to Teach the Tension in Solomon Islands

David Oakeshott

The few Solomon Islanders who progressed through formal education before independence in 1978 felt that their schooling had distanced them from their Indigenous ways of knowing (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992; McDougall and Zobule, this issue). In fact, this critique of formal education was the starting point for the second major review of education in Solomon Islands, the *Education for What?* report released by the Educational Policy Review Committee in 1973. The committee that produced the report consulted widely, collecting more than two thousand recommendations from Solomon Islanders (Bugotu 1986, 41). The chair of the committee, Francis Bugotu, captured the rationale of the report in a 1986 article: "The consequences of unquestioned acceptance and adoption of foreign education systems have taken their toll, and serious problems have surfaced in undesirable forms, creating disruptions of island and community society norms and separation and neglect of traditional family ties. The survival of the genuine island way of life, coined recently as the 'Pacific Way,' is being harassed and threatened by new modes of behavior foreign to the islands" (1986, 42–43). Elsewhere, he turned colonial racist tropes on their head, using the evocative phrase "the new darkness" to describe the awful future awaiting a Solomon Islands that embraced "the dazzling lights of civilization" offered through colonial education but neglected its own "traditional way of life" (Bugotu 1973, 78).

Bugotu took inspiration from critical pedagogue Paulo Freire, who likened the way students are considered empty vessels waiting to be filled with the knowledge the teacher imparts to them to a "banking model" of education. Such a model resonated with the way classroom knowledge had developed in Solomon Islands' education system (Freire 2017, 44–45).

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 33, Number 2, 386–408
© 2021 by University of Hawai'i Press

Bugotu called on newly educated Solomon Islanders to "transform from the inside any created oppressed image of ourselves and our situation into something acceptable, first of all to our own selves and then to the outside world" (1973, 78).

Since then, Pacific educators have, with some success, been actively theorizing ways to transform formal education from inside schools and classrooms. Indigenous scholars and educators insist that this process must begin from the premise that Indigenous knowledges are just as valid as the Western academic knowledge of the colonizers (see Thaman 2003, 10; Nabobo-Baba 2006; Smith 2012; Biermann 2011). For instance, the Rethinking Pacific Education by Pacific for Pacific Initiative seeks to promote the use of vernacular languages and knowledges in schools across the region and encourages students to reclaim their education by exploring their own cultural knowledge (Burnett 2009, 18; Thaman 2009, 4). In Solomon Islands, Karen-Ann Watson-Gegeo, David Welchman Gegeo, and Billy Fito'o have chronicled how the perception that the Solomon Islands state was in crisis intensified during the period of civil conflict, which killed approximately two hundred people and displaced around thirty-five thousand from Guadalcanal between 1998 and 2003 (2018, 409–411). The conflict led communities in Malaita to seize the opportunity to pursue their own forms of development. When education featured in these forms of development, primary consideration was given to concerns regarding how it fit within Kwara'ae conceptualizations of a "good life." Moreover, Watson-Gegeo, Gegeo, and Fito'o noted that "many of the returning PhD and MA graduates are seeking positions at SI National University's teacher-training college, and are pressuring for traditional cultural life practices, values, and ways of thinking and debating to figure prominently in the curriculum" (2018, 415). In the Pacific, including Solomon Islands, educators have been making concerted efforts to connect classroom knowledge to Pacific Islanders' lived experiences outside of formal schooling.

In this article, I analyze some recent attempts by Solomon Islander educators, including both curriculum writers and teachers at three secondary boarding schools, to carry on that work. The data are drawn from two research projects in Solomon Islands, the first during June 2013, and the second from June to December 2015. I lived at the secondary boarding schools, which offered grades 7 to 12, and conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observation of daily life outside and inside the classroom.[1] Here, I describe changes in curricular material and classroom

teaching practices and argue that teachers have made changes to what classroom knowledge entails. "Classroom knowledge" once could simply denote the information needed to pass national examinations. However, the new curricular material, pedagogical approach, and the way social studies teachers use them have made it possible to expand its meaning to encompass the everyday lives and relationships of students and teachers in the post-conflict period. The new curriculum covers the civil conflict, and the new pedagogical approach encourages students to bring their personal experiences into the classroom, which charges teachers with encouraging discussion about a sensitive topic that they, and their students' families, experienced themselves. Despite this, however, when the teachers I observed taught about the Tension, they did not stray far from the curriculum, and they deliberately avoided open discussion about the conflict. This kind of avoidance is in itself a way of bringing lived experience into teaching, as keeping certain forms of conflict-related knowledge *out* of the classroom has brought classroom knowledge closer to Indigenous methods for engaging with knowledge about conflict.

To make this case, I begin by briefly outlining the emergence of an examination-centric conceptualization of classroom knowledge. I then discuss how a critical pedagogy helped to orient my research to the limitations of prevailing conceptions of classroom knowledge and the ways in which new social studies textbooks and teachers attempt to alter them—a process that has also helped make clear the boundaries of what I can know as a non-Indigenous researcher in Solomon Islands. Following this, I show how social studies textbooks produced after the civil conflict, called "the Tension" locally, respect the boundaries Solomon Islanders place on the transmission of knowledge. Next, I demonstrate how teachers and students have kept the conflict-related knowledge pertinent to classroom relationships out of the lesson by rendering the Tension itself as the narrow, colonial form of classroom knowledge. By understanding the Tension as colonial classroom knowledge, teachers and students are able to separate the violent past from the social relations present in the classroom, thus allowing some discussion about that past based on the textbook account. In practice, however, the new social studies curricular material has required teachers to do more than simply rely on the textbook, as I show in the final section. Instead, the new textbooks have encouraged teachers to use Indigenous understandings of knowledge transmission about past violence in their classrooms when teaching about the conflict, constructing a vision

of classroom knowledge as something useful for more than simply passing examinations.

Constructing Classroom Knowledge

By independence in 1978, an education system was emerging in Solomon Islands in which students were put in classes with other children of roughly the same age and taught a curriculum that was deemed age appropriate. That curriculum divided the knowledge to be learned into discreet and abstract fields such as "social studies," thereby introducing students to a form of knowledge based on a rationale that originated during the European Enlightenment. Moreover, those curricular subjects were premised on the belief that knowledge was accessible to any person willing to investigate a topic scientifically and on the hubris that it was superior to any alternative forms of knowing (Smith 2012, 61). Students were taught classroom knowledge in English, which typically not even their teachers could speak fluently, and their comprehension of it was tested with written examinations. These exams were intended to filter out students so that only a few would make it to the end of formal education and move into careers in the public service; government policy in 1969 stipulated that only half of the Grade 4 (called Standard IV at the time) graduates would progress to Grade 5 (Standard V) and that only a quarter of the students that reached Standard VII would progress to Form I (Grade 8, the first year of post-primary schooling) (Palmer 1980, 316).

Within this system, the pressure put on poorly trained teachers to teach only the knowledge relevant to passing examinations was immense. Teachers often lacked basic curricular materials, and formal lessons were typically exercises in regurgitating curriculum content (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1995, 68–69). Curricula had been prepared under the British Protectorate government, and little thought was given in the classroom to Indigenous knowledge, which was deemed inferior (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992, 15–17). Anything relevant to the cultures of Solomon Islands was relegated to extracurricular life, often with the demeaning label of "arts and crafts" (Palmer 1980, 101). Classroom knowledge was thus the knowledge of official syllabi and textbooks, transferred through rote-learning pedagogy and necessary for passing examinations but largely irrelevant to the lives of Solomon Islanders.

This boundary between classroom knowledge and other forms of

knowledge was not simply a colonial imposition; many Solomon Islanders and other Pacific Islanders had embraced the idea that classroom knowledge and Indigenous knowledges were separate. For example, communities in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea, sought education once the missions arrived because they saw that education "prescribed particular actions that would lead to particular outcomes" (Demerath 2000, 98), which made classroom knowledge suited to exams and the tasks undertaken in the classroom (Carrier 1984, 75). Education was therefore useful insomuch as it could lead to paid employment, but it had little value beyond that sphere. In one case, a man had so little use for school knowledge that he simply let his literacy skills lapse entirely (Carrier 1984, 76). Watson-Gegeo, Gegeo, and Fito'o observed similar decisions on Malaita in Solomon Islands; families in Kwara'ae prevented some boys from going to school because they needed them to remain at home to learn Indigenous knowledge (2018, 405). Karen Sykes also noted pragmatism toward education in New Ireland, Papua New Guinea (1995), as did Jemima Mowbray in Bougainville, an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea (2014). The limitations of colonial classroom knowledge became apparent to me as I navigated my own positionality during research at the boarding schools.

Critical Pedagogy and Ethnographic Refusal

When non-Indigenous scholars (for instance, white and middle-class Australians like myself) conduct research with Indigenous peoples, we inevitably confront inequalities wrought through colonization and our privilege within that unequal system (Biermann 2011, 395). For me, this confrontation has occurred within research that attempts to understand linkages between schooling and post-conflict reconciliation and peacemaking in Solomon Islands, and in particular whether and how schooling shapes the way young people come to understand the history of their conflict. This work was based at secondary boarding schools in Solomon Islands that have historically been the elite schools for the minority of students who pass the entrance examinations.

I approached the topic in the context of critical education scholarship, which is fundamentally concerned with education's place in the reproduction of social inequality (Hatch 2002, 16). Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* first published in English in 1970, looms large in this field, particularly in research concentrating on classroom practices. Freire pro-

posed a critical pedagogy in which the role of the teacher was to help students discover the circumstances of their oppression so that they could join the struggle to overcome it (Bartlett 2005, 345–347). This required teachers to have a deep knowledge of their students' worlds so they could facilitate open and rational dialogue about the students' sociopolitical circumstances. That is, an individual's critical consciousness was fostered in classroom practices founded on reasoned debate among rational subjects (Burbules 2000; Ellsworth 1989, 304). It was an idealistic vision of classroom dialogue that ignored the multitude of disciplines that have "amassed overwhelming evidence of the extent to which the myths of the ideal rational person and the 'universality' of propositions have been oppressive to those who are not European, White, male, middle class, Christian, able-bodied, thin, and heterosexual" (Ellsworth 1989, 304). Thus, many have found that Freire's model of dialogue gave them little scope to engage with the circumstances of their oppression on their own terms (Burbules 2000, 255; Cervantes-Soon 2017, 15–16).

Freire's proposition was nevertheless useful for helping me identify my privilege within a global system of education, from which I could then reshape my own practices. For example, at two of the schools, I was invited to give presentations during the weekly "social night" about growing up and going to school in Australia. Before one of the presentations, I was asked to talk about my education and how I could be a PhD student while still so young. Before the other, the deputy had suggested that they were keen for me to expand the horizons of the students so they know about more than just Solomon Islands. I accepted both invitations, considering the presentations the responsibility of a respectful guest in the school community. But the presentations brought me face-to-face with a direct link between my presence at the schools and the inequalities established by colonial education. During Q&A after one presentation, a teacher effectively said, "Go see David for help with your school fees," and another made a joke about my age. Exaggerating, he said that when Solomon Islanders turn twenty-five, they are still in Grade 11, but there I was, at that age, a PhD student. I vividly remember fidgeting in my seat, feeling uncomfortable and ashamed, which was further compounded by not knowing what to say in response. These presentations proved to be precisely the point of Freire's critical pedagogy.

Acting on this critical pedagogy has meant drawing from Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2014), who took inspiration from Audra Simpson's "ethnographic refusal" (2007).[2] Ethnographic refusal does not necessarily mean

a rejection of the researcher's project or an unwillingness to participate in research. Rather, refusals take place within interviews and conversations and are the moments when interviewees set the boundaries for what can and cannot be known. Tuck and Yang explained that this is because "stories are meant to be passed along *appropriately*" (2014, 234; emphasis mine). This point resonates with Indigenous understandings of knowledge transmission in Solomon Islands and in Melanesia more broadly, where there are different knowledge domains within clans, which clan members cannot access equally (Sanga 2015; Sanga and Reynolds 2020). Similarly, landownership in the east (Scott 2000) and west (McDougall 2005) of Solomon Islands comes with moral and ethical values that regulate the sharing of knowledge for the benefit of relationships. Land disputes can be avoided or resolved when leaders enact these values by deliberately refusing to reveal knowledge that would prove their sovereignty but endanger relationships in the process. These orientations to knowledge are starkly different from Western academic conceptualizations of knowledge (particularly positivist ones) that assume anything and everything can be the subject of investigation (Tuck and Yang 2014, 233; Smith 2012, 44–45). Moreover, it is a significant point pedagogically: if knowledge is the domain of specific individuals in some knowledge systems, then classroom practices premised on the indiscriminate sharing of knowledge are imposing the colonizer's understanding of knowledge (Philips 1992, 76). Tuck and Yang argued that the social sciences neither have nor deserve a right to know everything any more than certain differentially positioned members within Indigenous communities do. Within this stance, social scientists can generate theory from within the bounds of what they are allowed to know, and classroom knowledge should also respect limitations on access to knowledge.

The concept of ethnographic refusal has helped center my analysis around a recurring response from Solomon Islanders, which I struggled to comprehend during fieldwork. One line of inquiry I pursued early in my work concerned historical narratives about the civil conflict held by different groups in Solomon Islands. However, questions about what happened during the conflict were met with a refusal. For example:

DAVID: What about the community [around the school]?

REUBEN: That's the thing, it's not really free, I think.

DAVID: Oh, go on.

REUBEN: If you want to talk to somebody [about the Tension], that person has to be careful because, um, maybe there are some groups, some associations inside that exist. I mean, they are there to protect some, some things.

DAVID: I don't understand.

REUBEN: Like, have you interviewed [James]? . . .

DAVID: Yep.

REUBEN: How about the questions in relation to the ethnic tension?

DAVID: I didn't get very far.

REUBEN: You see, you see. So there are some things held back.

In this example, the teacher, Reuben, was not a member of the community in which the school was physically situated, which made him a guest on their land. Moreover, Reuben knew local chiefs had briefed a member of that community, James, about what he could tell me before I interviewed him the previous day. Thus Reuben, as a respectful guest in the community, refused to engage in my line of questioning and render knowledge about the Tension as a topic for academic analysis because he was taking his cues from a person of the place, James, who had already refused my line of questioning. The result was that our conversation, which was typical of my attempts at conversations about the violent past, was punctuated with uncomfortable verbal silences as I struggled to work out what to say next. Importantly, the teacher also made it clear that similar refusals and the silences they produced marked such conversations among Solomon Islanders, too.

Although my research interest had been in post-conflict reconciliation, I was permitted to observe nothing more than the effects refusals have on the way teachers and students get along with each other. That is, refusals to share certain forms of knowledge about the violent past produce silences about it in everyday life. Seeing that the new curriculum and my interview and observation data were riddled with ethnographic refusal thus also made visible the ways such silences were unsettling the colonial form of classroom knowledge that would not brook silence about any topic, including the Tension. Refusals had even been written into recently reformed social studies curricular materials in Solomon Islands, and, as I discuss in the next section, they unsettled colonial-era classroom knowledge by imposing boundaries on what could appear in classroom discourse.

Refusals and Silences in New Curricular Materials

Scholars who have focused on the causes of the Tension, particularly those indigenous to the islands most heavily involved in the Tension (Guadalcanal and Malaita), have debunked its designation as an ethnic conflict (Kabutaulaka 2001; Kwaʻioloa and Burt 2007). To be sure, there was considerable violence between militant groups from Guadalcanal and Malaita, but the Tension neither began nor ended as a conflict between deeply divided ethnic groups. The Tension has historical, political, and economic causes in which inequalities in access to economic opportunities (predominantly located on the northern side of Guadalcanal) led to strong feelings of resentment among people from Malaita and Guadalcanal, among others. Further grievances emerged when these drivers interacted with Indigenous logics around access to land and the maintenance of relationships between landowners and their guests (Kabutaulaka 2001, 14; Allen 2018, 64). Early in 1999, a group calling itself the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army began evicting settlers from their homes on North Guadalcanal, and initially the predominantly Malaitan settlers often appeared to accept the terms on which they were being expelled (Kwaʻioloa and Burt 2007; McDougall 2016, 17). It took almost a year for a Malaitan countermilitia to appear, and Honiara, the country's capital, became a Malaitan enclave as fighting between the two militant groups took place on its outskirts. Although peace between the two groups was brokered in October 2000, the Tension continued until the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in July 2003. Even before RAMSI's arrival, however, the fighting devolved into localized conflicts within Guadalcanal and Malaitan communities that were driven by issues at the kin and clan levels (Allen 2018, 68).

Thus, the conflict occurred at multiple levels of social life, and, consequently, while former militants could give cogent political and historical narratives to justify their participation in the Tension (Allen 2018, 63–64), refusals like those described in the previous section were considered essential for everyone when talk about the Tension threatened to reach the level of who did what to whom and why. Even the name given to the conflict itself in popular discourse—the Tension—obscures the violence of the conflict period.

Refusals are also present in the social studies textbooks written after the Tension, which delocalize its events and obscure some of its realities. In 2004, Solomon Islands' Ministry of Education and Human Resources

Development undertook sweeping education sector reform, which was generally in keeping with international preoccupations with equalizing access to, improving the quality of, and ensuring good management of education systems (Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 8). Curricular and pedagogical reforms extended through all subject areas and grades, although it began at the primary and junior secondary levels, up to and including Grade 9. According to Patrick Daudau, then director of the Solomon Islands Curriculum Development Division, by 2013 new materials had been finalized up to Grade 8 in several subjects, including social studies, and had already been distributed to some schools. For social studies at least, Daudau asserted that the division had control over the content in the new textbooks. Regarding work with foreign technical advisors (tas), he said that if "the subject working groups . . . have [a] dispute, or conflict with the ta . . . we just push aside the ta" (Oakeshott 2013, 41). Not surprisingly, then, the new social studies materials were more popular among teachers in Solomon Islands than materials produced out of country (Lingam and others 2014). One school on Guadalcanal at which I conducted my research had just received the new materials.

The Tension is covered carefully and selectively in the new social studies textbook for Grade 8. The reformed social studies syllabus is divided into "strands" and "sub-strands," with each sub-strand corresponding to a chapter in the new textbook. The Tension is covered in a sub-strand called "social unrest and its solutions" within the "social issues and resolution in Solomon Islands" strand (mehrd 2013, 63). The coverage of the Tension is in keeping with the refusals people maintain with each other about the Tension, which was precisely the intention of curriculum developers and in line with the wishes of senior Solomon Islander education sector consultants (Oakeshott 2013, 43–47). The Tension is discussed in the context of "civil unrest" as a global phenomenon. Its socioeconomic causes and solutions are discussed in general terms, but only a few major events are covered, and the only militant named in the text is in prison for life. The text is also silent on the intracommunity violence that characterized much of the Tension. Perhaps the starkest illustration of the refusals in the textbook are the images that accompany the text. For example, in the image students see of the Malaita Eagle Force, the militants' heads have been cropped out, thus obscuring their identities (sicdd 2015, 342).

The new social studies textbooks also encourage students to value and respect the Indigenous cultures and languages of Solomon Islands. I was allowed to observe Grade 7 social studies classes as they worked through

the "family and community disputes and how to solve them" sub-strand, which is the precursor to the Grade 8 sub-strand on the Tension. "Family and community disputes" consists of ten forty-minute lessons, and teachers are encouraged to allow students to use Pijin instead of English to express their opinions in class (SICDD 2013, 102). The corresponding chapter of the textbook tells students a story about the appropriate ways to solve disputes between individuals and at the village level. "Traditional" dispute resolution practices are valorized throughout the chapter. Activity 5 is particularly instructive in this context and reads: "We all have different ways of respecting different types of people according to our culture. What is the word for respect in your home language? What does it suggest you should do or feel towards others?" (SICDD 2012, 218).

Then Activity 5 explicitly identifies social changes following engagement with foreign music and movies, life in the formal economy, and even formal schooling itself as potential causes of a loss of the "respect we traditionally show for people"—a process Bugotu identified and sought to counter in the 1970s. Moreover, the teacher's guide suggests one possible answer to the activity's question: in Ghari, a language of Guadalcanal, the word for respect is "kukuni," which "suggests visitors should receive a good welcome, not to mix around elders, not to swear at or in front of elders or leaders" (SICDD 2012, 104). Through the association it draws between culture and "home language," the activity positions Indigeneity as the source of the respect for relationships that students must possess to resolve disputes peacefully.

In sum, the textbook authors refused to expand classroom knowledge about the Tension, a decision that has made the material resonate more with everyday life for teachers and students. Indeed, the vague terms in which the Tension is discussed in the new curricular material resemble Indigenous ideas around access to knowledge, even as they appear to obscure a part of Solomon Islands' history, which the textbook then reinforces by valorizing indigeneity as the foundation for conflict resolution.

"Just Something in History": The Tension as Classroom Knowledge

Although the reformed social studies material now takes into account the different levels of access to knowledge that individuals within each class will have, teachers and students are generally still inclined to view classroom knowledge about the Tension in terms consistent with its colonial

origins. That is, teachers and students understand that classroom knowledge is useful for passing examinations, which is in fact an increasingly prevalent trend globally, given the rise of neoliberal reforms to schooling (Connell 2013, 106). Conceptualizing classroom knowledge about the Tension as exam-relevant knowledge has helped students and teachers attend to their relationships with their peers and colleagues by separating knowledge about the Tension from those relationships.

During my fieldwork, I have observed many instances of students identifying the differences between forms of learning encountered at home and at school. For example, in an interview in 2013, one student described the difference between learning in his clan context and at school:

> When I was a kid, that's when I would . . . boys would usually each day, like in the evenings, we would go sit with all the older men in the village, and they [would] tell us stories about what's happening before, how they would fight for a piece of land and where their lands were, and they would tell us their lineages. . . . So we go as far as knowing how other, maybe, relatives [come] from different parts of the Solomon Islands. Like, they would tell us that we have relatives from this part, and there [too], and we have a girl in [the] village that's married to a guy in the other village . . . and they taught dances and songs.

There was nothing of this sort in his formal education, he said. In a similar vein, a student interviewed in 2015 stated quite plainly that in her view, her peers were not interested in learning about their country, much less the Tension, at school because it would not help them pass their national exams. A peer of hers made exactly this point about the Tension itself. John Lowe found a similar attitude among secondary science students in Honiara, who also engaged with the curricular material for the purposes of examination but gave it lesser status than religious truth when considering explanations for natural phenomena (1995, 661).

Several teachers also described the difference between classroom knowledge and the realities of everyday life. For example, Elijah, a Christian education teacher, said he relied on the textbook to resolve conflicts between curriculum content and the beliefs of different denominations. Once, when a Seventh-day Adventist student asked a question that highlighted differences between the country's Christian denominations, Elijah replied that the class should all keep to the answer in the textbook, even though it might not reflect their beliefs. With such an approach, he seemed to be limiting the relevance of classroom and textbook knowledge to the classroom and education system itself.

Consequently, when the Tension was rendered as classroom knowledge, it became "just something in history," as another teacher put it. This produced an apparent contradiction common in the perspectives of teachers and students: many did not object to the idea of learning about the Tension, but they expressed considerable discomfort at the idea of talking about it with their peers outside of the classroom. This illustrates a separation between classroom knowledge and normal social life among colleagues and peers who come from a range of cultures and localities. For instance, two young women in Grade 12 imagined a distinction between social life at school on the one hand and classroom learning and the uses of the knowledge learned there on the other. Both students refused to discuss the Tension with their peers outside of class because they understood that it risked making their peers angry. However, neither had any fear of learning about the Tension in class. One of the two young women aspired to be a doctor, the other an accountant, and the learning that would help them achieve those aims, they said, only occurred in the classroom. Moreover, they said the only way they knew they had learned something was by being successful in their exams. Useful knowledge within what they imagined to be the purpose of schooling was still achieved through the memorization of curricular content, but it did not help them relate to their peers.

When the Tension was understood as classroom knowledge, it was separated from the relationships teachers and students were embedded in. One teacher, Jeremy, recalled what happened when the Tension came up in one of his Grade 11 classes. There was little discernible change in the mood of his students because "when they heard [about the Tension], it was just like history to them." Similarly, Joseph, who was from Malaita but teaching on Guadalcanal, explained:

> If they put it in the syllabus, then it would be ok. I mean, that would guide me on what to say, how to teach it—if it were in the syllabus. But if, just to talk generally, I'm very cautious. If I was on Malaita, I would feel confident to talk. But not in [this school]. . . . The syllabuses should tell me what to talk about. I believe those people writing [the textbooks] should be cautious about what sensitive issues exist in communities, and they should write out properly how we should talk about the ethnic tension. . . . So I would feel, "OK, what I have discussed is in the syllabus, not something from [me]."

Therefore, Joseph trusted that curriculum writers would have already worked out how to present the material in a format removed from issues important for the communities involved, whose members could be in his

classes. He imagined that sticking closely to the story in the curricular material would create a measure of separation between him and his social relationships on the one hand and the story told in class on the other. Moreover, given the perspectives of the students discussed here, it seems reasonable that he could expect his students to understand the difference between classroom knowledge and knowledge with a broader social relevance. When one of Joseph's colleagues elaborated on the same reluctance to teach the Tension, she made it clear that it was because the students came from different backgrounds (and therefore relationships with different levels of access to a range of knowledges about the past) and that she had to be careful to respect that. It might seem like Joseph and his colleague were advocating the use of the banking model Freire despised when teaching about the Tension because they said they would simply follow the textbook. However, even in relying on the textbook, teachers could bring Indigenous understandings of knowledge transmission into the classroom, finding ways to draw attention to the need to refuse to discuss the Tension in the process.

Refusals in the Classroom

The education reforms beginning in 2004 also included an attempt to change pedagogical practices in the country's schools. This came in the form of outcomes-based education, which Daudau said they had adapted to reflect a "Melanesian way of doing things [which] means learning by doing and assessment by demonstration" (quoted in Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 13). It was an attempt to abandon rote-learning pedagogies in favor of approaches that develop critical thinking. Outcomes-based education was an invitation for teachers to allow lived experiences into the classroom, which would effectively force the teachers using this method to accommodate the knowledge of the Tension that their students brought with them and to plan in advance how they would do so. The approach has been met with considerable skepticism from the teachers charged with implementing it, who doubt the government's capacity to provide the necessary training and resources (Oakeshott and Allen 2015, 13). In 2013, one teacher, Anthony, described teachers' general attitude and approach toward teaching about the Tension: "I tried my best so that nobody asked me questions about the ethnic tension." Thus, despite the invitation to lead classroom dialogue about the violent past, Anthony and his colleagues refused to do so.

Unsurprisingly, refusals and the silences they produced were a major theme in my observations of the "family and community disputes" sub-strand, which Joyce, an experienced teacher and Anthony's colleague, taught to her Grade 7 class. She had taught the Grade 7 and Grade 8 "social issues and resolution" sub-strands several times before, and we had already discussed how her teaching had changed with outcomes-based education before I observed her classes in second semester 2015. She said that in her culturally diverse classrooms, some students have become uncomfortable, but the atmosphere has generally been pleasant enough. She explained that she had made major changes to her lesson planning under outcomes-based education because it encouraged students to draw on their own experiences. So, more than ever before, she has had to anticipate students' prior knowledge of the topic being studied. Joyce was critically aware that this had the potential to upset and offend some students, particularly if some of their peers spoke in a way they should not have, because her classroom included students from opposing sides of the conflict. She said she expected that students would have learned outside of school that the Tension was mainly between Malaitans and people from Guadalcanal, and she therefore worried that Guadalcanal students would likely blame Malaitans for taking their land from them. She had heard as much from Guadalcanal students before. Similarly, she expected that Malaitan students would be aware of the violent eviction of Malaitans from Guadalcanal and of the widespread destruction of their property. To prevent any discomfort in the classroom, Joyce would acknowledge the land dispute between Guadalcanal people and Malaitan settlers but emphasize that land disputes happen across the country. She would do the same when teaching about the effects of the Tension; Malaitans were not the only people to lose property. Moreover, she would not ask direct questions of students that might steer the conversation away from a general level. For instance, she recalled swiftly retaking control of the class in 2014 after, in response to her asking the room at large about the effects of the Tension on the life of the people, a boy replied, "All the Malaitans came and fired guns at us." To prevent any discomfort, she reassured the class that many places are like that all over the world, that everyone was affected by the Tension and that Solomon Islands has reconciled and achieved peace. In this instance, she abandoned outcomes-based education in favor of an authoritarian pedagogy to produce the silence appropriate during public discussions of sensitive topics like the Tension.

Anthony has filled his teaching of "social issues and resolution" with the same sorts of refusals. He explained that he has no wish to teach the causes of the Tension in detail and instead has simply framed them as a misunderstanding between the two parties. Indeed, he said that detailed information about the Tension would cause "wrong feeling" among the students, particularly those whose clan members were directly affected by the violence. Therefore, when he has taught the Tension, he has made it a lesson about the importance of resolving problems quickly and the methods students can use to do so. In fact, Anthony admitted that he worries about the relationship between Malaitans and people from Guadalcanal, which has motivated his reluctance to attempt detailed discussions of the Tension in class and his preference to present it as a misunderstanding that could happen anywhere in Solomon Islands. In this way, the two social studies teachers have brought culturally informed silences into their classroom lessons about the Tension.

I observed Joyce's lessons in the Grade 7 sub-strand, which, to my surprise, she had expanded because she knew of my interest in the Tension—an indication of her confidence and experience. This meant the students were engaging in classroom learning about the Tension a year before it appeared in their syllabus. She formed the students into groups, who then completed the first lesson in the textbook as per the Grade 7 syllabus. They were given time in class to discuss the way disputes are resolved in their home communities, and several groups became noticeably excited and engaged during these conversations. For homework, the groups were then asked to write out their responses and present them to the class in the next lesson, along with answers to several questions about the Tension that were apparently added for my observation.

Joyce was most impressed by the understanding her students showed of the need to maintain silence about the Tension with peers from other island and kin groups. She gave no direct instruction about the Tension itself, which she later told me was because she wanted to know what her students already knew; the knowledge students brought with them to the classroom was what Joyce feared could upset other students. She said the students had surprised her with the depth of their understanding of the causes of the Tension and of what brought peace to the country, and she noted that this had led to some discomfort in the classroom. When the students discussed the main cause of the Tension, which they said was Malaitan takeover of Guadalcanal land, the students from Malaita were

noticeably uncomfortable. Critically, rather than leaping to the defense of their kin and province, those students remained silent, demonstrating to Joyce that they did not want any conflict to reemerge. This meant, in her view, that the students had demonstrated their knowledge of their relationships to others in the class. In this way, the Malaitan students' silence is comparable to the way Reuben had behaved as a respectful member of the school community in which he was a guest when he refused my questions about the Tension. Just as Reuben took his cues from the community member I had interviewed the day before, the Malaitan students had apparently demonstrated the same understanding of respectful behavior at their school on Guadalcanal. Thus, the classroom knowledge in Joyce's classroom was shaped quite profoundly around the refusals that denote an understanding of, and respect for, the relationships among individuals in the class who have access to different knowledges about the Tension.

The pedagogy of Joyce's classroom was a different form of critical pedagogy than the one that helped me unpack my positionality. As mentioned, Freire's critical pedagogy was premised on a certain kind of rational dialogue and reasoned debate in which knowledge was both attainable and available to everyone equally. Freire's conceptualization of how individuals become conscious of the structural surrounds that shape their lives therefore made a similar assumption to that contained within the colonial form of classroom knowledge, which ethnographic refusal seeks to challenge. By ensuring that she and her students refused to discuss contentious points about the Tension, Joyce's pedagogy seems to have communicated that students could tend to the relationships they were embedded in by respecting the knowledge of their peers. It was an assertion of a method for the transmission of knowledge about violence that refused to make local knowledge about the Tension an object for the classroom. It did not prohibit all discussion of the Tension, but it certainly shaped the direction the discussion took. Joyce's pedagogy began from a different starting point than Freire's because the "dialogue" took place silently. Her pedagogy also engaged critically with how the knowledge in her classroom was constructed, whether as a colonial form of classroom knowledge or as something that respected how information can circulate in society. The classroom knowledge her pedagogy produced was thus consistent with the premise that Indigenous knowledges are just as valid as the Western academic knowledge of the colonizers.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this argument has been respectful of the boundaries Solomon Islander teachers established for me. These teachers, and the Indigenous scholars at the meetings that led to this special issue, have been critical pedagogues who have pushed me away from researching narratives about the violent past and toward examining the silences produced when individuals refuse to have such stories rendered as Western academic knowledge. I have argued that curriculum writers, as well as the teachers and students discussed here, have been changing the meaning of classroom knowledge by filling it with more meaningful, locally relevant content. Historically, classroom knowledge reflected the knowledge of the colonial power, with no limitations on what can be known and who can know it. Colonization also saw schooling attempt to impose a hierarchy in which Western understandings of knowledge were constructed as superior to Indigenous conceptualizations of knowledge. The students who made it all the way through the education system have described the demoralizing effects of this, although there were also Solomon Islanders who compartmentalized classroom knowledge by relegating it to a discrete part of social life—namely, entry into the formal sector. Since the Tension, social studies teachers and students have found a new use for the colonial form of classroom knowledge: by rendering the Tension as "just something in history," they have been able to separate it from the relationships present in the classroom.

Moreover, new social studies material, particularly as it has been used at the Guadalcanal school discussed here, reflects the boundaries that Solomon Islanders typically respect if they talk about the Tension with each other. In contrast, outcomes-based education, a new pedagogical approach, risks dismantling these boundaries between different understandings of classroom knowledge because it encourages students to draw on their personal experiences. As a result, refusals to talk about the violent past have become an element of the knowledge about the Tension produced in classroom lessons. Anthony's and Joyce's teaching might on the surface appear to be an authoritarian pedagogy poorly equipped to help students learn to think critically. However, as it is concerned with respecting the relationships between different individuals in the classroom, theirs is a critical pedagogy that reflects Indigenous understandings of appropriate forms of knowledge transmission.

* * *

This research was supported by *an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. In addition to the teachers and students at the boarding schools, Debra McDougall, John Cox, Rachel Hicks, and two anonymous reviewers deserve special thanks for their commentary on an earlier draft of this paper. Any errors are my own.*

Notes

1 Both projects were approved by the Australian National University's Human Research Ethics Committee, and all participants mentioned in this paper have been given pseudonyms as per the terms of those protocols.

2 I thank the scholars at the 2018 Australian Association of Pacific Studies conference—specifically, the members of the Unbound Collective (see Flinders University 2018)—for pushing me in this direction.

References

Allen, Matthew G

2018 *Resource Extraction and Contentious States: Mining and the Politics of Scale in the Pacific Islands.* Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bartlett, Lesley

2005 Dialogue, Knowledge, and Teacher-Student Relations: Freirean Pedagogy in Theory and Practice. *Comparative Education Review* 49 (3): 344–364.

Biermann, Soenke

2011 Knowledge, Power and Decolonization: Implication for Non-Indigenous Scholars, Researchers and Educators. In *Indigenous Philosophies and Critical Education: A Reader,* edited by George J. Sefa Dei, 386–398. New York: Peter Lang.

Bugotu, Francis

1973 Decolonising and Recolonising: The Case of the Solomons. *Pacific Perspectives* 2 (2): 77–80.

1986 Island Countries Ask, "Education for What?" *Bulletin of the* UNESCO *Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific* 27: 41–50.

Burbules, Nicholas C

2000 The Limits of Dialogue as a Critical Pedagogy. In *Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Instituting Education, and the Discourse of Theory,* edited by Peter Pericles Trifonas, 251–273. New York: Routledge.

Burnett, Greg
2009 Critically Theorising the Teaching of Literacy and Language in Pacific Schooling: Just Another Western Metanarrative? *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* 3 (2): 17–32.
Carrier, James
1984 *Education and Society in a Manus Village*. ERU Report No 47. Port Moresby: Educational Research Unit, University of Papua New Guinea.
Cervantes-Soon, Claudia G
2017 *Juárez Girls Rising: Transformative Education in Times of Dystopia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Connell, Raewyn
2013 The Neoliberal Cascade and Education: An Essay on the Market Agenda and Its Consequences. *Critical Studies in Education* 54 (2): 99–112.
Demerath, Peter
2000 The Social Cost of Acting "Extra": Students' Moral Judgments of Self, Social Relations, and Academic Success in Papua New Guinea. *American Journal of Education* 108 (3): 196–235.
Educational Policy Review Committee
1973 *Education for What? A Report on the Findings of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate Educational Policy Review Committee*. Honiara: Government Printer.
Ellsworth, Elizabeth
1989 Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review* 59 (3): 297–324.
Flinders University
2018 About Unbound. https://www.flinders.edu.au/college-humanities-arts-social-sciences/unbound# [accessed 6 June 2021]
Freire, Paulo
2017 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. London: Penguin Classics. First published in 1970 by Seabury Press (New York).
Hatch, J Amos
2002 *Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
Kabutaulaka, Tarcisius
2001 *Beyond Ethnicity: The Political Economy of the Guadalcanal Crisis in Solomon Islands*. State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Working Paper 01/1. Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, The Australian National University. http://

dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/1557/beyond-ethnicity-political-economy-guadalcanal-crisis-solomon [accessed 24 Sept 2019]

Kwaʻioloa, Michael, and Ben Burt
2007 "The Chief's Country": A Malaitan View of the Conflict in Solomon Islands. *Oceania* 77 (1): 111–127.

Lingam, Govinda Ishwar, Greg Burnett, Julian Fenny Lilo, and Narsamma Lingam
2014 Curriculum Reform in Solomon Islands: A Shift from Eurocentrism to Solcentrism in Curriculum Making. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher* 23 (3): 345–353.

Lowe, John A
1995 The Impact of School Science on the World-View of Solomon Islands Students. *Prospects* 25 (4): 653–667.

McDougall, Debra
2005 The Unintended Consequences of Clarification: Development, Disputing, and the Dynamics of Community in Ranongga, Solomon Islands. *Ethnohistory* 52 (1): 81–109.
2016 *Engaging with Strangers: Love and Violence in the Rural Solomon Islands.* New York: Berghahn Books.

MEHRD, Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development
2013 *Secondary Social Studies Syllabus.* Honiara: Solomon Islands Curriculum Development Division, MEHRD.

Mowbray, Jemima
2014 "Ol Meri Bilong Wok" (Hard-Working Women): Women, Work and Domesticity in Papua New Guinea. In *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific,* edited by Hyaeweol Choi and Margaret Jolly, 167–197. Canberra: ANU Press.

Nabobo-Baba, Unaisi
2006 *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach.* Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

Oakeshott, David
2013 Teaching the Violent Past? Truth-Telling and History Education in Solomon Islands. Honors dissertation, The Australian National University.

Oakeshott, David, and Matthew Allen
2015 *Schooling as a "Stepping-Stone to National Consciousness" in Solomon Islands: The Last Twenty Years.* State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2015/8. Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, The Australian National University. http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/1622/schooling-stepping-stone-national-consciousness-solomon [accessed 26 Sept 2019]

Palmer, Bruce
1980 Options for the Development of Education in the Solomon Islands: A Critical Analysis. PhD dissertation, University of New England.

Philips, Susan U
1992 Colonial and Postcolonial Circumstances in the Education of Pacific Peoples. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 23 (1): 73–78.

Sanga, Kabini
2015 Fānanaua: Ethics Education in an Indigenous Solomon Islands Clan. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 8 (1): 17–31.

Sanga, Kabini, and Martyn Reynolds
2020 Knowledge Guardianship, Custodianship and Ethics: A Melanesian Perspective. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 16 (2): 99–107.

Scott, Michael
2000 Ignorance Is Cosmos; Knowledge Is Chaos: Articulating a Cosmological Polarity in Solomon Islands. *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 44 (2): 56–83.

SICDD, Solomon Islands Curriculum Development Division
2012 *Solomon Islands Social Studies Year 7 Learner's Book*. Melbourne: Pearson.
2013 *Solomon Islands Social Studies Year 7 Teacher's Guide*. Melbourne: Pearson.
2015 *Solomon Islands Social Studies Year 8 Learner's Book*. Melbourne: Pearson.

Simpson, Audra
2007 On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, "Voice" and Colonial Citizenship. *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 9:67–80.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai
2012 *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. London: Zed Books.

Sykes, Karen
1995 Raising Lelet: Education, Knowledge and the Crisis of Youth in Central New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. PhD dissertation, Princeton University.

Thaman, Konai Helu
2003 Decolonizing Pacific Studies: Indigenous Perspectives, Knowledge, and Wisdom in Higher Education. *The Contemporary Pacific* 15 (1): 1–17.
2009 Towards Cultural Democracy in Teaching and Learning with Specific References to Pacific Island Nations (PINS). *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 3 (2): 1–9.

Tuck, Eve, and K Wayne Yang
2014 R-words: Refusing Research. In *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities,* edited by Django Paris and Maisha T Winn, 223–248. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
Watson-Gegeo, Karen Ann, and David Welchman Gegeo
1992 Schooling, Knowledge, and Power: Social Transformation in the Solomon Islands. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 23 (1): 10–29.
1995 Understanding Language and Power in the Solomon Islands: Methodological Lessons for Educational Intervention. In *Power and Inequality in Language Education,* edited by James W Tollefson, 59–72. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Watson-Gegeo, Karen Ann, David W Gegeo, and Billy Fito'o
2018 Critical Community Language Policies in Education: Solomon Islands Case. In *The Oxford Handbook of Language Policy and Planning,* edited by James W Tollefson and Miguel Pérez-Milans, 400–419. New York: Oxford University Press.

Abstract

Boarding school in Solomon Islands has historically been a place where students learned a kind of knowledge—classroom knowledge—devoid of social content and meaning. Away from their homes for most of the year, young Solomon Islanders would focus on learning classroom knowledge, even though it was only useful to help them pass national examinations and advance to the next tier of formal education. Classroom knowledge aided colonization because it assisted in the separation of students from Indigenous knowledges and made them feel like failures if they did not master it. In this article, I show that new textbooks, written in the wake of the civil conflict that Solomon Islanders call "the Tension," have invited teachers to use Indigenous conceptualizations of how knowledge about violence should be shared in their teaching. Although for many the Tension could be rendered as the classroom knowledge of the colonial era, teachers have accepted the invitation the curriculum has offered them to refuse to pass on knowledge about the violent past.

KEYWORDS: Solomon Islands, education, ethnographic refusal, curriculum, classroom