# Defying Definition: Rethinking Education Aid Relationships in Solomon Islands

**Rebecca Spratt**

University of Auckland *r.spratt@auckland.ac.nz*

*The discourse of aid—its language, structures and practice—powerfully ascribes roles and attributes to those involved in aid relationships such as developed/developing, partner, recipient/donor etcetera. This discourse is driven by a complex system of diverse and often competing ideas, values, actors and relationships, within which individuals must make sense of their role and agency at both professional and personal levels. While recent years has seen much focus on improving relationships by reordering some of these categories, little research has investigated how individuals themselves make sense of all this, and how it then influences their practice. The research presented in this article investigated the professional subjectivities of a small group of public servants working for the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development in Solomon Islands. The primary aim of the research was to explore the ways in which professional subjectivity is influenced by, and influences, aid relationships in Solomon Islands. The research findings demonstrate the complexity and multiplicity of professional subjectivities within the education sector in Solomon Islands and provide insight into how this impacts on aid relationships and aid effectiveness. The research findings highlight the need to move beyond reified binaries of 'self' and 'other' and resist the appeal of bounded categorisations of aid actors. Embracing the dissonance inherent in aid relationships and continually reflecting on the dynamic interaction between discourse, professional subjectivities and individual agency are offered as potential means for strengthening education aid relationships across Oceania and beyond.*

*Key words: Solomon Islands, education aid, aid relationships, development partnerships, professional subjectivity, discourse, reflexive ethnography*

## INTRODUCTION

Relationships based on partnership, ownership, and local leadership have been posited as central to the effectiveness of aid to Solomon Islands education reform over the last decade (Pederson and Coxon, 2009; Coxon and Tolley, 2011; Tolley, 2012). Yet, simultaneously, these relationships are embedded in a broader framing of the Solomon Islands' development challenges, in which deficits of the so-called local 'partners' and leaders—the public service and parliament—are positioned as key barriers to development. Through this lens, the application of 'superior' technical expertise and management models from 'developed' nations such as Australia and New Zealand is the main solution offered by aid actors to the capacity deficits supposedly inherent in local systems. Within each of these competing discourses—or systems of language, ideas, and practice—the actors involved in aid are ordered in particular ways in relation to each other and attributed particular professional and social attributes. Scholars have conjectured about the impact (positive and negative) of such discourses on the motivation and perceptions of those working within aid relationships, and in turn, on the

effectiveness of aid relationships in achieving positive change (see Escobar, 1995; Eyben and Moncrieff, 2006; Groves and Hinton, 2004). However, there is little research that has directly asked actors involved in aid relationships what they think about these discourses, how they reconcile the different, often contradictory discourses in which they operate, and how their sense of themselves as professionals is impacted.

The research presented in this article attempted to address these questions in examining how individual staff members of the Solomon Islands' Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) experienced and perceived the relationships and roles that aid discourse ascribed to them. Underpinning the research is a belief, motivated by my own personal experience as an aid worker, that by better understanding how aid relationships impact on professional subjectivity (and vice versa) we can contribute to improving those relationships. This article first outlines the research's conceptual framework and relevant aspects of the Solomon Islands context, including my positioning as researcher and aid actor. A brief description of the methodology is provided, followed by presentation of key findings. The article concludes with some thoughts on why and how these findings matter for strengthening educational relationships in Oceania. I acknowledge and thank those who generously agreed to speak with me for the purposes of this research and gave up their time to do so.

## AID, DISCOURSE AND SUBJECTIVITY

This section briefly outlines the theoretical debates and key concepts of aid, discourse and subjectivity, before turning to the specific case of aid and subjectivity in the Solomon Islands education sector. Aid and international development discourse have long been implicated in the "making and unmaking" of subjects, that is, the social construction of social identities (Escobar, 1995). Aid discourse is used here to refer not only to linguistic aspects such as ordering categories of 'developed/developing' or 'donor/recipient' but the real-world practices, interactions, and ideas that are represented and enacted through language, including processes of social identification. As Baaz (2005) explains,

*…discourses and representations are institutionalised and materialised*

*through different practices (…) practices are constituted within different*

*discourses, and, therefore (…) all social practices have a discursive aspect*

*(p.13).*

A significant body of work has examined the way in which the aid discourse—the language, ideas, structures and practices of the aid 'industry'—shapes the social identities of actors involved in aid and the relationships between these actors (Crewe and Harrison, 1998; Escobar, 1995; Eyben and Moncrieffe, 2006). Post-development writers in particular have argued that aid discourse acts as an instrument of power that serves to define those involved in aid in a way that maintains a power relationship of the 'developed' over the 'developing', while silencing alternative representations (Escobar, 1995; 1997; Ferguson, 1994, Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Mitchell 2002; Shore and Wright, 1997). From this perspective, concepts such as partnership, ownership, and participation have been 'co-opted' by aid agencies; it is not a genuine effort to rebalance power relations, but 'empty rhetoric' used to hide other motives of the aid hegemony (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994).

There are many examples of where such concepts have been espoused by aid actors but not effectively or genuinely implemented in practice, which lends credence to the post-development writers' claims. However, the post-development literature has been widely critiqued for its reliance on simplified, unquestioned dichotomies of developed/developing, Western/non-Western and an assumption of aid as some monolithic, homogenous force, in which aid actors conspire to work together to maintain superiority over powerless 'locals' (Baaz 2005; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Mosse and Lewis, 2005). As Crew and Harrison (1998) contend, the "implicit assumption is that developers develop, while local people resist, and arguably that this resistance is the most important part of their lives" (p.18).

In contrast, an emerging body of work grounded in detailed ethnographies of aid has exposed a much more complex picture of aid discourse and the diversity of the relationships and roles of actors involved in aid (Baaz, 2005; Crewe and Harrison, 1998; Eyben, 2006; Groves and Hinton, 2004; McKinnon, 2007; Mosse and Lewis, 2005). From this perspective discourse is not static and all-powerful, but dynamic and porous. That is, multiple, often conflicting discourses operate simultaneously and are continually changing as the result of the on-going interactions between ideas, actors, institutions, practices, and language within any given social field (Baaz, 2005). These writers also draw on the concept of subjectivity, as developed in the writings of Foucault (1982; 1991), and the fundamental premise that "the constitution of a social identity is an act of power" (Laclau, 1990 quoted in Hall, 1996, p.5). Subjectivity, in contrast to broader notions of identity, is concerned with the way in which the subject is situated, and through that 'made', in relation to power and discourse (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006; Hall, 1996). However, subject positions are not a-priori categories that individuals simply occupy according to the rules of the discourse: individuals engage in self-reflection and have agency in shaping their own subjectivities; in other words, they are not powerless to being defined by discourse (Hall, 1996). This means that, as with discourse, subjectivities are dynamic and multiple; at times competing and in conflict; and, actors and their subjectivities are mutually constitutive (Baaz, 2005).

## POSITIONING THE RESEARCH

This research draws on these ideas of subjectivity and discourse to investigate the nature of professional subjectivities of senior staff of MEHRD in the heavily aided context of Solomon Islands. First the motivation and methodology for the research is outlined, highlighting my dual-role as researcher and aid actor.

### Researcher Subjectivity

Over 2006-2009 I was based in Solomon Islands, working for the New Zealand High Commission, principally responsible for managing New Zealand's aid to the education sector. As an NZAID official, my role involved daily interaction with officials of MEHRD, related not only to NZ aid funding for the Ministry but also to aid coordination more broadly, as New Zealand held the position of 'lead donor' for the education sector-wide programme. My engagement was heavily structured within the aid effectiveness discourse of development partnership, capacity building, and fostering local ownership. I was not just delivering aid; I was 'coordinating' and 'harmonising'. I was meant to advise and suggest rather than demand and control. I worked to align NZAID's support to the decisions and priorities of the Ministry leadership and there was much emphasis on the need for trust and respect of sovereignty. Yet simultaneously, I was embedded in a discourse that positioned MEHRD as part of a weak,

corrupt public service, with poor governance and severe capacity deficits. Representing NZAID, I argued there was a need for reform of the Solomon Islands' public service culture to increase professionalism and improve accountability, and often used this argument to justify New Zealand's contribution to the 'partnership'. However, just as my MEHRD colleagues were not only MEHRD staff, I was not only an NZAID representative. We also interacted as people with diverse social identities and interests, beyond that of our professional roles.

I struggled to reconcile my experience of my own relationships and sense of subjectivity, and that of my MEHRD colleagues, with these discourses in which we were embedded. It was this experience that motivated this research. I was interested in understanding how my colleagues in MEHRD experienced such language and labels—to what extent, if at all, did these competing discourses influence their own sense of themselves as 'subjects' of aid. I was particularly interested to test out the validity of post-development critiques of the time, which were prominent within Solomon Islands as a backlash to what was perceived by some to be disempowerment and 'crowding out' of locals, as the result of too much aid and too many advisers with too much power (Kabataulaka, 2006; Moore, 2008; Pollard, 2005).

## METHODOLOGY

In undertaking this research, given my history and relationships with those I was 'researching, I occupied both an 'insider' and 'outsider' role, a positioning that demanded a particular approach to the research. The research employed reflexive ethnographic approaches in the sense of drawing on knowledge gained from my "insider-outsider" position and engagement with the research participants over an extended period of time, combined with personal reflection and ethnographic interviews. This was embedded in a relatively in-depth exploration of the social, cultural and political context of Solomon Islands. The ethnographic interview method was chosen in part because it allowed me to take account of, and make use of, the pre-existing relationship I had with research participants, and my understanding and experience of the wider social context as a result of living in Solomon Islands for nearly four years. Ethnographic interviewing (also known as active interviewing) positions the interview as a "form of interpretive practice" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.17) that is an interpersonal, dynamic and interactive process of meaning-making and subject-making (Fife, 2005). Ethnographic interviewing allows for sharing of information and views by the interviewer, unlike traditional interviewing which shuns self-disclosure by the interviewer (Davies, 1999). This approach was appropriate for the research design given my simultaneous position of both 'insider' and 'outsider' (Mosse, 2005; Reed-Danahay, 2009).

The primary research involved semi-structured ethnographic interviews, one-on-one, with 10 MEHRD senior officials (six males, four females) undertaken in late 2009. The participants self-nominated to be part of the research and had been staff of MEHRD for an average for 15 years. All but one had previously been teachers. They came from a range of provinces within Solomon Islands. While targeting senior officials was a possible limitation of the research, it was justified in that they are the central actors in MEHRD decision-making, have influence over other staff, and are the key contacts for interactions with donors and aid funded technical advisers.

The interviews were analysed in a two-phase process, as recommended by Fife (2005). The first phase involved coding the material from the interviews into key themes and ideas. The second phase involved drawing together the material from the interviews, my personal reflections and the literature review to identify the central ideas or themes as well as the

relationships between these ideas: relationships of coherence as well as dissonance and contradiction.

The secondary research comprised of a literature review focusing on literature about aid relationships, partnership discourse, sector-wide approach (SWAp), and Solomon Islands political, governmental and socio-cultural history. This was complemented by my existing knowledge of the Solomon Islands context and the education sector. While often relegated to the 'background' section of research reports, in this article context is positioned as an integral part of the research process itself (Stephens, 2007). As such, the next section provides an overview of Solomon Islands society, state, and aid, focusing on the education sector and features relevant to understanding education aid relationships and professional subjectivities. This is followed by presentation of the results of the participant interviews. In order to maintain anonymity of individual participants, their verbatim comments are identified by a number assigned each participant bracketed with the letter P (for 'participant').

## SOCIETY, STATE, AND EDUCATION AID IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

Solomon Islands is an archipelago in the south-west Pacific consisting of over 900 islands, of which some 300 are inhabited (Kabutaulaka, 1998, p.11). The population in 2009 was 515,000, approximately 50 percent of which was under the age of 20 and 80 percent were living in rural, relatively isolated, and geographically scattered areas (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2013). Although English is the official language of education, government administration and media, Solomon Islands *pijin* is the lingua franca and there are over 80 vernacular languages still in use. The islands are believed to have first been inhabited around 10,000 years ago and the first recorded contact with Europeans was in the 16th Century (Bennett ,1987, p.6-7; Kabutaulaka, 1998, p.11). In 1893 the British declared Solomon Islands a protectorate but it was not until post-World War Two that the British Administration established the foundations of a Westminster government model and some level of service delivery out to the nine provinces of the new nation (Bennett, 1987; Turnbull, 2002). Solomon Islands was granted independence in 1978 and this was followed by very rapid withdrawal of the British administration albeit with continued aid flows from Britain and increasingly Australia, New Zealand, the EU, and others (Bennett, 2002; Larmour, 1990). The newly independent government had little reach into, or legitimacy with, the citizenry outside of the capital Honiara and this has remained largely the case throughout the independent history of Solomon Islands as a nation-state. Prior to European settlement, social and political organisation in Solomon Islands was strongly kinship based, and leadership was organised through a meritocratic system in which power is ascribed not inherited (Bennett, 1987; Kabutaulaka, 1998). While this has, of course, significantly changed over the last century or more, the 'Big Man' system and kinship networks remain extremely strong forces in Solomon Islands. Power and authority were, and in most respects still are, highly personalised and depend primarily on one's wealth as well as skills (Kabutaulaka, 1998). However, equality of resources and power is seen as critical and, thus, a leader achieved power and authority not through the accumulation of wealth but the distribution of that wealth to their followers (and would-be followers).

As Hegarty et al. (2004) contend, rather than being the primary agent of authority in the country (as in Western-liberal democracies) Solomon Islands government (SIG) today is but one polity competing for place within the,

> *...patchwork of semi-autonomous indigenous micro-polities it was designed to replace – localised governance systems that Solomon Islanders had developed over thousands of years and successfully organised and ordered themselves (p.5) .*

The relationship between *kastom* ('traditional' culture) and 'the whiteman's way' of social, political, and economic organisation plays a central role in the discourse about development and governance in Solomon Islands. This relationship has often been positioned as a clash between systems based on kinship networks, distribution of wealth, and the personalisation of power, and the systems of a liberal democratic state with formal government positioned as distinct from a 'private sector' and 'civil society' (Brigg, 2009; Hegarty et al., 2004; Kabataulaka, 2006; Moore, 2008; Turnbull, 2002). The discord between these two perspectives, or the failure to acknowledge and account for the discord, is often cited (rightly or wrongly) as a reason for the perceived 'failure' of many development activities and the state in Solomon Islands (Gegeo & Gegeo-Watson, 2002; Kabutaulaka, 1998, p.21).

Aid has contributed significantly to the development and expansion of health, education, law and order, economic growth, and infrastructure in Solomon Islands. While the efficiency, efficacy, and value of this aid can be, and is, questioned, it is hard to deny aid's influence on the social and political landscape of Solomon Islands generally and the public service specifically. This is perhaps no truer than over the last seven years since the period known locally as 'the tensions'. The tensions, a period of internal conflict from 1998 to 2003, led to near collapse of the colonially-established institutions of government and law. Subsequent international intervention saw Solomon Islands become one of the most heavily aided countries in the world over the 2004-2010 period (World Bank, 2010). In the education sector between 30-40 percent of the government's education budget was aid-funded (ibid). Much of the aid flowing to Solomon Islands during this period was focused ostensibly on rebuilding the machinery of government and addressing the perceived key barriers of low capacity and nepotism in the public service, and corruption and weak governance at the political level (Hegarty et al., 2004; Moore, 2008).

This period of Solomon Islands' history coincided with the rise of what has been labelled the 'aid effectiveness agenda' at the global level. In this framework, effective aid and development is essentially that which reduces poverty through locally driven partnerships based on shared accountability for sustainable results and with aid delivered in a way that minimises transaction costs and strengthens local systems and capabilities (Mosse, 2005). Aid effectiveness principles of partnership, local ownership and mutual accountability have been heralded as a new era in development cooperation. This has facilitated a reordering of aid relationships and, inevitably, new labels—donors and recipients are now called 'development partners' who are mutually accountable for results. A focus on technical skills transfer and infrastructure development has been supplanted by capacity building and institutional strengthening. Project documents and log-frames are now recast into partnership or cooperation agreements, and new modalities of aid such as budget support and sector-wide approaches have become more commonplace.

These trends were clearly visible in Solomon Islands generally, and the education sector specifically. Two donors, New Zealand (NZ) and European Union (EU), introduced a SWAp in 2003/04 including sector budget support from NZ. The SWAp was in part framed as a response to the public service capacity deficits and perceived lack of accountability of local actors for development. Simultaneously however, the SWAp was strongly embedded within

the aid effectiveness discourse emphasising local ownership, use of local systems and empowering local change agents as the solution to development challenges (Ward, Banks and Sikua, 2005; Coxon and Tolley, 2011). Connected to this was a desire from both 'sides' to shift from a transactional relationship between donor and recipient focused on inputs and outputs, to a higher-level policy dialogue between mutual partners. As such, at that time in Solomon Islands the discourse of the SWAp reoriented relationships and, therefore, subjectivities. Significant in the establishment of the SWAp was the sense of a new beginning and the existence of 'change agents' within both Solomon Islands and the donor community. The Permanent Secretary for MEHRD at the time, Dr Derek Sikua, was one of the SWAp's chief architects and his presence as a 'change agent' was crucial to donors' willingness to enter the partnership. This also coincided with a new era in aid in NZ, where NZAID had recently been established as a semi-autonomous body dedicated to the management of aid with the focus on partnerships and building local ownership. Therefore, NZAID as the lead donor for the SWAp and Sikua as Permanent Secretary shared the sense that "there has got to be a better way" (Sikua quoted in Pederson and Coxon, 2009, p.8) than the previous project-focused, advisor heavy approach of aid in the Solomon Islands' education sector. From the start, the particular relationship between NZ and MEHRD was pivotal to the SWAp, as Sikua (quoted in Pederson and Coxon, 2009) described:

> *Our experience encouraged us to identify which donors were more likely to*
>
> *work in ways that suit us through a SWAp arrangement. They [the donors]*
>
> *agreed to our request that they guide and lead [the ministry] to an extent but*
>
> *not overpower; let them learn from their mistakes (...) and provided really*
>
> *good technical advisors – a key ingredient of the SWAp success; we know*
>
> *who we want and they work for us (p.9).*

As can be seen from the above description of aid in the Solomon Islands education sector, aid discourse generates particular subjectivities for donors, technical advisers, and public servants, which appear to influence actors' approach to aid relationships. Situating this within the broader development discourse, political history of Solomon Islands, and key socio-cultural features, as outlined briefly above, aims to inform the reader's interpretation of interviews with selected MEHRD staff, which are presented next.

## MEHRD DEPICTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ROLES AND AID RELATIONSHIPS

Several key themes emerged from the interviews with MEHRD staff. This article focuses on two that are most pertinent to the question of strengthening education relationships and aid effectiveness in Oceania, specifically that:

- MEHRD staffs' subjectivities are multiple, diverse, and complex. Aid discourse and relationships influence MEHRD subjectivities but are not determinative and are not unitary or consistent in their effects; and
- MEHRD staffs' perceptions of, and therefore interactions within, aid relationships are diverse and highly contingent on personal relationships in which cultural empathy is most highly valued.

**Aid discourse does not define professional subjectivities**

The research findings strongly countered the claims of post-development literature of aid discourse as a monolithic power and determinative influence on the subjectivities of aid 'recipients'. While labels such as 'development partner' or 'counterpart' were salient in participants' descriptions of their professional self, they were certainly not the only, nor the most significant, subjectivity. The subjectivities of 'public servant' and 'educationalist' were the most prominent when asking participants about their sense of professional self.

*"First thing that comes to mind is I'm a teacher…[ ]..but public servant still garem minim for mi. Whatever I do, I do it for the people, serve the people".*

*(P10)*

*"…we in the Ministry of Education, and King George as well as Waimapuru, we are all of them. We are educationalists, we are public servants, we are civil servants. Sometimes we do a little bit of private sector work". (P8)*

*"Servant of the public - with the focus on service". (P7)*

Similarly, while relationships with aid-funded technical advisers (TA) and donor agencies were at times highlighted as playing an important role in participants' professional lives, they were by no means the most important. Relationships with colleagues, with family, with politicians, and with communities appeared to more strongly influence participants' professional subjectivities than aid relationships.

*"I felt for my other colleague directors. Because when I see them, they sort of encouraged me more, because you see the management of the SWAp a number of them responsible for millions…….they themselves, they were doing all the work and they need somebody to support them....So I got some comfort from them……. to work together with them". (P3)*

*"We had our experience, and our experience up to the bush school – people still talk about us, even now, they say 'those fellas in the office, they never come to our school, but you people came'". (P9)*

*"I'm proud of the Ministry… we are leading other Ministries". (P7)*

Participants' responses also highlighted the multiplicity of subject positions that they identified with and notably the frequent dissonance between them. Most often this was expressed in terms of tensions between family/village obligations and that of public service, such as in the following quote:

*"But I think, that's where my view of being a public servant is very important to me……I don't use my position to benefit my, just my province, or my*

> *school and my village. I tell you I've been in the Ministry for 22 years, and I*
>
> *feel very guilty, because I haven't done much for my school in my village.*
>
> *But that's being a public servant. You don't use your authority or your*
>
> *position to benefit yourself or your family". (P1)*

This reflects the broader tensions between aid discourse and *kastom* highlighted earlier in this article. Participants also often talked of an internal conflict created by the negatively perceived actions and attitudes of some Solomon Islanders (in particular relating to corruption or perceptions of poor work ethic) and their own subjectivity as a Solomon Island public official working in the name of national development. The tension between professional and personal subjectivity also arose in this context, and the perceived lack of separation between professional and personal roles within Solomon Islands was typically expressed as a negative in comparison to the way of 'developed' nations.

> *That's what I mean by that there is no difference between a person's*
>
> *professional life and personal. You know in the Western world there's a very*
>
> *big difference - you don't mix personal life and professional life. There is a*
>
> *very big distinction".*

> *Q: So would you like to see that change in Solomon Islands?*

> *"Yeah, that is that is….only then can we move, can we improve. In all the*
>
> *things, in terms of, even from down up to the highest level". (P1)*

> *"The donors are probably thinking, oh, why are we giving aid money to*
>
> *these people if they can afford to pay such a ridiculous amount of money to*
>
> *MPs spouses…." (P6)*

> *"…because being a Solomon Islander I am obliged to be a little bit more*
>
> *culturally sensitive towards my colleagues". (P6)*

Many of the participants interviewed keenly felt this dissonance. It was also often a feature of my interpersonal relationships—I frequently experienced a sense of dissonance between donor characterizations of Solomon Island public servants and my personal experience of my MEHRD colleagues. There was a strong sense of liminality for participants in terms of being at once a Solomon Islander and therefore my 'other', while at the same time positioning themselves as distinct from 'those' Solomon Islanders who did not share the same developmental and 'modern' views that I held or represented an aid worker.

The prominence of this dissonance and sense of multiple subjectivities can, in part, be made sense of in the context of Melanesian notions of self-hood. While care must be taken to not generalise and to recognise that culture is always evolving, there are evident patterns in Melanesian notions of self-hood, which have a bearing on inter-personal relationships (Moore, 2008; Brigg, 2009b; Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo, 2002; McDougall, 2000). Melanesian concepts

of self-hood tend to be of a strongly relational nature: the self is bound to others rather than existing as a distinct entity (Brigg, 2009b; Harrison 2006). Importantly, however, this relational self-hood is in part maintained through constant contact with other groups, during which difference is articulated and emphasised (Brigg, 2009b). As such, there is a continual tension for Solomon Islanders between relationality and individuality, 'sharedness' and differentiation, and this tension "is central to the lived experience of most people" (Harrison, 2007, p. 66 quoted in Brigg, 2009b, p. 151). Further, it is argued that Melanesian concepts of self-hood are very accepting of co-existing multiple identities and affiliations, overlapping and existing together even if at times conflicting (Brigg, 2009b). These notions of self-hood were not always shared by the aid actors with which MEHRD staff were interacting. This was highly evident in the participants' responses as well as in my own experience as an aid worker in Solomon Islands, and represents an important feature to consider in terms of creating effective aid relationships.

### Perceptions and experiences of aid relationships are diverse and contingent

Participants revealed similar diversity and complexity in their articulation of their relationships with aid actors and their experiences of fulfilling roles such as 'counterpart' or 'development partner.'

> *"I can say yes with the SWAp. Partners - you can relate it to a husband and wife. They share everything, and they communicate with each other, and if they don't communicate there's a problem, in their relationship. Just the same, we can relate the partnership with the Ministry and our stakeholders…[ ]…" (P6)*

> *"Well, no. Definitely not. It [referring to relationships with donors] is not. Partnership is something that there must be understanding between all the partners…." (P2)*

> *"They [technical advisers] feel they are not answerable to me". (P7)*

> *"…there's that feeling of you know, they bring in their money and they'd rather run it. So OK, run it. And then when you're done, then go away". (P6)*

While often participants employed binary categories of 'us and them', such as "those TA", "the donors", and "the whitefella" they also emphasised the personal nature of their relationships with aid actors, and the importance of interpersonal connections that go beyond such stereotypes. My own reflections on my subjectivity in relation to MEHRD staff also supported this finding. At times I occupied the position of aid donor and was often referred to as "NZAID", "our development partner" or even "the bank". Yet at other times my engagements with my MEHRD colleagues operated on a much more personalized basis. This indicates the continual negotiation between multiple subjectivities and multiple discourses. Clearly, individuals matter. Yet at the same time, the labels and categories of donor, technical adviser, and foreigner equally mattered and were employed by MEHRD staff to make sense of and

order their aid relationships and their own position within those relationships.

Cultural empathy, trust, and not assuming they (donors or technical advisers) have all the answers were repeatedly highlighted by participants as critical to good relationships with them and, importantly, to participants' own professional motivation. What Solomon Islands MEHRD staff most valued in relationships with technical advisers and donors were encouragement, promoting a sense of self-belief, and professional support in the form of coaching or mentoring, rather than explicit instruction or one-way 'transfer of knowledge'.

*"…what I feel is that hem more like, they adapt to the Solomon Islands*

*context and culture, and they develop us from that basis". (P5)*

*"Like, I've had some really bad experiences with some of these TA's who just*

*think that you know, who just do not even try to understand, you know, why*

*something is that way…..but then I thought 'Oh. This is my office, this is my*

*country. They're only here for three years. So I'm not going to allow them to'*

*And I think that kind of thinking sort of, kept me going….the one*

*characteristic that really went up my nose, was that they still had that idea*

*that, oh white man ia, and very condescending". (P6)*

This also aligns with the high value Solomon Islands' culture and society place on relationships and with the relational sense of self-hood highlighted above. This may not be true of other aided contexts, and points to the importance of cultural context for understanding subjectivity in aided relationships and the operations of discourse.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through the combination of analysis of political and cultural features of Solomon Island society, empirical evidence of perspectives of MEHRD officials and reflection on my own professional experience, this article has sought to demonstrate the complex, dynamic and multi-faceted nature of aid relationships and subjectivities in the Solomon Islands education sector. A key conclusion from this research is that the effects of aid discourse on relationships and subjectivities are neither unitary nor consistent. Rather, the effects are conditional on the particular interactions amongst actors, within particular contexts with particular histories. The diversity and variability of participants' narratives illustrates this, as did my own experience.

To assume these relationships are determined by some all-powerful discourse of aid is to ignore the power of every-day interactions of people in particular contexts. These findings demonstrate that discourse is not determinative, and that subjectivities are multiple and dynamic (Baaz, 2005; Crewe and Harrison, 1998). Thus, to explain the emergence of the education SWAp in Solomon Islands as an example of the imposition of global agendas of aid effectiveness is inadequate. Rather, the emergence of the SWAp is more accurately understood as an outcome of a convergence of several discourses and circumstances, and an outcome that has continued to evolve in particular ways due to the complex subjectivities, relationships and discursive fields operating in Solomon Islands at the time (Tolley, 2012).

The accounts of the participants and my own experience within education-aid relationships not only demonstrate that context and history matter, but that they are created and re-created mutually, in and through, discourse and relationships. As Dilley argued, context is "a process or set of relations, and not a thing in itself" (Dilley 1999:5). As such, the value of this research is not simply to put aid into context but to show how aid's actor-networks make their context (Latour 1996, p. 133 cited in Mosse 2005, p. 17). The findings highlight the centrality of subjectivity and of inter-personal relationships for aid effectiveness. Reflecting on Hau'ofa's (1998, p.401) call for an Oceanic regional identity built around "human beings with a common heritage and commitment, rather than as members of diverse nationalities and races", the findings demonstrate the potential for aid effectiveness focused on relationships that are based on real interests, commonalities, differences and a recognition of agency.

This is not to suggest that simply having a personal relationship can remove the barriers created by perceptions of difference nor neuter the, at times, enormous power inequities involved in relationships between aid actors. Rather, it is argued that personal relationships, with critical reflection on those relationships, can help to move beyond these differences and the labels that work to reify difference. Doing so also gives greater recognition of agency in terms of the productive, generative nature of power. Aid does not make and unmake subjects, and aid discourse does not exclusively define nor determine reality, unless we as aid actors allow it to. For actors involved in education-aid relationships the challenge is to accept the dissonance that inevitably arises from critical reflection on simplistic binaries and reifications of difference, and use it to motivate deeper understanding and appreciation of self and other.

## REFERENCES

Baaz, M. E. (2005). *The Paternalism of Partnership A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid.* London, NY: Zed Books. doi: 10.1111/j.1471-0366.2007.00151_6.x

Bennett, J. A. (1987). *Wealth of the Solomons: A History of a Pacific Archipelago, 1800-1978.* Pacific Islands Monograph Series, No. 3. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. Retrieved from http://www.netlibrary.com.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/Reader/

Bennett, J. (2002). *Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands. Though Much is Taken, Much Abides: Legacies of tradition and colonialism*. Discussion Paper 2002/5. Canberra: State Society and Governance in Melanesia, Australian National University.

Brigg, M. (2009). Wantokism and state building in Solomon Islands: a response to Fukuyama. *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 24(3):148-161. Canberra: Australian National University.

Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J., (2006). Introduction to of Revelation and Revolution. In Moore, H., & Sanders, T. (Eds.). *Anthropology in Theory. Issues in Epistemology*, (pp382-396). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Cooke, B., & Kothari, U. (2001). *Participation: The new tyranny?* London, New York: Zed Books.

Coxon, E., & Munce, K. (2008). The global education agenda and the delivery of aid to Pacific education, *Comparative Education* 44 (2): 147-166; doi 10.1080/03050060802041050

Coxon, E., & Tolley, H. with Fua, S.J., & Nabobo-Baba, U. (2011). *Researching SWAps in Pacific Education. A study of experiences in Solomon Islands and Tonga*. University of Auckland, New Zealand

Crew, E., & Harrison, E. (1998). *Whose Development? An ethnography of aid*. London: Zed Books.

Davies, C. A. (1999). *Reflexive Ethnography. A Guide to Researching Self and Others*. London: Routledge.

Dilley, Roy (Ed) (1999). *The Problem of Context. Methodology and History in Anthropology v4*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books

Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering Development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Escobar, A. (1997). Anthropology and Development. *International Social Science Journal*, 49(4): 497-516. Retrieved from Wiley Online Library. doi 10.1111/j.1468-2451.1997.tb00040.x

Eyben, R. (Ed). (2006). *Relationships for Aid*. London, Sterling, VA: Earthscan.

Eyben, R., & Moncrieffe, J. (2006). *The Power of Labeling in Development Practice*. Institute of Development Studies Policy Briefing Issue 28. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Retrieved from http://www.ids.ac.uk

Ferguson, J. (1994). *The anti-politics machine: "Development," depoliticisation, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Ferguson, J. & Gupta, A. (2002). Spatialising states: toward an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. *American Ethnologist* 29(4): 981-1002. Retrieved from JSTOR Arts and Sciences 2 doi 10.1525/ae.2002.29.4.981

Fife, W. (2005). *Doing Fieldwork. Ethnographic Methods for Research in Developing Countries and Beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power in Dreyfus, H.L. & Rabinow. P. (Eds.). *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. (pp. 201-228) Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality in Burchell G., Gordon, C., Miller, P., (Eds.). *The Foucault Effect. Studies in governmentality*. (pp. 87-104) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gegeo, D. W., & Watson-Gegeo, K.A. (2002). Whose Knowledge? Epistemological Collisions in Solomon Islands Community Development. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 14(2): 377-409. Retrieved from Academic OneFile http://hdl.handle.net/10125/13653

Groves, L., & Hinton, R. (Eds.). (2004). *Inclusive Aid. Changing power and relationships in international development*. London, Sterling: Earthscan

Hall, S. (1996) Introduction: Who Needs Identity? In Hall, S. & Du Gay, P. (Eds.). *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 1-17) London: Sage.

Harrison S. (2006). *Fracturing Resemblances. Identity and mimetic conflict in Melanesia and the West*. New York, Oxford: Berghan Books

Hauofa, Epeli (1998). The Ocean in us. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 10(2): 391–410. http://hdl.handle.net/10125/13234

Hegarty, D., May, R., Regan, A., Dinnen, S., Nelson, H., & Duncan, R. (2004). *Rebuilding State and Nation in Solomon Islands: Policy Options for the Regional Assistance Mission*. State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2004/2 Australian National

University, Canberra. Retrieved from
http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/ssgm/publications/discussion_papers/

Hinton, R., & Groves, L. (2004). The complexity of inclusive aid in Groves, L., & Hinton, R. (Eds.). *Inclusive Aid. Changing power and relationships in international development*. (pp. 3-20) London, Sterling: Earthscan.

Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F (1995). *The Active Interview*. California: SAGE

Kabutaulaka, T. (1998). *Pacific Islands Stakeholder Participation in Development: Solomon Islands*. Pacific Island Discussion Paper Series, World Bank Report Number 18824. Retrieved from http://go.worldbank.org/PIOY3DVLQ0

Kabataulaka, T. (2006). 'Crowded Stage: actors, actions and issues' in Henderson, J., & Watson, G. (Eds.). *Securing a Peaceful Pacific*. (pp. 408-22) New Zealand: Canterbury University Press

Larmour, P. (1990). Public Choice in Small States: Land Management in Melanesia in Ghai, Y. (Ed.). *Public Administration and Management in Small States. Pacific Experiences*. (pp. 26-59) London, Suva: The Commonwealth Secretariat and the University of the South Pacific.

Li, T.M. (2007). *The will to improve. Governmentality, development and the practice of politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press

McDougall, D (2000). Paths of pinauzu: Captivity and social reproduction in Ranongga. *Journal of Polynesian Society*, 109(1): pp99-114. Retrieved from http://www.jps.auckland.ac.nz/document/?wid=5076

McKinnon, K. (2007). Post-development, Professionalism, and the Politics of Participation. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97(4): 772-785. doi 10.1111/j.1467-8306.2007.00582.x

Mitchell, T. (2002). *Rule of Experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Moore, C. (2008). Pacific view: the meaning of governance and politics in the Solomon Islands. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 62(3): 386-407. doi 10.1080/10357710802286833

Mosse, D. (2005). Global Governance and the Ethnography of International Aid in Mosse, D. and Lewis, D. (Eds.). *The Aid Effect. Giving and Governing in International Development*. (pp. 1-36) London: Pluto Press.

Mosse, D. & Lewis, D. (Eds.). (2005). *The Aid Effect. Giving and Governing in International Development.* London: Pluto Press.

Pederson, E. & Coxon, E. (2009). *Review of the Solomon Islands Education Sector Wide Approach*. Prepared for Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, Honiara, Solomon Islands.

Pollard, B. (2005). Solomon Islands Education and Donor Assistance in the Post-conflict Period in Sanga, K., & Taufe'ulungaki, A. (Eds.). *International Aid Impacts on Pacific Education* (pp. 155-198) Wellington, New Zealand: He Parekereke, Institute for Research and Development in Maori and Pacific Education, School of Education.

Reed-Danahay, D. (2009). Anthropologists, Education and Auto-ethnography. *Reviews in Anthropology*, 38: 28-47. New York: Routledge

Shore, S. & Wright, S. (Eds.). (1997). *Anthropology of policy: critical perspectives on governance and power.* London & New York: Routledge

Solomon Islands National Statistics Office (2013). *Report on 2009 Population & Housing Census: Basic Tables and Census Description*, Honiara, Statistics Office, Ministry of Finance.

Stephens, David (2007). Culture in Education and Development principles, practice and policy. *Bristol Papers in Education* No. 3, Oxford: Symposium Books

Tolley, Hilary (2012). *Sector wide approaches from a complexity perspective: Insights for development from Solomon Islands and Tonga*. PHD Thesis, Auckland, New Zealand: University of Auckland

Turnbull, J. (2002). Solomon Islands: Blending Traditional Power and Modern Structures in the State. *Public Administration and Development*, 22,:91-201. doi 10.1002/pad.211

Ward, M., Sikua, D. & Banks, T. (2005). Donor Harmonisation for Improved Aid Effectiveness. Sanga, K., & Taufe'ulungaki, A. (Eds.). *International Aid Impacts on Pacific Education* (pp. 320-335) Wellington, New Zealand: He Parekereke, Institute for Research and Development in Maori and Pacific Education, School of Education.

Watts, M. (2003). Development and governmentality. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24(1): 6-34. doi 10.1111/1467-9493.00140

World Bank (2010). *Solomon Islands Growth Prospects: Background Material and Analysis*. World Bank.