

## **Wantok-Centred framework for developing citizenship**

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*This paper presents a framework for developing citizenship education in the Solomon Islands. By drawing on a qualitative study conducted with 24 students, 20 teachers, and four principals in four rural and urban schools in the Solomon Islands, this study reveals that wantok-centred relationships are a unifying symbol that holds the family unit, clan, tribe, church members, and people with the state. In order to strengthen wantok relationships that create a peaceful coexistence in the Solomon Islands, this article proposes a wantok framework to underpin the development of citizenship education in the Solomon Islands. It introduces three domains: democratic, spiritual, and cultural, which are all centred on the notion of relationality. It demonstrates how relationality is central to the wantok framework by connecting people through the pijin language, and cultural, spiritual, and democratic values. This article concludes by demonstrating how this framework can promote wantok-centric identities, values, and relationships in both the formal and non-formal education sectors in the Solomon Islands.*

*Keywords:* Wantok-centred; citizenship; citizenship education; democracy; Indigenous culture; Christianity; Pijin

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Solomon Islands is a very small but diverse country. The only unifying symbol is Pijin language. Historically, in the late nineteenth century during the formalization of the Solomon Islands British Protectorate, Pijin English emerged. Those who used it were referred to as “Wantoks”. The term derived from two English words “one” and “talk” meaning speaking the same language. The term originated from the merging of modern democratic systems, Christianity, and Indigenous culture and is a combination of Indigenous language words and English words; it is used in formal, informal, and non-formal occasions nationally.

Language identity is a significant tool, with the potential to unify a nation as diverse as the Solomon Islands. According to May (2018) “common language can unify but a separate language can fracture and fragment a society” (p. 236). The commonly used term, *wantok*, is the only unifying symbol that reflects the identity of people and signifies people who use variants of the same language. The language has emerged with new identities and national consciousness among people of the Solomon Islands. This has seemingly redirected a discussion on relationship and identity, rights, and responsibilities, ownership and sense of belonging in the Solomon Islands. *Wantok* is now a commonly use term to connect people of diverse ethnicity in the Solomon Islands and other Melanesian countries (Briggs, 2009). The *wantok* tradition has, therefore, played an important social support function in the absence of a functioning state welfare system.

The Solomon Islands has suffered the consequences of the political challenges of citizenship (Mellor & Prior, 2004). There is increasing voter apathy, resurgence of national movements, the impact of global forces on local traditions, the stress created by increasingly multicultural societies, and a decline of volunteerism in community activities (Mellor & Prior, 2004). This has impacted on the principles of democracy, which concerns the rights, freedom, duties, and responsibilities of citizens. Such varying perspectives shows that the term citizenship is problematic and contestable (Mellor & Prior, 2004). Indeed, citizenship is a complex discourse that can be influenced by a wide range of variables relating to the extent of social settings, political systems and structures, and economic status of each nation state and community (IEA), 2010). In this regard, education systems that focus on implementing citizenship education, particularly in developing countries such as Solomon Islands, should be seriously considered.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the perspective and understanding of citizenship by teachers and students in the Solomon Islands. It focuses on students, teachers, and principals' perspectives of citizenship and it draws on their understandings to develop a *wantok*-centred framework that captures the domains of citizenship within the Solomon Island national education system. As the paper develops, I argue that a *wantok*-centred framework for understanding citizenship is significant for the stability of the Solomon Islands; it draws from Indigenous cultures, modern democracy, and Christianity as guiding principles. This framework places relationality at its core and has considerable potential to inform education and curriculum at the national level.

## **CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CITIZENSHIP AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

Euro-centric and Anglo-centric citizenship frameworks are dominant in many democratic developed and developing nations-states (Mellor & Prior 2004). These frameworks consider the position or status of being a citizen within a universal status that accords individuals human, civic, political, and welfare rights (Marshall, 1950); legal status that grants social, political, and economic rights (Dominelli & Moosa-Mitha, 2014); and a set of rights, duties, and identities linking the citizen to the nation state (Banks, 2008). Such links are organized around relationships between the state and the society (Figueroa, 2004). Under such frameworks, citizenship refers to the legal rights and obligations within a nation state and, more specifically, to civil, political, and social duties (Marshall, 1950). These rights include “the right to liberty, justice, political participation, economic welfare, security and to sharing in social heritage” (Figueroa, 2004, p. 223). The integration of people to form a community is what modern Western thought has closely tied to the nation-state (Marshall, 1964). Within a nation-state, “citizenry functions to guide the distribution of values of rights and duties that constitutes the citizens’ will to live peacefully together in the democracy” (Ghasempoor, Yarmohammadzadeh, & Pishkarmofrad, 2012, p. 111). All who possess citizenship status are “equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed” (Figueroa, 2004, p. 223).

However, in non-Western contexts, citizenship is associated with morality and spirituality (Aldridge 2013). These values transcend non-Western societies towards tolerance and peaceful co-existence among people and are, therefore, intrinsically important to determining the direction of young people’s development (Lee, 2004). In similar claims, Green (2014) argues that Indigenous people do not separate religion from the state. Therefore, citizenship is not separated from religion and culture; thus, spirituality is part of the state and not considered a separate entity (Green, 2014). In other words, “religion implies cultural identity, so religion and culture are inseparable” (Aldridge, 2013 p. 2).

Likewise, Green (2014) points out that “Indigenous expression of spirituality is an intricate part of our everyday experience, seeped within our laws, governance, models, relationship to our environment, practice and philosophical outlook” (p. 34). Spirituality is linked to Indigenous sovereignty and national autonomy that connects to clan, place, history, language, ancestral teaching, and ceremonial places (Green, 2014).

According to the Kwaraae people of the Solomon Islands, citizenship is referred to as *Ngwae ni fuli*, (person of place) (Gegeo, 2001). The *ngwae ni fuli* symbolises *babato* ‘o ‘anga (stability), *aroaro* ‘anga (peace), and *tuafiku* ‘anga (living in unity) (p. 69). That is, a person who relates to the social, physical environment, cosmos, and spiritual world. Gegeo (2001) uses the term *Ngwae ni fuli* “strictly to explore the way in which people conceptualize and discuss their identity in the rapidly changing world” (p. 3). The *ngwai ni fuli* is referred to from other literature as personhood (Ikuenobe 2006 in Naisilisili, 2017). The recognition of a personhood is earned in society through assuming responsibilities that defines a person (Naisilisili, 2017). This covers one’s existential foundation that links to geographical and physical location, genealogy (one’s location in a kin group both in the present and reaching backward and forward in time). This includes having land through the unquestioned position of genealogy and marriage, being knowledgeable about culture, history, ontology, cosmology, and being accompanied by certain kin obligations and responsibilities that cannot go unfulfilled until one is freed by death. This is different from political and legal recognition and the legitimacy of citizen’s rights and freedom under state laws as held by the Eurocentric and Anglo-centric citizenship. It associates more with cultural values, lingual identity and the recognition of traditional ownership of land and the relationship of citizens with Indigenous tribal groupings.

Similarly, in the case of Fiji, Nabobo-Baba (2009) explains that citizenship is concerned with the responsibilities of speaking the truth, being hard-working, attending to customary and community obligations, recognizing people for their local wisdom, living well, and working hard. In this regard, Indigenous people of Pacific Island countries differ in the way they educate children for citizenship from the content, pedagogies, and strategies of Western education philosophies. Children are, therefore, given special education in order to acquire such important knowledge, values, and skills. However, Koya, (2010) claimed that while Fijians are proud of their nationality, the development of national pride in Fiji has been limited and fragmented by their consciousness of their racial and ethnic background. Thaman (2004) referred to this as being incompatible to the values of Pacific peoples and their education. Therefore, there is still work to be done in Pacific Island countries to ensure that citizenship frameworks include values that are relevant to their context, that are centred around the notion of relationality, and that unite and empower citizens. Relationality in Indigenous societies is central to citizenship and is defined by the acceptance and recognition citizens have in society and the demonstrated values from culture and religion (Naisilisili, 2017).

Anglo–Eurocentric education, however, focuses more on citizenship frameworks that are related to the historical relevance of local identities. It is developed through the mutual understanding between the state and the individual (Iyamu & Otote, 2003). Such education focuses on the preparation, through teaching knowledge and understanding, to assist young people to engage in their roles and responsibilities as citizens in both civic and civil society, and to shape their communities, schools, and societies (White & Openshaw, 2005). Citizenship education prepares individuals to participate as active and

responsible citizens in a democracy (Herbert & Sears, n.d). It is a conscious process of developing certain values, habits, skills, and attitudes that the society considers desirable and essential for its survival as a unit and its development. This is achieved through the forms of education and training that each nation-state adopts (Iyamu & Otote, 2003).

However, citizenship education programs cannot be successful if they fail to consider the unique historical, cultural, and social traditions of the context (Ichilove 1998). Citizenship education programs cannot be readily transported from one country to another, neither can a country simply adopt a citizenship education program and expect that it will work. Citizenship education programs need to be carefully adapted rather than adopted (Kerr, 2006). In a small island state like the Solomon Islands, any wholesale adoption is likely to be problematic, particularly in such a socially, linguistically, culturally, and religiously diverse context. Importantly, social inequality within the Solomon Islands has created unequal class, status, and wealth between people. This disparity prevents citizens from participating effectively and actively in state institutions. This implies the difficulty of translating the Euro-Anglo centric citizenship education framework into meaningful approaches to developing countries. This article responds to this concern by developing a framework for citizenship education that is based on the values, beliefs, and aspirations of Solomon Islanders. It achieves this by introducing a *wantok* framework for citizenship education in the Solomon Islands that places relationality at the centre of this program.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To find a citizenship education framework that is suitable for Melanesian countries like Solomon Islands, careful consideration has to be made so that information gathered is true and robust. This study was qualitative in nature and was conducted with four principals, 20 teachers, and 24 students using in-depth interviews, group discussions, and content analysis (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). A case study was used as a strategic design to inform data gathering for this study (Yin, 2003). It was regarded as the best approach for this study to obtain as much information as possible about the experiences of teachers and students as citizens of Solomon Islands. The aim of this design was to uncover the significant factors of how people relate to each other and live together as one people. In this study, the researcher was the key person who generated and analyzed the research. Four schools were chosen as case studies to represent the urban and rural setting from two provinces in the Solomon Islands: Malaita and Guadalcanal, with two schools from urban centres and two from the rural schools.

Semi-structured interviews were used in the study and were conducted with principals, teachers, and students drawn from urban and rural schools. The purpose of using the interview method was to get firsthand information from the participants' own words so that the researcher could develop insights on how the participants perceive or interpret their world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). An interview was considered the best option for this study as in-depth, detail, and rich data was gained from the conversations (Geertz cited in Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interviews were conducted with 12 teachers, four principals and 12 students. One-on-one interviews were conducted with principals while group discussions were held separately with a group of teachers and a group of students.

The researcher transcribed the recording from Pijin to English. First, there was a preliminary analysis of the data to highlight and identify emerging issues important for the study as well as a process of a clear and systematic coding of data under relevant themes. After the preliminary analyses, a post-data analysis was conducted to reduce the

data (Grbich, 2007). The data were coded by identifying themes and concepts through comparisons, categorizations, interpretations, descriptions, and syntheses (Ezzy, 2002).

## FINDINGS

This paper reports on students' and teachers' voices in selected rural and urban schools in the Solomon Islands. The findings that follow covers the conceptualization and understanding of citizenship, citizenship education, and values that were significant for the four principals, 20 teachers and 24 students interviewed in this study.

### **How teachers and students conceptualize citizenship**

At the outset, the term citizenship was found to be unfamiliar to teachers and principals because it had no traditional equivalent. According to teachers and principals, the term has no resemblance to any traditional or cultural word in the Solomon Islands. A principal made this remark:

I see the term citizenship as irrelevant to Solomon Island context. It does not have an equivalent word with Solomon Island and, in this regard, my society. In my society, we do not judge and recognize people according to how outsiders or the West recognize and judge citizens. We judge people according to cultural norms, values, and ownership – the way we see people in our society is through the upholding and demonstration of values acceptable in society and the traditional ownership of resources as land, that only has connection through Indigenous tribes and the values that guide action (custom). I myself cannot emulate others. (Rural School Principal)

The term citizenship does not have an equivalent word in local dialects in the Solomon Islands, particularly in Malaita, the site of the study. This resonates with concerns raised by Helu Thaman (2004) who also claimed that definitions of a citizen is different from that in Western liberal democratic countries. She claims that democratic values are not contextually relevant and are incompatible to Pacific people. She further asserts that people of Pacific Island countries do not really know the meaning of citizenship as they do in a liberal democracy so it is not a straightforward term in Pacific island countries such as the Solomon Islands. The diversity of perspectives held by people, the sense of place and space and the limited exposure to the idea of Western citizenship and democratic ideals and practice reflects the complexity of the term citizenship. This study also revealed that relationships based on blood ties, ethnicity, land ownership and leadership were recognized by students as key to citizenship in the Solomon Islands.

My recognition can only be validated by my family, my community and leaders in society. We are recognized among society as “people of the place” through blood ties and who have lived and demonstrated the ethical values of leadership among people (Rural School Student).

Teachers and students related citizenship with values that reflects an individual's position within the local context and, therefore, influences their ability to participate freely among kin groups or community. According to participants, a person that is recognized for his or her active and free participation in society is someone that is identified as a citizen within a tribe and land. They relate citizens with people's active engagement in community activities such as caregiving, sharing, hardworking, security, and ethical leadership. This suggests that they are citizens or people of place. Such recognition and active participation is different from a set of democratic rights, responsibilities and identities that link citizens to the nation state (Banks, 2008). This perspective differs from

the legal and political status of the rights and freedoms of individuals (Gilbert, 2005). One teacher in this study explain this by saying:

[C]itizen[s] are those that were born in the land with parents that are of the land as well. They are seen as the heritage of people of the place by birth, whose parents are people of the place as well. People of place are those who have land attachments, genealogy, and attachments to Indigenous kinship and tribal groups. Such relationality denotes the responsibility and care that is obligated by people to the land, environment and people. (Urban School Student)

According to teachers and students, communities in the Solomon Islands only recognize citizenship through rightful ownership of land and membership with Indigenous tribes, land and *kastom* (custom) and not by recognition of the law. This was noted by students who perceived citizens as:

[P]eople who care for things in the environment and their own society. They are people who respect those in their kin group, tribe, and other people they are associated with. (Urban School Students)

According to this student, a citizen is a person who is born and recognized as a rightful person of that locality through land, tribes, culture, and custom. Another student sees citizens as those who relate well with everybody in the community or someone who is a peacemaker.

Citizens (person of place) are people who show kindness and have demonstrated the value of sharing in material things including, labour, money, food, and clothes. (Urban School Student)

This suggests that students hold a different perspective of citizenship from a Eurocentric understanding. Participants repeatedly related citizenship to birthright, status, identity, participation, character, values, and disposition. According to the participants in this study, democratic rights are only limited to ownership of land and blood tie attachment. This has affected the way they recognize citizens under modern laws. For instances, in the Solomon Islands, foreigners who are citizens do not have their rights recognized because they do not have blood ties with people, land ownership, and tribal attachment. A clear example of this was the burning down of foreign Chinese properties in Honiara (Kabutaulaka, 2005) and the eviction of people from Guadalcanal island from the period of 1998–2003 despite these individuals gaining access to land through a legal process from Guadalcanal (Aqorau, 2008). Thus, while these citizenry relationships are recognized and sanctioned by law (Dagger, 1997), the findings in this study reveal that land and blood ties are seen by principals, teachers, and students as a more important marker of citizenship. This confirmed the argument that citizenship varies in many ways and in varying degrees (Banks, 2008; Nelson, & Kerr, 2006).

As demonstrated, the participants in this study viewed the legal definition of citizenship as shallow compared to recognition based on church, cultural affiliations, and land ownership. Those studied only recognized citizenship through cultural norms, values, land, and resource ownership. Furthermore, the recognition of citizenship through land ownership and resources transferred down through genealogical lines comes with an obligation to adhere to the standards expected from culture and religion. The responsibility also involves protection of tribal land, resources, and genealogy from outside influence or interference, equal sharing of resources, protection of customary land rights, and mandatory participation in communities by way of providing support to people in the community. As participants observed, in traditional Solomon Island society, the

rights of a person are recognized through fulfilling certain Indigenous obligatory processes; particularly with respect to rightful ownership and participation under cultural guardianship. This also included the right to claim land and share in obligations and the right to lead people according to custom and Christian standards. This is consistent with the finding of earlier studies by Gegeo (2001) on Indigenous rights of ownership of land as the guaranteed license to act without question. This is different from individualism, which holds rights and freedom in a secular state that reflects democratic principles (Daggar, 1997). Evan (2006) claimed that the conception of citizenship is based on individualism and collectivism, political rights, and local and global social rights. This argument also has links to the mainstream conceptualization of Western democratic countries that citizenship is based on rights and privileges of citizens and their allegiance to the government (Lagese, 2000). In this study, individual rights and responsibilities or duties, tolerance, and national identities have no resemblance to any traditionally or culturally used word.

### **Perception of values of citizenship by teachers and students**

Teachers identified important relational values that they considered Solomon Islanders should demonstrate:

The values I think are important are values from culture and church . . . the dress code or how people dress, participation, demonstration of skills, thinking, attitudes, behaviours, certain foods to eat, and observation of cultural and church ethics and dispositions that show you are from the place and the community of people. (Rural School Teacher)

The above quote differentiates the relationships people have with the state, neighbours, and the environment, which is promoted by modern democracies. In Western democracy, relationships are grounded on the identity of individuals through the state providing legal identification which guarantees the status of being citizens (Banks 2008; Engle & Ochoa, 1988). In this study, participants claimed that the absence of cultural and Christian values resulted in instability and chaos in the Solomon Islands rather than the absence of democratic value. Teachers and students openly articulated the significance of creating a Solomon Islander that promotes values from the local cultures (participation, respect, unity) and Christian values (love, respect, relationship).

I think the values that are considered important are those that we practice from our culture and values that are relevant to Solomon Islands . . . the values currently promoted in the curriculum are not relevant to Solomon Islands. What Solomon Islands needs is a citizenship programme that promotes the missing values from society. (Rural School Students)

Students perceive this to be important because of the failure to formalize values of culture and Christianity in school curriculums and programmes. Participants in this study predicted that if nothing is done to address this in the curriculum, the country may experience a repeat of ethnic tensions and a rise in violence and corruption that is much bigger than what has been experienced. Further, teachers highlighted the importance of relationship through culture and Christian values. Teachers claimed that peaceful co-existence emerges only when the values of democracy (rights, responsibility, freedom, equality under the law), culture (respect, ownership, security, sharing), and Christian (love, hospitality, compassion, respect) are promoted together. According to the teachers, “these values appear to be missing from Solomon Islands’ society and they assume that this has led to a rise in individualistic behaviours and the avoidance of communal

obligations” (Rural Teacher). They claim that citizens of the Solomon Island may become disintegrated and dysfunctional to nuclear and extended family and communal activities because they are concerned only about themselves. This is explained by the following student:

I think building relationship with people is important. The reason is that we can support each other when we have needs. If we have good relationship with our families and communities and people, we will solve our challenges together easily. (Rural School Student)

According to participants, the way people dress and think, as well their attitudes and behaviours reflect their values. A teacher also highlighted this by saying:

[P]eople who demonstrate responsibility in the country in regard to public life, private life, having values of the society that embrace cultural, church, and modern laws are citizens of the country. (Rural School Teacher)

However, as reiterated by this teacher, citizens have to appreciate societal values as well as values embodied in modern laws, the constitution, civil laws, and the good governance agenda. The teacher further emphasized that values of the local culture, church, and the modern rule of law are equally important. Therefore, participants suggested that individuals have to recognize and observe the values and norms of society to show the calibre of their membership in the community. This study reveals that people do not judge citizens as Westerners do. Instead, participants in this study judged citizens according to relationality on cultural and Christian ties based on values that are practiced and demonstrated, that are acceptable in society, and as judged based on ownership of land that only has connection from Indigenous tribes.

### **Towards a *wantok*-centred framework**

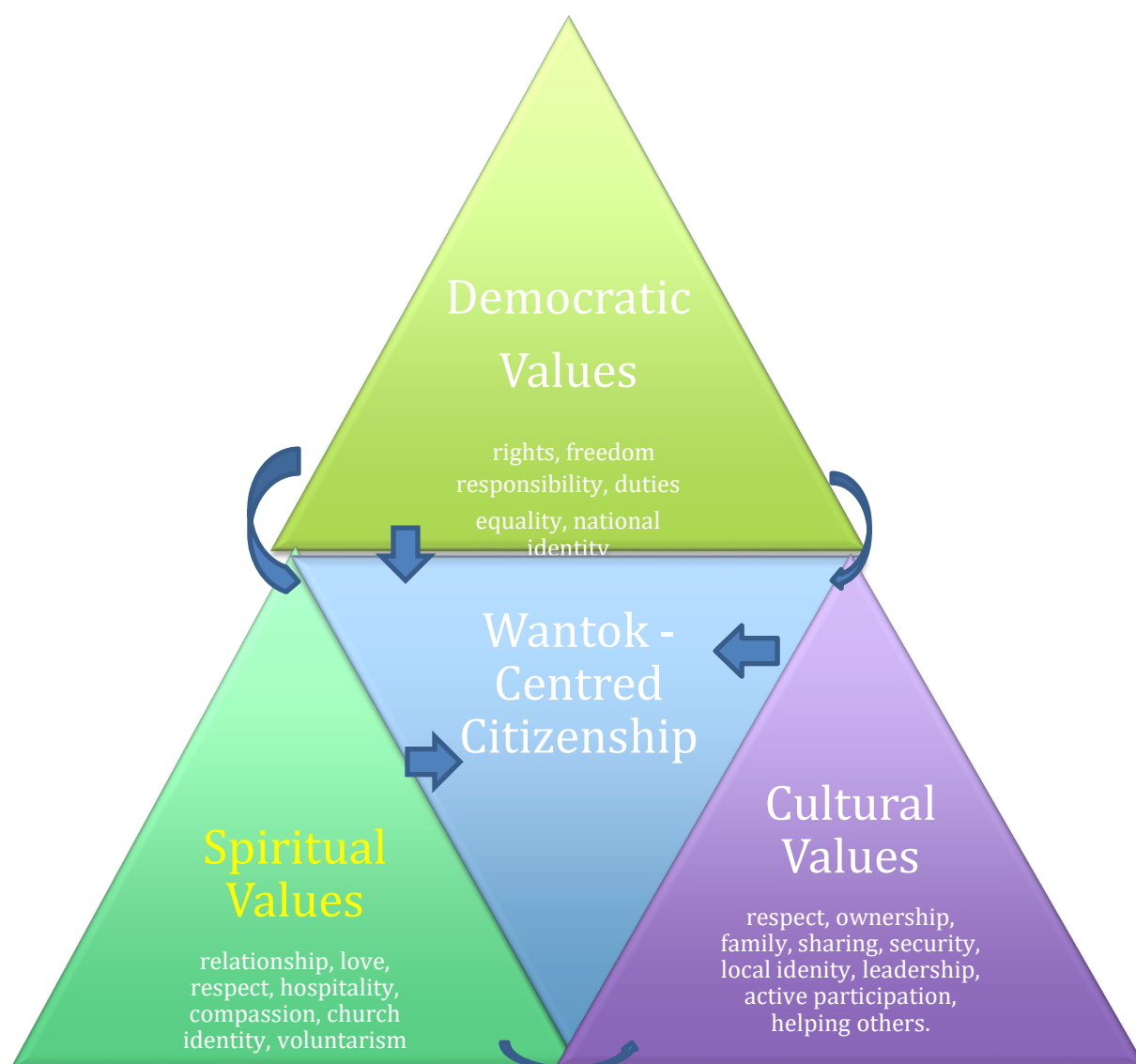
In response to the concerns raised by teachers, students, and principals regarding the notion of citizenship in the Solomon Islands, I propose a *wantok*-centred framework to support the teaching of citizenship education in Solomon Island schools. Since the only unifying symbol in the Solomon Islands is the Pijin language, this study considers using Pijin as a frame to unify people, reflecting a common identity, the Christian religion and democratic institutions. This framework places relationality at its core as a way to strengthen citizenship based on local values, beliefs, and aspirations. The *wantok*-centric citizenship framework recognizes the culture, spirituality, and modern institutions as complementary and none should be promoted at the expense of the others. These three domains are inter-related and affect people in varying ways; therefore, equal promotion and practice of each domain in Solomon Islands societies would likely create unity and stability in society. All have to be simultaneously promoted and developed. Therefore, the *wantok*-centred framework provides a way for these three domains to be institutionalized, taught, and learned.

As Figure 1 shows, this framework is based on three domains: democratic values, which are political and legal in nature; cultural values, which are relational in nature; and spiritual values that are relational and emotional in nature. The *democratic domain* suggests that citizenship education should include teaching on rights, freedom, and responsibilities under the law. I suggest that this content needs to be formalized and promoted through the curriculum because, as the participants in this study showed, people do not know or understand their rights and responsibilities, which has led to discrimination against others. The *cultural domain* suggests that citizenship education in the Solomon Islands should include teaching about the right to ownership of land and



resources, care for each other, security, relationship with people, clan tribe, and others. In addition, this domain aims to promote an understanding of developing freedom from the land through planting food and sharing of foods to neighbours. This domain also speaks about important tribal issues and leadership. Finally, the *spiritual domain* is largely relational in nature and includes teaching about people's right to membership within Christian families, showing love, mercy, compassion, and care towards others, and sharing, respect, compassion, and helpfulness towards those in need.

Figure 1 outlines the key domains in this *wantok*-centred framework.



**Figure 1: Three dimensional *wantok*-centred citizenship framework for Solomon Islands**

Therefore, this *wantok*-centred framework provides a local response to citizenship education within the Solomon Islands. This framework has grown from within, based on the perceptions of principals, teachers, and students, rather than being a top down imported model. This *wantok*-centred framework is shaped by historical events and is intended to underpin the teaching of citizenship education in all sectors of education in the Solomon Islands, including formal, non-formal, and informal education.

## CONCLUSION

This article has introduced a *wantok*-centred framework for citizenship education in the Solomon Islands based on the perceptions of principals', teachers', and students' conceptualization of citizenship. Participants identified the need to integrate and incorporate the values from Indigenous culture, spirituality, and democracy into a framework with the unifying term *wantok*. The three domains have been identified to support the teaching of citizenship education in the Solomon Islands: democratic values, cultural values and spiritual values. Each of these domains provides scope for the development of programmes and initiatives to strengthen the teaching of citizenship education in the Solomon Islands.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are considered significant to strengthen the teaching of citizenship education in the Solomon Islands. Firstly, it is recommended that a national policy on citizenship education is developed to support programs that recognize democracy, spirituality, and cultural values. It is recommended that these values are included in informal, non-formal, and formal programmes. Secondly, it is recommended that the term *wantok* become an overarching framework for all three domains. It is also suggested that further research examines how to strengthen teaching programmes that promote cultural, spiritual, and democracy values in both non-formal and informal institutions, such as the family, clan, tribe, religious communities, and the wider society. Finally, in this paper, relationality sits at the centre of this *wantok*-centred framework for citizenship education in the Solomon Islands. Future research in this area may provide an opportunity to understand the important interrelationship between citizenship education in the Solomon Islands and this *wantok*-centred framework.

## BIO

Dr Billy Fitoo sees himself as an educator and mentor. He was a qualified primary, secondary and tertiary school teacher. He has held substantive leadership positions in schools within the Solomon Islands Teaching Service for many years. Before joining the University of the South Pacific in 2013 as tutor and later as lecturer, he was the Deputy Director of the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM), Ministry of Public Service, Solomon's Solomon Islands Government. Currently he is the coordinator of the Educational Leadership programme and lectures of both undergraduate and post graduate education courses at the School of Education, University of the South Pacific.

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