Exploring, celebrating, and deepening Oceanic relationalities

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The theme of the 2018 Oceania Comparative and International Society (OCIES) conference held at Victoria University of Wellington, in Wellington, New Zealand aimed to explore, celebrate, and deepen Oceanic relationalities. This special issue of the International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives *responds to this call for scholarship to examine how Comparative and International Education (CIE) can be repositioned around the notion of relationality to contribute theoretically, practically, and spiritually to education at global, regional, national, and community levels. In this Special Edition, we celebrate the work of seven new and emerging researchers from OCIES. This paper introduces us as a community of scholars, connected geographically by sea, yet it is our shared commitment to relationality that has enabled us to further the scholarship of CIE within our region.*

Keywords: relationalities; new and emerging researchers; vā; comparative and international education

INTRODUCTION

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us.

We are the sea, we are the ocean . . .

(Hau'ofa, 1993, p. 16)

Hau'ofa's Oceania describes a "world of people connected to each other" (Hau'ofa, 1998, pp. 401–402). By personifying the ocean as a geographical and relational space, Hau'ofa encourages us to place humanity and relationality at the centre of our work. This moral imperative to explore "people-enablement, post-coloniality, demineralisation, the recognition of Indigenous rights, social justice and various forms of sustainability" (OCIES, 2018) shaped the theme for the 2018 Oceania Comparative and International Society (OCIES) conference held at Victoria University of Wellington, in Wellington, New Zealand. The conference theme *Exploring, celebrating and deepening Oceanic relationalities*, put forth a call for scholarship to examine how Comparative and International Education (CIE) can be repositioned around the notion of relationality to

contribute theoretically, practically, and spiritually to education at global, regional, national, and community levels. This special issue of the *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* responds to this call by celebrating the work of seven new and emerging researchers from the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES). As a community of scholars, we are connected geographically by sea, yet it is our shared commitment to relationality that has enabled us to further the scholarship of CIE within our region. In this special issue, we continue the strong tradition of OCIES scholars based at institutions *within* Oceania, who engage critically with contexts within and *beyond* Oceania. Indeed, bringing scholarship from around the globe into dialogue through our regional CIE society sets OCIES apart from other education-based societies, and offers a unique opportunity for academic rigour and productive scholarship for our region.

Each of the articles in this special issue cohere around the notion of relationality within and beyond Oceania. This editorial sets the foundation for this important work by *exploring* relationality through three interrelated themes: relationality through socio-spatial positionality; relationality through identity and citizenship; and, relationality as a response to structural tensions and barriers. Each of these themes explores relationality from a theoretical, methodological, and conceptual position emerging from the work of the authors in this special issue. We then lay the framework to *deepen* our understanding of relationality as a collective publication process by sharing our collaborative publication journey. We demonstrate how our intent to strengthen "the educational interconnectedness within the relational space of Oceania" (Coxon & McLaughlin, 2017) led to a relational journey towards publication, despite our vast geographical separation. We conclude by *celebrating* the critical scholarship published in this special issue by new and emerging OCIES researchers.

EXPLORING RELATIONALITY IN COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Origins of conceptual work on relationality are often attributed to the discipline of human geography, and takes a particular emphasis on notions of relational space (Allen, 2012; Jones, 2009). Human geographers employ relationality as a conceptual tool to explore the multiple connections and relationships between/amongst/within/through/beyond various spaces, thus opening up possibilities to engage with both the complexity of lived experience, and the complexity of the nature of reality (Jones, 2009). Within Oceania, a particular conceptualization of relationality is presented through an understanding of *vā*. *Vā,* or the space where relationships or interactions occur, is a viewpoint found in many Pacific countries including Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji. As the relational space, *vā* recognizes the "socio-spatial" connection and the importance of balance in relationships (Airini et al., 2010). Unlike Western conceptualizations that consider space as something to be filled, the *vā* is never an empty space. Instead, the *vā* is filled with the relationship that exists between two people, groups, or entities; there is always some kind of relationship, whether it is positive or negative, supportive or derogatory, and those involved have responsibility for how the relationship works (Fa'avae, 2019; Ka'ili, 2005; Thaman, 2008). Considering *vā*, particularly the expectations, ethics, and responsibilities of *tauhi vā* (a Tongan phrase that refers to caring for socio-spatial relations), "leads to an examination of our interaction with others; a focus on our intentions and conscious actions that influences the nature of our relationships with others" (Mila-Schaaf, 2006, p.

11), including non-living entities. In this special issue, Fasavalu and Reynolds draw on *vā* to explore positionality within research spaces. Through a conference *tok stori* session, they demonstrate how storying can be used to negotiate their own relational positionality within their field of educational research field.

A second way that relationality is conceptualized by authors in this special issue is through identity and citizenship. Research suggests that identity development is a complex and socially constructed phenomenon that is reconstructed over time through engagement within socio-cultural contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011; Schutz, Cross Francis, & Hong, 2018). Relationality is central to this identity work. As Kennedy, in this special issue points out, Oceanic cultural identity is relational and embraces the multiplicity of connections and relationships between people, place, spirituality, and space. Kennedy's article invites us to bring relationality into our conceptualization of language education and, in doing so, reveals how this relational space deepens our understanding of Oceanic cultural identity, and creates opportunities for teachers/educators to be inclusive of Pacific values and knowledge (Fonua, 2018). Similarly, Romero demonstrates how relationality can be used as a lens to examine identity construction in the Pilipinx diaspora. Romero uses diffraction to explore Pilipinx "becoming" through punk rock lyrics and, in doing so, demonstrates the transformative nature of public/punk rock pedagogies and alternative forms of education to contest deficit identities and oppression. Through both of these articles, Kennedy and Romero demonstrate how relationality brings new insight to our understanding of identity construction and reconstruction in transformative and nuanced ways.

Articles by Fitoo and by Choo in this special issue extend on conceptualizations of identity to examine relationality through a citizenship lens. Research shows us that citizenship is a politically and socially contested space (Martiniello, 2002). Globalization has both challenged and, in some cases, eroded Indigenous conceptualizations of citizenship (Levi, Durham, & Porter, 2015; Schattle, 2005). This has prompted calls for the development of citizenship frameworks that reflect Indigenous governance systems, values and beliefs. Fitoo responds to this call by exploring notions of citizenship within the highly diverse context of the Solomon Islands. He considers citizenship through a focus on a shared language—*Wantok*—and he proposes a *Wantok-centric framework* to conceptualize and unify citizenships within the broad diversity found throughout the Solomon Islands. Choo looks to examine relationality *beyond* Oceania by considering the construction of citizenship amongst young urban Buddhists in Myanmar. Her study contends that citizenship within that context is constructed through participants' religious (Buddhist) and political identities, developing a form of democracy which shuns the rigid separation of the public and private self within Western conceptions of democratic citizenship. Each of these authors explore competing notions of citizenship through a lens of relationality, bringing fresh insight and transformative potential to the development of citizenship frameworks and identity construction within each context.

A final way that relationality is conceptualized by authors in this special issue is as a response to social, political and economic barriers. Research has addressed the cultural, social, political, and economic tensions associated with the implementation of global reforms in local contexts (Appadurai, 2002; Chan, Zhang, & Teasdale, 2018; Cobb & Couch, 2018; Coxon & Munce, 2008). This global-local dialect has been the subject of intense debate, particularly in the Pacific where donor funding and global policy reforms, such as outcomes-based curriculum, open education, and leadership programmes, have

often negated local ownership and lacked cultural and contextual relevance (Cobb, 2018; Fa'avae, 2018; Sanga & Reynolds, 2018; Tuia, 2018). For this reason, Riddle (2019) encourages us to question education's response to the complexities of these global-local tensions. This issue responds to this call by positioning relationality at the heart of these local responses. Joskin's article demonstrates how the *Kibung Framework* provides a relational professional development framework to implement outcomes-based curriculum reform within the Papua New Guinean context. Joskin present relationality as a culturally and contextually relevant response to these global reform agendas.

As well as relationality being central to this global-local policy nexus, Yenas' article draws our attention to the transformative potential for relationality to provide a more inclusive future for women living with disabilities. A growing body of research suggests that women and children living with disabilities are often marginalized within their own communities, particularly in the Pacific (Spratt, 2013; Stubbs & Tawake, 2009). While global awareness of the need for inclusive education policies is beginning to address this disjuncture (UNESCO, 2018), such policies have frequently fallen short of addressing and challenging societal beliefs and practices that stigmatize, marginalize, and discriminate against the educational inclusion of women and children living with disabilities (Sharma, Forlinb, Deppelera, & Guang-Xue, 2013; UNESCO, 2018). As Yenas suggests, empowering the voices of those living with disabilities has the potential to enhance awareness and build understanding. In this way, giving voice to those living with disabilities can strengthen relationality within communities and challenge exclusionary stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination.

DEEPENING OCEANIC RELATIONALITIES:
A PUBLICATION JOURNEY

As a Society, we recognized the need to create a relational space to provide ongoing advice, guidance, and mentorship for our new and emerging researcher community. The geographic and academic isolation of many new and emerging researchers in our Society heightened the need to establish an active community of emerging scholars. Our intent in doing so was to extend the production of local knowledge and scholarship from a place of shared commitment and relationality. To address this need, we launched a New and Emerging Researcher Fono (NERF) at the 2018 OCIES conference. We were grateful to receive an OCIES Fellowship and Networks Grant which provided seed funding to host this introductory *fono*, and delighted to have close to 50 new and emerging researchers attend. One aim of this *fono* was to support new and emerging researchers in OCIES to publish their conference paper in this 2019 special issue of the *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*. A call for proposals was extended to OCIES emerging scholars at the conclusion of the conference and we were thrilled to receive a strong response from emerging scholars throughout the region.

What set our NERF apart from more traditional publication projects was our intent to create a relational space for ongoing discussions and conversations. Despite geographic separation, we were deliberate in our intent to create a "third space" (Edward, 1980) for new and emerging researchers to engage in intellectual conversation and knowledge-sharing throughout the publication process. An online *fono* was created to build, nurture and maintain relationships with authors throughout the Pacific. Authors and editors met through an online Zoom conversation to discuss key concepts about relationality, share literature, and consider how relationality was operationalized in their articles. In addition,

each author was assigned a mentor who provided feedback on four writing milestones during the manuscript development stage. Milestone guidelines and writing tips were shared by the editorial team and an author self-review checklist (adapted from Rath & Mutch, 2014) was provided to give greater clarity to authors as they prepared their final manuscript. As editors, we were also mentored into the editorial role by an experienced academic and editor. We met as an editorial team prior to each writing milestone and online f*ono* to discuss the development of manuscripts and to further scaffold our online *fono* gatherings. In this sense, authors and editors were all actively part of an academic learning community.

The final phase involved the support of a large number of senior OCIES academics who played a vital role in reviewing each manuscript. As guest editors, we have been humbled by the hard work and intellectual generosity of those who reviewed draft submissions and supported authors towards their final manuscript. Each manuscript underwent at least two rounds of blind peer reviews by two experienced academics who offered specific feedback and extended comments on each article. This process provided clear feedback to allow authors an opportunity to further develop and enhance their manuscripts. In addition, each article was anonymously reviewed by an author, giving authors the additional experience of being a reviewer. The publication of this special issue signals the conclusion of our new and emerging researcher publication project, yet the beginning of our efforts to deepen Oceanic relationalities through a collaborative academic learning community. We hope that by doing so, we offer possibilities for the development of future emerging research communities, both in Oceania and beyond.

With this in mind, our publication journey was not without obstacles. On occasion, technological access, infrastructure, and connectivity proved to be challenging for some of our authors located in more remote regions of the Pacific. At times, some authors could not attend our online *fono* due to access and connectivity issues. This required flexibility with milestone submission dates and a willingness for editors to connect with authors at alternative times to maintain momentum throughout the process. Connectivity issues also occasionally impacted the quality of our online discussions. Some authors communicated via the online chat function because of sound issues, while others could be heard, but not seen. Despite this, the online *fono* still proved to be an important way to maintain connections throughout the writing process.

Another significant challenge was supporting emerging scholars through their competing and often demanding schedules. Some scholars were in the final submission stage of their Masters or PhD theses. Others relocated to the Pacific at the conclusion of their studies, during data collection phases of their research, or because of external aid contracts. This required a time of resettling for each scholar and both flexibility and encouragement from the editorial team. In addition, we were working within a tight timeframe for the development and submission of the articles. While this condensed time frame helped to maintain the momentum of the project, it also left little room for unexpected delays. It required authors to respond quickly to feedback, which was not always easy for many first-time authors with their own busy schedules. Developing an understanding of how to structure an article and respond to the theme of the special issue took time to establish. Ideally, spending time in a "reading circle" prior to writing would help to deepen our collective understanding of relationality and build a stronger awareness of the multiplicity of interrelated spaces through which our own research connects. Nevertheless, authors

worked solidly over an eight-month period to write, review, and publish the articles in this special issue.

CELEBRATING OCEANIC RELATIONALITIES: AN OVERVIEW OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Each of the seven papers in this special issue celebrates the contribution of OCIES new and emerging researchers. These articles cohere around the notion of relationality, each advancing research in a wide range of educational contexts. Relationality is celebrated through three interrelated themes: relationality through socio-spatial positionality; relationality through identity and citizenship; and relationality as a response to structural tensions and barriers. Each of these themes aims to achieve the broader goal of exploring, deepening, and celebrating relationalities within Oceania and beyond.

The first paper by Fasavalu and Reynolds examines relationality through the lens of socio-spatial positionality. Fasavalu and Reynolds examine researcher positionality as relationally constructed. Drawing on *tok stori*, and informed by *vā,* the authors employ autoethnography to examine their own stories as they pursue a deeper understanding of their positionality-as-researchers. The paper is set on their contention that "ethical cultural references from Oceania extend the demands of positionality beyond flows of power in research" (p. 17). Examining their own narratives, and the intersections of others participating in the *tok stori*, the authors construct a deeper engagement with their own journeys as a research "edgewalk". The authors demand careful and explicit attention to the implications of relational care, love, reciprocity, and responsibility which accompany a continuous process of re-positioning in pursuit of authentic researcher relationality. Fasavalu and Reynolds offer important parallels for thinking "positionality-as-teacher" within the classroom, and provoke a deeper consideration of the importance of *tok stori* within academic conferences.

The following three articles examine relationality through the identity and citizenship. Kennedy's article explores how Pacific language programmes in secondary schools can deepen understandings of *vā* and contribute to cultural identity construction for Pacific students. By embracing relationality through *vā,* she offers a perspective that is not usually applied to language education. This approach brings to light how language education can support Pacific cultural identity construction and the importance of exploring the *vā* between a person and their language, and the interconnection between language, relationality, and identity. Although very few schools in Aotearoa New Zealand support Pacific language development, Kennedy's study highlights the value of supporting the learning of heritage languages by sharing students' stories of how their language, their culture, and their cultural identity are enhanced by doing so.

Romero examines identity expression in the Pilipinx diaspora through punk rock lyrics. This work challenges the way in which Pilipinx is traditionally presented, by offering a representation that "complicates dominant understandings of the contexts, conditions and capacities of Pilipinx bodies" (Romero, 2019). Relationality is intersected with diasporic history and punk rock pedagogy to explore how Pilipinx becoming can inform current Oceanic relations.

Fitoo's examination of citizenship in the Solomon Islands highlights the challenge that a highly diverse context can create for education systems concerned with developing

relevant and meaningful citizenship education programmes. Drawing on focus groups and semi-structured interviews with students and school principals from urban and rural secondary schools, Fitoo advocates an approach to citizenship education framed around elements of *wantok*—a term indicating the use of variants of Pijn, and used to signify unity. As Fitoo argues, a *wantok-centric* framework for citizenship education offers an opportunity to centre notions of citizenship upon elements which can bring together and connect a diverse population.

Choo focuses on the case of young urban Buddhists in Myanmar. Her work draws on photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviews as a way of examining her participants' construction of democratic citizenship. Choo's work highlights the manner in which participants draw on their religious understanding of Buddhism as they perform civic responsibilities. Choo demonstrates a need for a broader understanding of democracy: her participants rejected Westo-centric understandings of democracy because it requires a separation of the private (religious) self from the public (civic duty) self. Rather, her participants consider the relations between these forms of self as they perform active civic participation within Myanmar's Buddhist democracy.

The final two articles within this special issue draw on relationality to form a response to social, political, and economic barriers. Joskin demonstrates how relationality can provide a culturally and contextually relevant response to the complexities of implementing global outcomes-based education reform agendas into local contexts. Using Papua New Guinea (PNG) as a case study, Joskin examines PNGs engagement with external donors and aid agencies to shed light on how a series of global policy and curricular reforms have impacted local education systems and practices. Her work invites us to consider how relationality can be central to the contextualization of local policy responses through the *Kibung Framework,* a relationality-centred professional development model. The *Kibung Framework* presents an Indigenous approach to teachers' professional learning by valuing connectedness through discussion and dialogue. In doing so, the *Kibung Framework* offers a point of departure from top-down programmes and frameworks that are often evidenced in global educational reform.

Finally, Yenas' article presents relationality as a response to societal barriers by giving voice to women living with visible, physical disabilities in PNG. Yenas uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to investigate the lived experiences of five women living with physical disabilities. Through the voices of her participants, her article demonstrates the discrimination, social stigmatization and educational exclusion experienced by these women. Yenas suggests that a relationality of understanding can be established through inclusive policies and practices, thus challenging and transforming current social stereotypes and exclusionary practices.

To conclude, Hau'ofa's (1998) described Oceania as "us": "a world of people connected to each other" (p. 401–402). We hope our relational journey towards publication has gone some way towards strengthening "the relational space of Oceania" (Coxon & McLaughlin, 2017.) while also contributing theoretically, practically, and spiritually to our educational interconnectedness at global, regional, national, and community levels. Together, these papers offer a critical insight into how our research, both within and beyond Oceania, places humanity and relationality at the centre of our work. We invite you to join with us by centring your own scholarship within the educational interconnectedness of this relational space.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr Donella Cobb is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Waikato. Donella teaches postgraduate and undergraduate courses in global studies in education, pedagogy, and professional learning and development. Donella's research explores the intersection between the political economy of education, critical pedagogy and international education policy.

Dr Daniel Couch is a Lecturer in the School of Education at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. His research examines the intersections of armed conflict, higher education, and state building, and is concerned with the various manifestations of neoliberalism within global and national educational agendas.

Sonia Fonua is Pāpālangi (New Zealand European) and was born and raised in Aotearoa New Zealand. Married to her Tongan husband, they have two young sons who inspire her to improve the education system for all Pasifika. She has been working for 20 years in academic positions focused on equity, access and social justice for indigenous Māori and Pasifika students. Building on previous study in Anthropology, her doctoral studies are in Critical Studies in Education within the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland. Her research interests focus on ethnic disparities in education, and ways to embed indigenous (science) knowledge and develop effective teaching and learning methods for indigenous and minority students).

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