Building on Living Traditions: Early Childhood Education and Culture in Solomon Islands

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The Solomon Islands, a small developing nation in the South Pacific, demonstrates an emerging community-based kindergarten model with the potential to promote context and culture relevant early learning and development, despite deeply embedded foundations in colonial legacies. Based on the Kahua region of Makira-Ulawa Province, this collaborative, ethnographically-informed, study explores how the kindergarten is situated at the core of a cultural revolution. Findings enlighten how the kindergarten is serving as the basis to building on living traditions through cultural reinvigoration efforts, while the very essence of the kindergarten's sustainability has become dependent upon the revitalization of traditional practices historically fundamental to Kahuan society. From this, implications drawn address how community-based initiatives can facilitate early childhood education while still supporting context-specific cultures and identities through sustainable initiatives.

Introduction

The postcolonial landscape in the South Pacific continues to illustrate how Western values, attitudes, and practices permeate present-day life, in addition to how colonial-era knowledge and practices particularly persist in dominating regional education systems. The current reality of early childhood education[1] (ECE) in the Solomon Islands (SI), and islanders' understanding and perceptions of such programs, is intricately linked with the nation's colonial history. This article explores the distinctive efforts of the Kahua people in the SI to reclaim ownership over their early childhood educational systems, in culturally-reinvigorating ways, amidst colonial legacies. This is framed around an overarching research question of "How have cultural and contextual factors influenced the development and sustainability of Kahua community-based ECE?" Through this exploration, influences of cultural and contextual factors on ECE programs' sustainability[2] are explored as key foundational elements to societal cultural maintenance.

Many cultural beliefs about the nature of childhood and children's development have been unexamined by interventionists in the creation of ECE initiatives, thereby contributing to a propagation of universalized views of childhood (Cleghorn & Prochner, 2010; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2006; Nsamenang, 2008). This in turn has had a strong impact on international policy and practice development, such as the first Education for All (EFA) goal[3], reflecting what Nsamenang (2006) calls an institutional universalism that often does not translate to non-Western cultures. Consequently, many ECE programs around the world dramatically resemble the practices and values of a Western-based model, with a decidedly specific discourse for high quality programs for children from birth through age eight. This can be seen in knowledge transfers from the West (i.e. Euro-American ideologies and research) that promote restricted practices inclusive of rigid classroom routines, artificial child-centered learning environments, active play-based learning models, individualistic social orientations, and child-specific classroom artifacts (e.g. learning resources, child-sized furniture, soft flooring materials). As a result, a self-perpetuating set of practices and values have emerged that are frequently uncritically transferred around the world to dissimilar contexts and cultures. Arguably, these Western-dominant ECE practices prevent recognition of, and efforts to reinvent, more culturally-relevant, locally sustainable programs

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in the Majority World[4]. For many Majority World societies, early learning has traditionally been embedded within children's active involvement in meaningful daily practices throughout their communities. Therefore, dissimilarly to artificial child-centered Western ECE formal learning environments, children in many of these non-Western cultures are integrated in adult-world activities, as engaged through observer-based models of learning and learning through apprenticeship in informal education environments.

In contrast to the international transfer of ECE policies and practices, many small states' indigenous efforts have arisen to counter the continuation of colonization now under the guise of educational globalization (Super & Harkness, 2008). In this article, small states are defined as those with populations under 1.5 million (Holmes & Crossley, 2004). Situated at the forefront of the intersection between international ECE discourses and localized counter-movements is the small South Pacific nation of the SI and their recent developments in community-based kindergartens (i.e. "kindy"). These kindies are typically leaf huts, locally resourced with bush materials, and conducted in mother tongues by minimally trained local villagers. To date, many remote villages are proving unable to independently establish, run, maintain, and sustain these community-based programs. This challenge has become a critical threat to the wider SI education system since the enactment of a national policy requiring all children's attendance in kindergarten for three years prior to entering primary school (Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development [MEHRD], 2008). To explore the cultural and contextual underpinnings to these developments, this article is based on a collaborative, ethnographically-informed, case study, situated in the remote Kahua region of Makira-Ulawa Province.

Education Foundations in International Literature

Western theorists such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Piaget have historically exerted considerable influence in shaping perspectives on early learning and development. Their argument was that children acquire knowledge and awareness of their surrounding world through learning experiences that enable them to individually construct their own learning (LeVine, 2007). However, more recently, sociocultural and postmodernist literatures have shifted the view of young children to emphasize the culturally and socially communicated nature of knowledge and learning (Edwards, 2005; Rogoff, 2003). This assertion has largely evolved from Vygotsky's (1978) fundamental premise that knowledge acquisition and the development of intellectual potential within a community is due to the sociohistorical context. Thus, children are not individually constructing knowledge; instead, this process must be defined through the social and cultural practices, beliefs, and experiences of the community. More recently, this idea has been expanded upon by Rogoff (1990), who argues that individual development is shaped by the cultural and social context in which it occurs; therefore, it cannot be defined in universalistic terms. Exemplifying this is Whiting and Whiting's (1975) study of *Children in Six Cultures*, which emphasizes the importance of historical traditions and environmental conditions guiding parents in child-rearing. Their position is furthered by research on cultural values and parental goals mediated by environmental demands (LeVine, 1974), claims that parental beliefs/goals/behaviors are linked to sociocultural contexts (Field, Sostek, Vietze, & Leiderman, 1981; Rogoff, 2003), and how culturally distinct contexts influence origins of parents' belief systems (Goodnow & Collins, 1990) and ethnotheories (Harkness & Super, 1996). Ultimately, all children arrive at formal education with informal learning systems they have developed within their local cultures, comprised of learning strategies and contexts that have fostered their early development (Ninnes, 1995). It is widely acknowledged that different cultures provide different settings, and different experiences within those settings, affecting children's engagement in various situations based on the culture's particular beliefs and values (Gauvain, 2001; Tudge et al., 2006).

By not accounting for cultural practices, parental beliefs, and environmental constraints, ECE programs are not likely to be sustainable endeavors due to their incongruence with the particular cultures and context in which they are being implemented. Puamau (2005) writes,

> Because formal schooling is largely derived from foreign value systems, there is a serious cultural gap between the lived experiences of most Pacific Island students and what is offered in schools, including the way schooling is organized and structured, the culture and ethos of schooling, its pedagogical practices, and the assessment of learning. (p. 13)

Despite increasing rhetoric suggesting greater responsiveness to issues of cultural sensitivity, this mainstream ECE literature has not delved deeply enough to develop context-informed understandings that can be applied within specific ECE programs (Cole, 1998; Fleer, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). This is not to overlook the increasing research rooted in Indigenous methodologies within the Majority World (Kagitcibasi, 2000; Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006; Nsamenang, 2000).

Within the Pacific, the past forty years of educational reform initiated by donors and governments have been regarded by Indigenous scholars as largely a failure. This is particularly with regard to two factors: (1) insufficient quality human resources to achieve development goals, and (2) a lingering vagueness of the vision for Pacific education and the purposes it aims to fulfill.

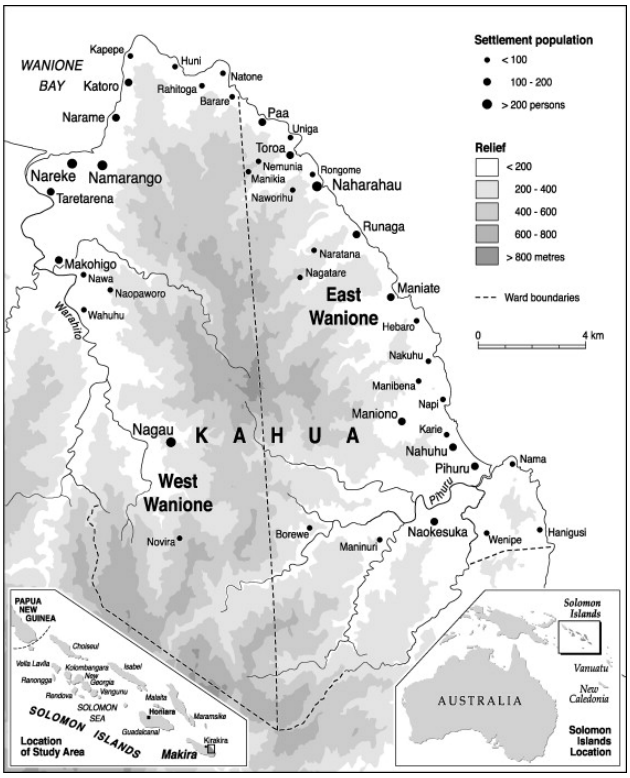
> Education reforms have remained largely fixated on improving various aspects of the quantification of education, but there has been little questioning of the values and assumptions underpinning formal education or development. (Pene, Taufe'ulungaki, & Benson, 2002, p. 1)

Global discourses around ECE have generally been framed in terms of outcomes, instead of defining ECE as a cultural process or tool. As argued elsewhere (Burman, 2001; Kincheloe, 2000; MacNaughton, 2005), ECE is at risk of "inadvertent complicity in a neoliberal imperialist agenda to secure and expand the hegemony of individualist, often European-heritage, positivist values, goals, and pedagogies in early learning and development" (Ball, 2010, p. 3).

Similarly, within Pacific Forum island nations, education scholars have deemed it critically important to rethink education in context in response to the lasting regional colonial legacy (Daiwo, 2001; Foote & Bennet, 2004; Puamau, 2005; Thaman, 1998). In recognition that culture is continuously evolving, space must be left by practitioners/policymakers/villagers to continually reflect on and revise approaches to, and goals for, ECE. Arguably, this should be inclusive of locals' own evolving images and not merely a dominant image of middle-class, Anglo-American, English-speaking cultural constructions of the child.

Contexts of "Smallness"

Both the SI and the specific Kahua region studied here epitomize the concept of smallness. The SI is itself a small state, with a population of 506,967 (World Bank, 2011); Makira-Ulawa Province has a population of 38,000 of which the Kahua population is approximately 4,500 (Fazey, Latham, Hagasua, & Wagatora, 2007). In this context, the small educational initiative of kindergartens, which have only recently become valued and implemented in pockets of the country, gains interest.



Source: Fazey, Pettorelli, Kenter, Wagatora, & Schuett (2011)

Figure 1. **Map of Kahua, Makira-Ulawa Province, Solomon Islands.**

The SI – a double chain archipelago of nearly 1000 tropical, fertile, reef-fringed islands and coral atolls – lies northeast of Australia in the southwest Pacific Ocean (Figure 1). The nation faces a variety of challenges, including smallness of scale, remoteness of location, diversity of cultural and linguistic groups, colonial history, and potential for local ownership amidst a highly active foreign aid and political interest arena. Within the context of SI, the study focuses on the Kahua region (i.e. East and West Wanione) of Makira-Ulawa Province, as located in the far eastern portion of the SI archipelago. Kahua was chosen as the focal context due to the region's

1. culturally and socially tight-knit communities, which facilitated research across the region through strong human networks;
2. reputation throughout the nation as one of the least developed regions in terms of economy, infrastructure, and educational achievements, yet high resiliency in maintaining traditional kastoms[5]; and
3. widespread developments in ECE, as spurred by an international nongovernmental organization's support to the provincial Ministry of Education, beginning in Kahua.

Furthermore, the Kahua region consists of forty-eight remote, predominantly coastal, communities, with an approximate annual growth rate of 2.7% (Fazey et al., 2007). The majority of families are dependent on subsistence livelihoods, supplemented through small-scale copra and cocoa farming, and live largely without access to electricity, infrastructure (e.g. roads), or telecommunication services. As a result of rapid population growth, limited natural resources, and increasing Western influences, the region is beginning to change from a subsistence- to monetary-

based economy. As such, like many contexts globally, the Kahua people increasingly value the importance of education to improve the potential of their future generations. Kindergartens in particular have seen a dramatic increase in numbers across Kahua, from only one in 2000 to over 18 a decade later. Collectively, the above features specific to the Kahua region made it a prime location for this study's exploration of ECE development and sustainability in the midst of changing cultural contexts.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Research Design

Research using a variety of methods to understand the multifaceted components of ECE and development in culturally diverse contexts has increasingly succeeded in developmental research over the past decade (Harkness et al., 2006; Garcia-Coll et al., 2002; Weisner, 2005). In particular, sociocultural theorists recognize that early learning and development are not individual constructions, nor are they universal, but instead acknowledge that they are highly mediated by one's context and culture. This study is rooted in a sociocultural-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Super & Harkness, 1986), which acknowledges the holistic nature of ECE as a process defined by the social and cultural practices, beliefs, and experiences found in a particular context, yet also incorporates biological and environmental factors. The theoretical assumptions underpinning the study guided a methodologically synergistic research approach, defined for the purposes of this study as a *collaborative, ethnographically-informed, case study*. Drawing from these different methodological perspectives facilitated the development of methods for understanding local realities of the Kahua poeple, as verbally expressed. It also facilitated delving deeper into local realities by observing and partaking in aspects of participants' daily lives. This thereby additionally accounted for nonverbal features and eventually allowed for comparisons to be discussed and drawn between individuals, families, learning environments, and villages. Supporting this research methodology is a strong unifying assumption about the social world as being co-constructed, context-bound, relational, and situated (Susman & Evered, 1978), while recognizing that human existence is fluid, contextual, and relational (Jardine, 1990). Accordingly, it became critical for the lead researcher (a non-Kahuan) to extensively collaborate with a local research team, and more broadly with Kahua communities, to best access and interpret local perceptions and realities. Notably, the term collaboration is used here to convey a deeper experience of mutually consciousness-raising interactions and involvement in the research process; this is contrasted by participation and merely implying peripheral participant involvement in researcher-designed activities (Crossley, Herriot, Waudo, Mwirotsi, Holmes, & Juma, 2005; Trist, 1986).

Methods and Research Strategy

The research was led by an expatriate Caucasian female and a gender-balanced research team of four local Kahua kindergarten teachers and chairmen. The lead researcher trained the local team for one week prior to beginning the study. Key training topics included basic understandings of ECE, qualitative research facilitation approaches to be used in the study (with hands-on practice), translation skills, and data management to ensure proper documentation throughout fieldwork. Together, the team collaborated with ECE stakeholders from all levels of Kahua society through extensive participant-observations, interviews, and participatory focus groups. Recognizing the limitations of approaching the research from a single perspective (e.g. insider versus outsider, female versus male, academic versus villager), the research team's diversity of perspectives facilitated greater rapport building with wide ranging participants and deepened their collective understandings throughout the research and analysis processes. The lead researcher approached the study as an ethnographer, striving to deeply understand the local context, which in turn provided the basis for strong rapport building within Kahua. However, it was ultimately through

the collaboration within the local research team and Kahua participants that deep dialogue and mutual consciousness-raising was able to occur. This thereby resulted in richer data collection and conclusions drawn than would have been possible from an individual external researcher perspective.

Also of great importance to the study was the research teams' collaborative working relationship with the local grassroots Kahua Association. The Association was officially launched in 2005 in response to limited external support for their small region's development and as a unification effort against resource exploitation. This demonstrates local communities' commitment to promoting their own sustainable development and more effective resource management, as deeply embedded with cultural and societal understandings. The Association also symbolizes a unifying effort of the Kahua people as a cultural group, with desires to reassert the importance of their traditional cultural practices and beliefs, based on democratic principles of upholding equality and social justice for all Kahua people. Such collaboration formed the essential basis for the study's theoretical underpinnings and research design. It subsequently provided a means for the researchers to connect with communities through local leaders and turn the research process and findings into practical sustained actions for Kahua.

Similar to any ethnography with a discovery-based design (Fife, 2005), the focus of this study unfolded as the fieldwork evolved. Therefore, much like the activity of grounded theorizing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), fieldwork began with a broad exploration, predominantly implementing participant-observations and unstructured interviews in a single village for four months. Subsequently, this provided shape and focus for designing and conducting eight additional months of fieldwork with more structured methods throughout the Kahua region (i.e. semi-structured observation tool and interview schedules for different categories of participants). Throughout the study, dialogue within the research team also served a reflective research tool to deepen understandings of the data collected (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte 1999).

The research team began the study by exploring the wider range of formal, informal, and nonformal early learning provisions available in Kahua communities (e.g. church, peer-to-peer, chiefly cultural teachings, etc.) so as to be able to identify features that potentially related to the sustainability of community-based kindies. This was based on the general premise of the Developmental Niche conceptual framework, which brings together the interactive relationships between the (1) physical and social settings of the child's everyday life, (2) culturally regulated customs of child care and child rearing, and (3) the psychology of the caretakers (Super & Harkness, 1986). By observing and discussing different environments of early learning in Kahua communities, as well as their underlying historical cultural changes, consonances and dissonances in approaches to learning could be identified. For example, customs underlying the teaching-learning process was explored between current institutionalized learning (i.e. kindy) and traditional culturally-relevant exchanges of knowledge through shared experiences (i.e. kastom learning in home). With such an understanding of sustained traditional, and more recent, teaching methods and types of information shared, implications could then be drawn for application in enhancing culturally relevant and more sustainable community-based institutionalized early learning.

Over the course of one year, a total of 30 villages were engaged in extensive research team participant-observations, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and 32 participatory focus groups (inclusive of 135 male and 149 female participants in 9 villages). Observations and interviews were conducted throughout villages to develop broad understandings of the interplay between early learning approaches, contexts, and cultures. Participatory focus groups

involved small separated groups of men and women (in accordance with cultural norms). These groups were engaged in stone-ranking activities and discussions about community values, understandings, and support towards various early learning environments in their immediate community. In order to understand children's learning in context, whilst capturing the deeply embedded and influential contextual factors, the methods implemented were repeated among different individuals and communities. Extensive purposive sampling was used to obtain a broader range of perspectives across participant ages, gender, social status, relation(s) to children, and geographic location. In addition to heightening different viewpoints, and averting singular visions, triangulation was used to validate data by checking a variety of sources across these diverse ECE stakeholders' interactions with the research team (including data from interviews, focus groups, and participant-observations) (Cornwall, Musyoki, & Pratt, 2001). This thereby strengthened the reliability of the research findings.

Of greatest significance to this study was the dialogic processes that proved to be most informative. These were facilitated by the relationships and social environments promoted by the research team, through the combination of ethnographic and collaborative research methods. Over extended periods of time, authentic engagement with communities around the research issues, as well as open acceptance of local cultures, allowed for deep rapport building between the research team and villagers. Word of this support for the research and research team then spread throughout the region, easing the process of rapport building in community after community. Without these strong relationships, discussions related to the research topics would have likely been far more guarded, as would participants' comfort to carry on as usual when being observed. This necessitated approaching the study from the sociocultural-ecological perspective, recognizing that to understand local practices, beliefs, and experiences for the purpose of addressing the research question, then mutual consciousness raising and co-construction of knowledge between the research team and communities was essential.

Data Analysis Strategy

As a result of the evolving research design throughout the fieldwork, data analysis was not a distinct stage. Instead, it was an ongoing process for the research team in which research questions were reformulated, reexamined, and clarified, based on the iterative process central to grounded theorizing. Data (i.e. notes from observations, interview notes and transcripts, and focus group data forms) were analyzed holistically to draw out themes to feed back into guiding the research. This required using thematic analysis, in which emerging themes and patterns were identified across the different data obtained from all research methods and team members. Data were thematically analyzed using a two-step process of open and focused coding, which was ongoing and cyclical as new data was continuously obtained (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Esterberg, 2002). Open coding allowed for the micro-analytical level of analysis in identifying themes/ categories of significance to the inquiry, out of which focused coding then refined the process (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Focused coding is similar to open coding but focuses more specifically on previously identified recurring themes. After refining the recurring themes into more focused coded categories, content analysis was then used to explore quantitatively the frequencies of themes identified and qualitatively to use narrative description to illustrate the themes.

Findings: Building on Living Traditions

"Learning" in Kahua

To understand the cultural context of ECE in Kahua, one must first understand the concept of learning in context. There are two distinct types of learning within Kahua. In the Kahua language,

these are known as *ramatenia* and *hagasuria*. Ramatenia refers to kastom teachings that form the "commandments" which guide one's life and interactions with others. In contrast, hagasuria refers to more general life skills/knowledge teachings, such as those learned in formal schooling. These two aspects of learning are situated in the Kahua Principles that form the basis, at least traditionally, of life for the Kahua people (Table 1, as applied to early childhood learning).

Table 1. ***Application of Kahua Principles to Kahua Early Childhood Learning***[6]

Principle	Translation	Interpretation
Hemoti	Sharing Together	Children must share everything (e.g. during snack time, share food with other children/teachers)
Herongogi	Asking	Children must ask first before doing/taking something (e.g. ask the teacher to leave the classroom to "go to sea" to toilet).
Hemakuani	Care	Children must respect others' property by taking care of it, whether the owner is present or not (e.g. during bathing time, children are not to steal other children's trousers; children are not to knock down others' block constructions).
Hekarigi	Discussion	Everything must involve dialogue and discussion with others (e.g. teacher engages children in discussion during free-play time about what they are working on).
Ramata	Kahua "operational rules" to guide behavior	Ramata are inclusive of a process for discussion and the types of behaviors required to maintain respect. They emphasize how to live a good life by understanding what are acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, as all rooted in expressions of respect. Traditionally, ramata are taught and applied at family levels, but they are also taught in a less formal manner within the kindergarten.

The Kahua Principles are comprised of four overarching local Kahua cultural values, which provide the basis for how the Kahua people are to behave and interact. Underlying these long-standing, locally defined, traditional principles are deeply rooted obligatory Kahua practices of respect, love, and compassion for others. Additionally, the Kahua Principles give rise to *ramata*, which are the traditionally unwritten specific operational rules for how the Kahua people must lead their lives. The Principles remain near exclusively an orally transpired tradition, unwritten until the past few years through the work of the Kahua Association. Nevertheless, their traditional understanding as a set of principles to guide daily life, and inclusion in direct and indirect teachings to children, are imperative. In present-day Kahua, specific knowledge regarding these principles was found to be quickly diminishing, such as an awareness of the specific vernacular terminology used to express each of them. However, the fundamental actions addressed and enforced through them were observed to still provide a firm basis for daily human interactions throughout the region.

Codification and Objectification of Kastom in ECE

Explicit knowledge of the Kahua Principles by the vast majority of Kahua people has been on the decline for over sixty years, as was extensively ascribed by Kahuans to increasing "Western" influences (e.g. local interest in formal education teachings, "Whiteman" material possessions, church/Christianity). However, recently there has been a resurgence of traditional practices (e.g. sharing kastom teachings, enforcing gender specific clothing, learning traditional handicrafts).

Most commonly, this was expressed in association with a local frustration in society's falling prey, as opposed to adequately adapting, to modern external influences. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Model, the development of education, and ECE specifically, within the SI can be seen as a microcosm for what has been happening on the exosystem to Kahuan culture and macrosystem in Solomon society. Through increased incorporation of Western-ideologies – as historically introduced with the arrival of the church and formal education by Christian missionaries and more recently through international agendas – an objectification of kastom currently can be seen as an effort to circumvent anxieties of this encroaching modernity to SI.

Throughout communities in Kahua, the case of shifting approaches to early childhood learning in varied microenvironments stands as a concrete example in alterations to Kahuan epistemologies. These illustrate a move from the traditional emphasis on *ramatenia* (i.e. teachings related to kastom beliefs and practices) being replaced by that of *hagasuria* (i.e. teachings related to general knowledge), as executed through non-Indigenous (Western) forms of learning at church and in formal school-based education. Notably, Kahuans did not describe these two forms of learning as being at complete odds with one another, but instead expressed a need for balance between traditional cultural and non-Indigenous knowledge. As one young mother said, "The ways of Kahua are being lost. People here are adopting new wisdoms and understandings from Whiteman as a result of the education system" (personal communication, September 27, 2009). This sentiment was reinforced by a Kahua kindy teacher,

> Kahua culture has changed over time because of Western learning. Nowadays, people send their children to primary schools, secondary schools, as far as universities overseas out from our Solomon Islands' society…when they return, they just live in Western style…when Western systems come in, it convinces people that they do not need to think highly of our kastoms and people. (personal communication, November 2, 2009)

However, the research team found this local concern over declining cultural knowledge to be met by a countermovement towards cultural reinvigoration, as seen with a codification of kastom. Exemplifying this is the fact that only in the past few years have the Kahua Principles been documented and more abstractly discussed, in contrast to their historical oral existence and largely unspoken incorporation into all aspects of life. Accordingly, much of the cultural reinvigoration effort in Kahua began with community elders and the Kahua Association's efforts to combat problems of lacking cultural respect in their communities. Subsequently, a majority of parents and primary school teachers have also begun to recognize their lacking knowledge of traditional cultural wisdom to pass on to children, which has been compounded by their realization of the near extinction of this knowledge with their aging community elders. These findings by the research team are of great significance, since on the surface one can observe an intergenerational cultural decay in Kahua; however, underlying this (yet to be fully realized), the kindy was found to hold much potential as *cultural reinvigorator* in addressing these cultural concerns. As one Kahua grandfather and kindy chairman expressed,

> Good Kahua cultural values are quickly fading away due to Western world influences. Such styles are sure enough to dominate Kahua culture in not a very long time. Kahua leaders should not ignore this issue. I recommend kindy school as a first ladder to step forward in education. It is where a traditional leader, a government leader, or a church leader is shaped and can later shape others for the best future and betterment of our nation, the Solomon Islands. (personal communication, November 2, 2009)

Fundamental to the sustainability of community-based kindy initiatives appears to be a dependency on this community-level reinvigoration of culture for generating community-wide support and cooperation in shared beliefs.

Community Support for Early Learning

To explore issues relating to context and culture influencing ECE program sustainability, it is important to understand how truly fitting these formal education programs are to local contexts and cultures. The majority of teaching-learning practices, verbalized beliefs regarding learning, and aspirations for children in Kahuan ECE microenvironments were found to relate to simplified versions of *kastom*. Accordingly, teaching tools, such as songs, traditional stories, and material resources presented surface-level cultural relevance. Yet, their underlying implementation for the transpiration of learning and cultural reinvigoration were found to frequently be objectifications of deep Kahua culture. Based on an analysis and compilation of data from interviews and participant observations, Kahua kindies were found to be situated on a spectrum between traditionalism and Western ideologies, as demonstrated in Figure 2.

	Primary School (Pre-class/Class 1)	**Church / Sunday School**	**Kindy**	**Home**	**Wider Community**
Spectrum of Approaches to Learning	←		*(Western – Traditional)*		→
Objective	Extrinsic motivation to learn: preparation for future schooling and paid employment				Intrinsic motivation to learn: preparation for life; kastom/tradition/subsistence
Approach to Learning	Rote learning, memorization				Legitimate peripheral participation (observation-modeling)
Learning Model	Theoretical, abstract, practical				Practical, personalized
Thrust	Towards change and independence				Towards conformity and interdependence
Ownership of Knowledge	Public, commodified knowledge				Private: belongs to families, tribes, and lineages
Source of Knowledge	Western; scientifically and formally documented information				Traditional; kastom beliefs, values, skills, and practices
Learners' Personal Orientation	Openly competitive, low autonomy				Quietly competitive, high autonomy
Questioning by Learners	Actively encouraged and practiced				Discouraged and regarded as challenge to experts' authority
Social Context	Information-oriented, focus on individual achievement				Individual-oriented, emphasizes unity, stresses interdependence, foundation in significance of understanding and respecting local kastoms
Language of Instruction	English, Pidgin				Vernacular: Kahua
Learning Resources	Manufactured materials				Local bush materials

Figure 2. ***Spectrum of early learning approaches in Kahua microenvironments***[7]

The spectrum of early learning in Kahua microenvironments (Figure 2) identifies and arranges five microenvironments by the degree to which they incorporate Western and traditional learning approaches, based on prominent objectives identified across microenvironments. Through each of these microenvironments, a transition was observed by the research team:

- Starting with the wider community, traditional learning approaches, although still prominently evident in the home, begin to change as some parents prepare children for kindy, such as through school readiness activities (e.g. counting, drawing, and more structured behavior). Additionally, kastom teachings were said to be increasingly overt, such as taught to groups of children by the village chief when parents no longer have the knowledge or willingness to do so through their daily practices in the home.
- Kindy then advances children's development through the incorporation of more Western-oriented learning approaches in preparation for children's transition to primary school (e.g. handwriting practice, early math concepts, classroom rules). However, kindies still bridge back to the home and community microenvironments through predominant use of the vernacular as language of instruction, use of local resources for learning materials, and incorporation of kastom teachings.
- Church and Sunday school link back to the community, largely through language (services in vernacular despite most denominations using English Bibles) and communal practices, while Church teachings are distinctly imported from the Western world. However, in many ways, some teaching (i.e. Biblical values) are also similar to traditional values, such as sharing and fellowship. Over time, due to devout beliefs, Christianity has become a component of locally perceived present-day culture to the majority of Kahuans.
- Primary school is situated at the extreme end of the spectrum, towards a Western learning approach. To a great degree, classroom pedagogy, materials, routines, curriculum, etc. are virtually indistinguishable from Western classrooms. However, there is still room for further movement along the spectrum. For example, although the language of instruction is mandated to be English, as per the national curriculum, the vast majority of these classrooms are conducted in SI Pidgin (a mix of vernaculars and English) due to insufficient English skills of both teachers and students for English to be the sole language of instruction.

Each of the microenvironments discussed above can be viewed with particular distinctions across a spectrum of learning approaches, origins, goals, etc. Yet, fundamental to them all was found to be the underlying (desired, even if not always fully realized) cultural values, as also significantly reflected in local religious beliefs and Kahua Principles: respect, love, fellowship, and knowledge of kastom. Therefore, although nearly all participants consistently voiced a strong perception that local cultural knowledge is being lost in Kahua, observations revealed that it still remains a strong foundation to nearly all early learning interactions throughout the villages, regardless of the specific early learning microenvironment.

Based on participant observations, community support for early childhood learning microenvironments was found to be greater in each of the four independent microenvironments (i.e. wider community, home, church, and primary) in comparison to community support for the kindy. By applying this to the conceptual Development Niche framework, the lacking support for kindies can be associated with greater shared understandings of approaches to learning in the other microenvironments, as compared to those of the community in relation to the kindy. It is through these overtly observable deeper shared understandings, which have developed over longer periods of time, that have allowed for the creation of states of equilibrium between

externally introduced ideas to Kahua and long-standing internal cultural beliefs and practices. For example, historical accounts about childhood conveyed through interviews suggest that acceptance of formal primary school has led communities to place less priority on children working in subsistence gardens. Over time, many parents have come to prefer their children attain a good formal education so they can find paid employment to financially support their extended families. Contrastingly, a dissonance was observed between the kindy and parental beliefs about children's learning. SI ECE curriculum emphasizes children's learning through play, while community cultural beliefs and objectives largely only recognize a narrower, academic understanding of formal education. For example, while shells and stones are collected as kindy classroom resources to support learning through play, when children bring such materials into the home, they are typically roused outside for bringing what is considered rubbish into the house. These ECE consonances and dissonances were found to affect the levels of community support for educational activities and environments. Most notably, this resulted in limited support for community-based kindies due to a lack of community shared values and understandings with this new formal ECE initiative.

Championing the ECE Vision: The Case of Two Kindies

Exemplifying challenges to kindy sustainability, and the potential influences of the kindy on culture, are two case studies, as were revealed through extensive participant observations and interviews in two villages. On the surface, these two communities are quite similar: both follow the same Kahua traditions, cultural practices, and predominantly subsistence lifestyles. However, the effects of beliefs in a paranormal phenomenon about people living beneath their island of Makira has developed significantly dissimilarly in each context, particularly as understood through the functioning of their kindies.

Kindy 1 serves as an exemplar community-sustained ECE initiative, having been established and independently maintained since the 1980s, which was long before other communities were even aware of such programs. Despite never having received external support, financially or through training, the masterminding of merely a sole inspirational champion for the program has since garnered his community's support in the vision of supporting ECE. Nevertheless, during the past few years, this support has dramatically changed due to community separation into two groups over beliefs regarding the aforementioned paranormal phenomenon. The community divide became so severe that even the community church was torn down until a "belief-consensus" could be achieved. With churches in Kahua serving as the center of communities, and a significant site of social interactions, the demolition of the church in this community exemplified the demise of amicable daily interactions between these two opposing groups of villagers. This not only affected the quality of communal life, but it also undermined the Kahua Principles of respect and compassion for others. Through this time, the kindy provided the sole unifying element in the community. While adults became estranged over deep-seated beliefs, uniting them has been an enduring commitment to their children's development, which has demanded cooperation in the preservation of a functioning program. Beginning with kindy leaders and village women, slowly the kindy is serving as grounds to rebuilding amicable community relations.

In contrast to Kindy 1, a second kindy demonstrated a more deeply segregated village over the paranormal beliefs movement. Located in the small back portion of a community building, this kindy has had few resources and little community support throughout the few years since its establishment. Villagers attributed this to poor kindy and village leadership. Upon arrival of the new beliefs movement, disunity amongst villagers reached such a degree that nearly all community-wide endeavors ceased, including mere social greetings to others while in passing.

The kindy reflected this segregation with an inability to bolster community support for making resources; regular attendance by children; or commitment to support, monitor, compensate, and train teachers. Individualist attitudes flourished in the community, such as demonstrated by those with the highest formal education levels, who chose to home-school their young children and recommended a private fee-based kindy as opposed to the faltering community-based program. Fundamentally this contradicts the essence of most community-based kindies, which have developed as communal projects, respectful of the different degrees of financial and in-kind support individuals are capable of contributing. Further, this conflicts with the deepest values of the Kahua Principles: respect, sharing, and compassion for others.

These two kindy cases depict differing leadership styles, thereby inciting different reactions from their communities in terms of support for their kindies. Fundamental to Kindy community 1, in addition to the strong leadership of the program and community, was their roots in fellowship, as is central to their South Seas Evangelical community church. Communities throughout Kahua of this denomination were observed to embody the highest levels of community unity and cooperation, which are in direct unison with traditional Kahua Principals. Contrastingly, Kindy community 2, notably being of Anglican denomination, demonstrated much stronger individualist behaviors with lacking regard for community-wide children's education. Based on these examples, the revitalization of Kindy 1 appeared to be associated with the presence of competent leaders for the ECE vision, effective community collaboration, community awareness of ECE, community embodiment of local cultural values, kindy staff involvement, and program responsivity to the local context. As the founder and chairman of Kindy 1 stated at the grand opening of their newest leaf hut classroom,

> Our past failures do not bring us discouragement but an encouragement to see our mistakes and put things right. This school was not supported by any organization or government – it was stated by our own concern and we find it hard sometime to meet materials and support for our teachers. [But] let us promote manpower by using our power. (Personal communication, July 22, 2008)

Concluding Discussion: Drawing on the Past, Giving Rise to the Future

This study began with an a priori assumption that local knowledge is valuable, which provided justification for the collaborative nature of the research. Further supported by ethnographically-informed methods, the overarching methodological approach allowed for in-depth exploration, incorporating wide-ranging perspectives, of the evolving Kahuan culture and its critical role in both supporting and being supported by local institutionalized ECE (i.e. community-based kindies). Through this, living Kahuan traditions were built upon on to give meaning to the present reality of early learning across Kahua communities and insights into the future sustainable development of Kahua kindies.

A decidedly cultural foundation to ECE has been taken in this article, which was supported by local priorities to reinvigorate Kahua kastoms, as embodied by the Kahua Principles. While cultural change has become one foundational justification for the sustainable development of kindies, two additional critical societal elements raise the stakes for their sustained development in Kahua at this time. Firstly, parents increasingly have long-term employment goals for children, which require formal education, in light of a societal move towards a cash-based economy. Secondly, should children desire this formal education, national SI ECE policy requirements now mandate children's attendance in kindergarten for three years before being allowed entry into primary

school. Recognizing the continued significance of kastom in the Kahua people's cognition and conduct raises insights into their perceptions of education at this time of societal and educational change. It is important to note that kastom is not limited to observable cultural features of cooking, handicrafts, attire, etc., but instead extends deeply into Indigenous values, beliefs, and mere existence. As such, kastom has become an important consideration for supporting formal education, and therefore not simply an externally imposed concept that hinders local expression and development. This is supported by previous research suggesting that learning and identity are tied to one's sociocultural background; and as such, approaches to learning must be adapted to students' cultures, contexts, and social worlds.

In Kahua communities, this study found early childhood learning microenvironments to be situated on a spectrum of increasing international transfers of a Western-based learning ethos. More specifically, in the kindergarten context, the study revealed that ECE epitomizes a transitional institution between traditional practices (from the home and community) and imported institutions from the West (such as church and formal education). Within this spectrum, a general trend was identified away from the traditional model and values of learning, as associated with kastom. This cultural shift was ascribed to what here has been termed an *intergenerational cultural decay,* as has been widely attributed by locals to the increase in external influences on Kahuan society, at the detriment of Kahua kastom.

As counteragent to an intergenerational decay of traditional culture in Kahua, the kindy was found to hold potential to serve as cultural reinvigorator by reuniting communities. However, not only was the kindy found to be severely challenged by numerous barriers in maintaining regular program functioning, the very foundational sustainability of the kindy itself was found to be largely dependent on this cultural reinvigoration, and as such, maintenance of local traditional values. Through a revitalization of key cultural values and practices rooted in the Kahua Principles, future generations could better be able to continue embodying the fundamental local values of respect, fellowship, love, and compassion for others, as locally deemed necessary to maintain a harmonious Kahuan society. To achieve this in communities and kindies, research findings raised the need for inspirational local championing of the vision for culturally-relevant ECE, local ownership-taking based on increased awareness of ECE, and sustained communal cooperation rooted in a reinvigoration of traditional kastoms. As the Kahua Association builds their capacity to practically influence and initiate locally defined development in Kahua, it holds great potential to become a key stakeholder in ECE, through serving as a regional champion for the ECE vision, societal cultural reinvigoration, and regional reunification on the whole. Already, strengthened local cultural understandings in Kahua were found in turn to be supporting community-based educational initiatives in context-sensitive ways. This is thereby perpetuating a cycle of traditional cultural learning and practice, which if sustained, could influence generations to come.

Drawing on the research presented in this article, it becomes apprehensible how uncritical international transfers of ECE policies and practices cannot directly meet the context and culture sensitive needs and desires of the Kahua people. Building on this, it is recommended that Kahuans next begin to locally define context and culture specific measures with which to encourage the localization of ECE programs. This will require regional collaboration to maintain culturally-defined quality assurance standards with which to develop and regularly monitor programs. In applying this call for future education developments, it goes hand in hand with continued research capacity development in Kahua. "[P]art of the rationale for such capacity development is to strengthen the ability of small state voices to engage actively with and, where appropriate, challenge the nature and influence of powerful international agendas" (Crossley, 2008, p.249).

Eventually, as Kahua's culture-relevant ECE initiatives become quality, sustained endeavors, then local voices will be positioned to influence the wider realms of education discourse in the SI and beyond.

In concluding this collaborative study with the Kahua people, the final words are left to a local Kahua kindy chairman. He emphasized the utmost importance of *local significance* for Kahuans in championing the future of sustained context and culture-sensitive ECE for *their* children, as resonates with the fundamentals of the Kahua Principles. He asserted, "We must not give up easily because once you give up, you give up for good. The future of all children and teachers in Makira needs *us* to take pride in early childhood education" (personal communication, August 15, 2009).

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Endnotes

1. *Early childhood education* is used in this study to refer to formal, nonformal, and informal contexts of learning for young children of kindergarten age (approximately 3-6 years old) in the Solomon Islands. Reference to formal SI ECE, known as kindy, is based on the National SI Curriculum developed in 2009 "Valium Smol Pikinini Blong Iumi" ("Valuing Our Young Children"), which states, "Early childhood education must enable all young children to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes for meaningful participation in Solomon Islands society." (MEHRD, 2009, p. 2).
2. Sustainability is used in this study to include cultural and contextual elements, as defined by program responsiveness to ever-evolving local needs, demands, and limitations, while maintaining focus on original program objectives (i.e. culturally-sensitive, appropriate, and meaningful ECE for specific context) and populations served (i.e. children 3-6 years old) (Daiwo, 2001; Kirpal, 2002; Mancini, & Marek, 2004).
3. Education for All Goal 1: "Expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children" (UNESCO, 2000, p. 15).
4. Majority World is used to represent what is commonly referred to as *developing countries*, *third world*, and the *South*. This term intentionally highlights the fact that these countries are the majority of humankind, in a manner that emphasizes what they are in positive connotations rather than what they lack.
5. Kastom is the Pidgin word used for *custom* throughout Melanesia, predominantly to refer to long-established local practices and/or behaviors. Within Kahua, this term is most significantly associated with behaviors of *respect*.
6. Based on research team's cumulative interviews and observations in Kahua.
7. Modified and expanded from Teaero's (2002, p. 80) work on Kiribati Indigenous education based on extensive observations and interviews by the research team throughout Kahua.

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