

# Exploring inclusive education research in Tonga through Tongan cultural lenses and methodologies

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*This article explores my PhD research into Tongan family practice, looking at how Tongan families support and care for their member with siva-tu‘amelie’s (special needs) education. The article discusses the layered approach of Pacific and non-Pacific methodologies that I used during the study to ensure a safe space for participants. The method enabled me to collect rich, high-quality stories. The article also outlines how the approach promoted a strength-based perception and lens towards a subject often associated with negative connotations. My study highlighted the positive, strength-based aspirations and care Tongan families have for their members with siva-tu‘amelie that contradicts common notions of Tongan families viewing their members with siva-tu‘amelie through a medical or religious lens. I also provide a brief background of siva-tu‘amelie in Tonga, outlining the importance of my study for creating a shift in how society, educators and the education system perceive individuals with siva-tu‘amelie.*

*Keywords: Inclusive education, Special education, Inclusive special education, Tongan methodologies, Fāa ‘i Kavei Koula, Siva-tu ‘amelie, Kakala framework, Talanoa*

## INTRODUCTION

Kaitani and McMurray’s (2006) findings imply that individuals with special needs (SN) in Tonga often face negative societal stigma, discrimination and prejudice. These negative mindsets and prejudices are primarily evidenced in the terminology and labelling of people with *siva-tu‘amelie* (SN) in Tonga and the negative connotations of the terms. My study revealed the importance of language and how it reflects one’s views of others. I had hoped that while conducting my PhD research on the policy and practice of inclusive special education (ISE) in Tonga, I would shift community perception and language used about individuals with SN to one that is positive and strength-based. I achieved this through one of my participants, ‘Alipate, who, together with a few of his colleagues, developed a new term to describe SN: *siva-tu‘amelie*. He intended to develop a more positive and hopeful concept to replace the most commonly used Tongan term, *faingata‘ia*, which means to be in difficulty or trouble. *Siva* means ‘loss of hope’ and *tu‘amelie* means ‘to be hopeful’ (Churchward, 1959). ‘Alipate defines *siva-tu‘amelie* by explaining that although their special need is where they may have *siva* (lost hope), they are hopeful for positive outcomes and can achieve anything—they have *tu‘amelie* (hope). It is a term most commonly used to refer to individuals with SN.

This paper outlines the Pacific and non-Pacific methodologies used in my doctoral work, providing the rationale underpinning the methods I used. I also explore how these methods worked together and provide personal reflections on how the methods allowed me to gather in-depth, quality insight into the experiences of families and their member with *siva-tu‘amelie*. To shift focus to one that is strength-based and positive, the terms *siva-tu‘amelie* and special needs will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

## **EVOLUTION OF THE EDUCATION OF PEOPLE WITH *SIVA-TU‘AMELIE***

The types of education for people with *siva-tu‘amelie* throughout the years have evolved from special education (SE) to inclusive education (IE) to ISE. Exploring this evolution and the perceptions underlying the changes is important because they affect education delivery for people with *siva-tu‘amelie* in Tonga.

Many discussions have taken place regarding the rights of people with SN to education, from advocacy by international organisations to parents and others who support and are concerned with the rights of people with SN (Dray, 2008; Price, 2009). In particular, there is advocacy to provide people with SN access to quality education. Still, difficulties remain because of existing barriers based on ignorance, prejudice and mistaken assumptions on the part of those without SN about what needs to change in the system (Price, 2009; Williams, 2013).

### **Special education**

SE first evolved in the 19th Century and was underpinned by a medical model. This deficit model claims that the fault or the leading cause of an individual with SN's inability to access services and participate fully in society lies within the individual with SN. SE has historically referred to delivering education to people with SN separate from mainstream education, whether in separate schools or classes within mainstream schools. The placements of students with SN in classes were based on their medical diagnosis (Jenson, 2018).

Through SE, an individual's SN is perceived as tragic and undesirable, further excluding and oppressing those involved (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017). Although SE gives people with SN access to education, the programs are often offered in classrooms that are separated from non-SN students. This is a form of enforced isolation (Purdue, 2006). Powell (2011) states that segregation remains the overriding mode of SE support services, and SE has become synonymous with limitations and exclusion.

### **Inclusive education**

The development and shift from SE to IE aimed to educate all SN students via mainstream inclusive schooling. However, although the policy of IE supports full inclusion, Kauffman and Hallahan (2005) criticise IE as a misplaced ideology, noting that, in practice, students are sacrificed because they are placed into an education setting not suited for them. This raises the issue of 'main-dumping' (Hornby, 2014), which is the process of placing students with SN in a learning setting without considering the quality of education provided and whether the mainstream school is ready or willing to fully educate a student with SN (Hornby, 2015; Lewis, 1995), and without full consideration as to whether it is the right learning environment for the student (Hornby, 2015).

Therefore, although inclusion in mainstream education is necessary to satisfy inclusivity and to deliver access to educational spaces as a right, it is not enough to ensure quality education for students with SN (Lewis, 1995). From personal experience, there is a strong presence of main-dumping in the education of people with SN in Tonga. Evidently, there is still confusion and uncertainty around the concept of IE in developed and developing countries alike (Hornby, 2012). The following section discusses how the IE framework's limitations led to ISE's development.

### **Inclusive special education**

ISE differs from IE in that it is not just rights-based but is also focused on what is right or most appropriate for the development of any individual with SN, addressing the issue of IE's main-dumping. ISE identifies the importance of considering not only the rights of the person with SN but also what is suitable for the person with SN, considering whether the student is in a learning environment where they are receiving quality education– that they are best able to learn there, and that their needs are being met. Concurring with this concern, Warnock (2010) states that each student's learning needs are different, and specific needs are more effectively met in a mainstream classroom. However, others may require a SE setting, not only for those with severe SN but also for students whose SN prevent them from learning effectively in an environment of a large mainstream class and/or school (Hornby, 2014; Warnock, 2010).

Hornby (2014) proposes that the concept of ISE focuses on providing education for all children with SN in mainstream and special school classes. Hornby's (2014) theory of ISE synthesises the strengths of IE and SE to form a theory that is 'right' and suitable for the learner with SN, blending wholesale rights and individual considerations. ISE aims to provide people with SN with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to have as much independence and success as possible after they leave school (Hornby, 2015).

### ***SIVA-TU'AMELIE* IN TONGA**

Researchers (Forlin et al., 2015; Leaupepe, 2015) have found that people with *siva-tu'amelie* in the Pacific, including Tonga, have historically been perceived through a medical and/or religious lens. People with *siva-tu'amelie* have often been seen as a misfortune to the family (Kaitani & McMurray, 2006) and a curse from God. A common explanation for this is the little knowledge people in the Pacific have about *siva-tu'amelie* (Tufue-Dolgoy, 2010). Kaufusi (2009) explains that Tongan families with a member who has *siva-tu'amelie* often experience shame and embarrassment. They go through stages of depression, denial, anger and acceptance, often leading to many families hiding their family member with *siva-tu'amelie* at home. People with *siva-tu'amelie* are often excluded from economic, social and political structures and systems (Kaitani & McMurray, 2006). This exclusion makes it imperative that the community is educated on what *siva-tu'amelie* is and how the community can provide support, thus alleviating feelings of shame and embarrassment experienced by families.

With this knowledge, I realised that the experiences of individuals with *siva-tu'amelie* and their families in accessing education in Tonga could be a deeply personal and sensitive subject for many families. Therefore, I needed to be aware of cultural and personal sensitivities; as a Tongan researcher, I needed to conduct myself to meet the needs of my research and the cultural and personal needs of the families and individuals with *siva-tu'amelie*. In my study, I used Pacific approaches such as the *Kakala* framework (Thaman, 1992) to guide the study and describe the research process. I also used the *talanoa* method (Vaioleti, 2006) as the foundational research approach. Conducting research in IE and ISE is often associated with negative experiences and can be a fraught topic for some participants. An appreciative, strength-based approach reframes ISE as an opportunity and qualitative methods ensure the voices of those most deeply concerned can be heard.

As a result of this carefully layered approach of Pacific and non-Pacific research methods, the study was fruitful for promoting in-depth discussions revealing the successes and difficulties participants experienced in accessing IE in Tonga and establishing ways to build on and strengthen their successes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

When research involves Pacific peoples, the methods and processes used must be culturally appropriate and suitable for the context (Sanga, 2004). A Pacific-centred study that might impact Pacific communities requires using Pacific knowledge systems and conceptual frameworks (McCaffery & McFall-McCaffery, 2010; Sanga, 2004; Taufe'ulungaki, 2001). Therefore, and as already noted, I used the Tongan *Kakala* framework and the *talanoa* method. I used the non-Pacific qualitative interpretive paradigm and appreciative inquiry/strength-based approaches along with these Tongan methods.

Vaioleti (2006) warned that using non-Pacific research methods when attempting to create Pacific knowledge has the potential risk of sanitising 'out elements such as unseen loyalty to kin systems, actions associated with recognition of spiritual or cultural order, church obligations and deep cultural concepts that affect Pacific peoples' (p. 23). Sanga (2004) observed that many Pacific research researchers have felt the need to be justified by referencing Western theory. Sanga disagreed with this perceived need to use Western theory through his work and offered philosophical grounds and space where indigenous Pacific research could be established. Sanga and Reynolds (2017) highlighted that the Pacific understandings of reality, knowledge and values stand alone as 'bases of a research paradigm to serve local Pacific interests without justificatory reference to the West' (p. 198). However, for my study, I opted to use non-Pacific approaches not as a means to justify my results but as an additional layer to support the underlying and foundational layer of the Pacific methodologies. I will explain later in this article how the Pacific and non-Pacific approaches I used complemented and worked well together.

The following sections will discuss each component of my methodology and why I chose each aspect. I also discuss how the methods are compatible and enable me to gather rich data.

### **Qualitative Interpretive paradigm**

I chose to adopt an interpretive paradigm within a social constructivist approach because the method focuses on people's lived experiences, maintaining that deeper meanings can be uncovered through action. This paradigm within the context of my study explored practice at a family level, examining how families support the development and learning of their family member with *siva-tu 'amelie*. Furthermore, a qualitative approach as a form of inquiry attempts to examine the world and experiences from the participants' perspective rather than from the researcher's perspective (Connelly, 2007). Qualitative inquiry focuses on what is currently happening in present situations, searching for a depth of understanding of phenomena and influencing factors rather than attempting to predict what will happen. This approach provides a holistic perspective of the participants' experiences.

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a narrative-based process (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AI is a strength-based approach and narrative-based process helpful in understanding the strengths of peoples, programmes, and communities (Chu et al., 2013). First introduced by Cooperrider and Srivastva in 1987, AI seeks to understand the social world by exploring peoples' perceptions of what is valuable and working out ways to build on these perceptions (Reed, 2007). AI allows participants to engage in conversations, explore the positive, life-giving core of a situation or phenomenon, and create change and new approaches for action. AI, as an approach to research,

appreciates a phenomenon's current reality (Zandee, 2014). In this manner, AI overlaps with an interpretive framework, which looks at reality and how it is created through experiences.

AI is unlike some research methods that look at barriers, gaps and problems of a topic or situation. In contrast, AI focuses on strengths. It empowers and creates a safe space from blame (Cobb, 2010), which is essential when working with families and individuals with *siva-tu'amelie*. AI focuses on personal positive experiences, enabling people to feel safer and more comfortable sharing information since they are talking about their strengths rather than their problems and mistakes (Hammond, 2010). These types of conversations enable meaningful connections between the researcher and participants and allow new frameworks for action to be generated (Cobb, 2010).

AI interviews differ from traditional interviews because rather than seeking facts and opinions, AI seeks stories, experiences and metaphors. Stories are important because they provide rich insight into the participants' lived experiences, and sharing stories establishes a relationship between the teller and the listener (Zandee, 2014). Chu et al. (2013) used the *Kakala* framework and AI to guide their data collection through *talanoa* to study the educational practices that benefit Pacific learners in tertiary education. They use AI as a lens when working with their participants and for framing their questions for the *talanoa* sessions. I used AI as a lens to guide how I interacted with participants and for formulating the questions for the *talanoa* sessions. AI develops a sense of trust with the participants and establishes an environment for participants to feel comfortable. This coincides with the nature of *talanoa*, which also seeks to develop trust and create an environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their stories (Manu'atu, 2003; 'Otunuku, 2011; Vaioleti, 2006).

Hornby (2014) states that using strength-based practice in ISE can change how people with SN or, in this case, *siva-tu'amelie* and their education are perceived. This approach shifts from focusing mainly on identifying deficits in people with *siva-tu'amelie* to investigating factors that promote success. An AI approach can promote a change for a positive mindset about *siva-tu'amelie* and the education of people with *siva-tu'amelie*. However, Knibbs et al. (2010) also noted that positivity, being the primary focus of an AI approach, can have limitations because participants may overlook real problems within the study. As a researcher, I needed to view what are commonly perceived as negative issues in an appreciative way. This does not imply attempting to make light of a subject that may be sensitive to the participants or a negative issue. Instead, it is a way of using the 'issues' or 'problems' to understand participants' stories, find assets and build on them to create positive change. Success comes with its difficulties, and this study aimed to encourage participants to discuss both their successful and difficult experiences to navigate ways to build on and strengthen their successes (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012). Gharabaghi and Anderson-Nathe (2017) support seeking positive and negative information by stating that there should be no limits on the themes and topics that warrant an appreciative inquiry, strength-based research approach. The use of an AI approach was appropriate for this study, and it did not limit the discussions and conversations carried out through *talanoa* with participants.

## Pacific methodologies

### ***Kakala* framework**

The *Kakala* research framework is a Tongan methodology that demonstrates the art of garland making as a guide for a research framework based on a Tongan cultural reference (Thaman, 1992). According to Thaman (1992), the *Kakala* research framework was established to create

a safe space with trust between researchers and their participants to allow access to authentic traditional knowledge. The process of weaving together the *kakala* or garland involves gathering scented flowers and women sitting together on a mat, weaving the flowers into a *kakala*. Johansson-Fua (2014) stated that the process of making the *kakala* is a communal one that illustrates relationships, the sharing of resources, and the passing of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next.

The *Kakala* framework values Tongan relationality, time-honoured practices and values (Sanga & Reynolds, 2017). Sanga and Reynolds also noted that ‘Kakala has the potential to unsettle the dominance of the researcher over the community and to challenge the modernity of research’ (p. 199). Professor Konai Helu Thaman put together the original approach to formulate her conceptualisation of teaching and learning and develop culturally inclusive teaching and learning for Pacific teachers and students (Johansson-Fua, 2014; Thaman, 2007). The framework was later revised, reconceptualised, and strengthened by Professor Thaman, working with Dr ‘Ana Taufe‘ulungaki, Dr Linita Manu‘atu, and Dr Seu‘ula Johansson-Fua.

The *Kakala* framework was used as a cultural framework for this study and is appropriate as it describes principles and values that underpin the *anga fakatonga* (Tongan culture and values). The *Kakala* research framework allowed for a space where those involved are free to be who they are with all their insights, knowledge, experiences and inherited gifts in a space where they can feel a sense of belonging without shame or pretence (Johansson-Fua, 2014). The *Kakala* framework has six key components: *teu*, *toli*, *tui*, *luva*, *mālie* and *māfana*. Drawing from the work and definitions of Thaman (1992; 2007) and Johansson-Fua (2014), I will discuss in more detail the components of the *Kakala* framework and how they were used in my study.

The preparation process before the work begins is referred to as the *teu* stage of the *kakala*-making process. This refers to the process of conceptualising, designing and planning the study. The *toli* process is the selection and collection of various flowers. In this study, it refers to the criteria for selecting the research participants and data gathering. Johansson-Fua (2014) affirms that within this stage, the process of data collection and the ethics used are critical to gathering authentic and accurate data.

*Tui* is the process of weaving together the flowers and making the *kakala*. In the research process, it refers to the analysis stage. This involves interpreting and analysing the data. Johansson-Fua (2014) elaborates on the process that the women go through during this stage of the *kakala* by describing it as the collective process between the older women, who string together the *kakala*, and young girls, who are sent out to gather the flowers or leaves. Throughout this process, the pattern of the *kakala* may change, and there is a process of negotiation and correction between the women and the young girls.

Similarly, depending on the information received, the research process may involve negotiation and readjusting plans. Emerging patterns and themes are also identified during this process. It is also an opportunity to engage in further conversations with the research participants to ensure that what has been captured is correct.

*Luva* is the term used to describe the presentation of a *kakala* when it is completed. It represents the act of giving a gift with heartfelt sincerity, humility and honour. The concept of *luva* is associated with the notion that much time, work and sacrifice has gone in to create the *kakala* that is gifted. In this study, *luva* describes the hard work and sacrifice I have gone through to create this *kakala*. *Luva* also refers to the dissemination of the information and the new knowledge gained from this research in the giving back of the *kakala* to the research

participants; this is viewed from a Tongan perspective as a sign of respect and love. This signifies the process of giving voice to Pacific people, carried out with care and respect (Johansson-Fua, 2014).

Additionally, the concept of *mālie* is an expression of appreciation. Typically used in a performance setting, it is a term that the audience uses to provide encouragement, support and appreciation towards the performers. In the framework context, it evokes a feeling that the *Kakala* being presented is high quality. For the *kakala* of this study to be considered of high quality, the research process requires constant monitoring of the data against key ideas such as utility, applicability and relevance to the context (Johansson-Fua, 2014).

*Māfana* (warmth) refers to the heartfelt feeling that causes an emotional reaction. In the research context, it describes how the *kakala* creates an emotional reaction for all involved in the research (Manu'atu, 2000, 2001). This process creates an empowering relationship and transformation between the researcher and participants where new knowledge and understanding are created, as well as a transformation of policies and services for individuals with *siva-tu'amelie*, families and those who work in the IE education sector. In relation to the *kakala* of this study, this research was carried out with 'ofa and passion. In the process of weaving together the *kakala* of this study, it evoked a sense of *māfana* within me as a researcher, but I hope it will also evoke *māfana* among the participants and audience. These key processes of the *Kakala* framework were used to guide the research.

### ***Talanoa***

There are many variants of the concept of *talanoa*, including across different places, such as Fijian, Samoan and Tongan *talanoa*. I used the Tongan *talanoa* because of the nature of my study. *Talanoa* is a combination of two words: *tala*, meaning to inform, tell and announce, and *noa*, meaning free and open expression, balance and equilibrium (Churchward, 1959; Halapua, 2004; Tecun et al., 2018; Vaioleti, 2006). Mead (2003) defines the state of *noa* as restoring balance; when a balance has been reached, relationships are restored. Literally, *talanoa* means to talk and interact without a fixed framework. Tecun et al. (2018) noted that *talanoa*, from a Tongan perspective, means 'to story/dialogue in balance...to story/dialogue once there is balance' (p. 161). To reach a state of *noa* or balance, one must be able to create and maintain relationships (Tecun et al., 2018). In a research context, *talanoa* removes the barriers between the researcher and participants, allowing them to create a safe space and relationship where participants' stories are valued (Vaioleti, 2006).

The concept of *Talanoa* was developed as an indigenous research methodology for exchanging ideas or thinking (Halapua, 2004; Vaioleti, 2006). *Talanoa* refers to personal encounters carried out mainly by face-to-face interaction, where people story their issues, realities, and aspirations. Johansson-Fua (2014) refers to *talanoa* as a conversation between people, sharing ideas and talking with someone. *Talanoa* can be used for different purposes: to teach and share ideas, preach, build and maintain relationships, and gather information. It is a flexible concept, meaning that the language and behaviour used in *talanoa* can change depending on the context and those involved. Its flexibility also allows opportunities to 'probe, challenge, clarify and re-align' (Vaioleti, 2006, p. 25). However, its flexible nature may also present as a limitation. Vaioleti (2006) stated that reliability is concerned with consistency, but in the process of *talanoa*, researchers' and participants' viewpoints and reactions tend to change over time; *talanoa* is unlikely to gather similar results each time.

*Talanoa* is used as a research tool mainly for data collection and analysis, and according to Johansson-Fua (2014), *talanoa* fits a qualitative approach. Similar to qualitative research and

empirical research, *talanoa* seeks to understand the meaning behind people's experiences (Vaiotei, 2006). Through *talanoa*, trust is developed, and courage is gained to share one's story and experiences (Manu'atu, 2003). Manu'atu (2003) stated that '*talanoa* opens up people's hearts to speak about issues they encounter in everyday living' (Manu'atu, 2003, para. 7). This method is suitable for this research as it provides a culturally appropriate setting and safe environment where participants have the freedom to talk about the research topic, *siva-tu'amelie*, openly, which leads to critical discussions, allowing rich contextual information to surface. Johansson-Fua (2014) stated that combining the *Kakala* framework and *talanoa* allows access to traditional knowledge rarely shared in research.

In a Fijian context, Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012) note that *talanoa* is an embodied expression of Fijian *vanua* (land, people, tradition, place), which includes love, empathy, and respect. Supporting this statement, in incorporating *talanoa* in a research setting, Tecun et al. (2018) claim that emotions should be expected to be connected to this form of knowledge and understanding. As a guide for researchers effectively conducting *talanoa* in a Tongan context, Johansson-Fua (2014) and Vaiotei (2006) suggest using the following basic principles and guidelines: *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *loto fakatōkilalo* (humility), *fe'ofa'aki* (love, compassion) and *feveitokai'aki* (caring and tendering to the *vā* or the relationship).

In my study, I found that the *talanoa* sessions unfolded in a conversational manner, allowing my participants to explore and discuss the research topic and questions from different perspectives. This process ensured that rich and comprehensive data was collected. To ensure I carried out the *talanoa* effectively, I used Johansson-Fua (2014) and Vaiotei's (2006) principles to guide how I approached the participants and conducted the *talanoa* sessions. As a Tongan researcher, I made sure I approached the participants, especially the families and members, with *siva-tu'amelie* with *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *loto fakatōkilalo* (humility) and *fe'ofa'aki* (love, compassion). Additionally, for *talanoa* to work effectively, a *vā* needs to be established and maintained through *feveitokai'aki*—caring and tendering to the *vā* or relationship. Literature on Tongan *talanoa* emphasises the importance of relationships and the vital cultural component for Tongans associated with keeping good relations. I applied the principle of *feveitokai'aki* in my first meetings with participants to establish trust and connection between myself and the participants. The four principles were applied throughout my interactions and *talanoa* with the participants and allowed for authentic data collection.

## **REFLECTIONS ON THE LAYERED METHODS AND *SIVA-TU'AMELIE***

In this section, I discuss how each of the four elements of my methodology worked together to allow rich data from my participants to emerge and how the strength-based approach to a sensitive topic was brought to the forefront. Using an AI and a strength-based approach was highly beneficial in creating a safe space for the families and their members with *siva-tu'amelie*. Using an AI approach allowed participants to feel comfortable and safe to share their stories and experiences even though these were difficult regarding emotions, experiences and explanations.

In the context of my study, using an AI approach together with the principles and practice of *talanoa* allowed me as a researcher to establish a *vā*—relationship with my participants that was culturally appropriate and had a sense of trust where they felt safe to talk openly with me about their story and experiences, revealing things that had previously been hidden or unspoken of, or kept in families only. This aligns with Chu et al.'s (2013) claim that using an AI approach and *talanoa* establishes trust and promotes storytelling. This study successfully promoted an



in-depth discussion of the participants' successes and difficulties and established ways to build on and strengthen their successes.

I drew from Vaioleti's (2006) work on culturally appropriate protocols for carrying out a *talanoa* based on the *anga fakatonga*. *Faka'apa'apa*, meaning respect, being humble and considerate, refers to the interaction between the researcher and their participants. It ensures that researchers are knowledgeable about their participants' culture, the appropriate communication is used, and the interactions are conducted respectfully.

*Anga lelei* is the act of being kind, generous, helpful, and tolerant. I was able to show and be *anga lelei* towards my participants through the values of *loto tō* and *faka'apa'apa*, approaching them with humility and respect. As a Tongan researcher, I had to show my participants that they are the knowledge holders. I had to proactively listen to my participants, understand their situations, and then act and respond appropriately. It was important for me, especially considering the nature and sensitivity of my research, that my participants knew and felt that I was there to genuinely listen to their voices and stories without judgment.

*Mateuteu* is the researcher's preparedness to carry out their research. Researchers should not only be knowledgeable about their participant's culture but also their family. *Poto he anga* is the concept of being cultured, knowing what to do and being able to carry it out effectively. Going into my research, I found that having an in-depth knowledge and understanding of my *anga fakatonga* helped to not only preparing me to carry out my research but also in how I approached and interacted with my participants.

Vaioleti (2006) claims that the researcher 'must honour the participants' kindness and willingness to be involved in the research' (p. 30) by preparing research materials ahead of time. Before meeting my participants, I made sure to have all my research questions, consent forms and research materials ready. These documents and research questions were also prepared in the Tongan language.

Lastly, *'ofa fe'unga* refers to displaying appropriate compassion, empathy and love for the context. In my research, because my participants trusted me enough to be vulnerable to share their stories, I also had to be vulnerable to show compassion, empathy and love for my participants. I did this by sitting with my participants, giving them the time and space to talk freely and openly, allowing myself to genuinely feel for and understand them, and validating their stories and knowledge.

These concepts were appropriate and were used in my role as a researcher. I made sure I approached the participants, especially the families and members, with *siva-tu'amelie* with *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *loto fakatōkilalo* (humility) and *fe'ofa'aki* (love, compassion). Additionally, for the *talanoa* to work effectively, a *vā* needs to be established and maintained through *feveitokai'aki* (caring and tendering to the *vā* or relationship). In approaching my participants, I was able to establish a *vā* by initiating a connection with my participants either through mutual connections or familial ties. In cases where there are no mutual connections or ties, I used my *anga fakatonga* and knowledge of the *Fāa'i Kavei Koula* (Four Golden Pillars) to create a *vā* with my participants. The *Fāa'i Kavei Koula* was first introduced by the late Queen Salote Tupou III in 1964 (Fehoko, 2014). They are the four core values that underpin the Tongan culture, societal views and beliefs: *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *loto tō* (humility), *tauhi vā* (maintain good relationships with others) and *mamahi'i me'a* (loyalty, fidelity and passion in application of self).

The literature on Tongan *talanoa* emphasises the importance of relationships and the vital cultural component for Tongans associated with keeping good relations. I applied the principle

of *feveitokai 'aki* in my first meetings with participants to establish trust and connection between myself and the participants. I continued to apply the four principles throughout my interactions and *talanoa* with the participants, enabling me to collect authentic data.

As a result of using these methodologies and methods, my study was able to highlight and bring to the forefront the positive, strength-based perceptions Tongan families have towards their members with *siva-tu 'amelie*.

Family plays an important role in educating their members with *siva-tu 'amelie*'s through their practice of support and care at home. My study highlighted that these practices of support and care of Tongan families are guided by Tongan values, such as the *Fāa 'i Kavei Koula*, *'ofa* and Christian values. These same values also play a role in the strength-based perceptions and aspirations of the families for their members with special needs. Families within this study shared the common perception that their member with *siva-tu 'amelie* is a *tapuaki mei he 'Otua* (a blessing from God). They described their member as a *tofi 'a mei he 'Otua ke tauhi* (a gift from God) and believed it was their responsibility as parents to care for them. Such perception is not uncommon in Pacific cultures and holds for Tongan culture as well (Leauepepe, 2015; Mauigoa-Tekene et al., 2013) and contradicts common notions that people with *siva-tu 'amelie* are a misfortune and a curse from God (Kaitni & McMurray, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

This article noted that individuals with *siva-tu 'amelie* are traditionally perceived through a medical and religious lens in the Pacific, and how my study contradicted this perception by highlighting the strength-based views and aspirations Tongan families have towards their members with *siva-tu 'amelie*. The paper also explored how research concerning individuals with *siva-tu 'amelie* and their families can be difficult because of the topic's sensitivity and how I, as a Tongan researcher, used both Pacific and non-Pacific methods to ensure that my participants felt comfortable and safe to share their stories with me. Looking forward, my experiences as a researcher within the context of my PhD study have helped to strengthen my connection and knowledge of the *anga fakatonga*. It suggests how a methodology incorporating Pacific and non-Pacific methods can work well together to strengthen the study and allow for a deeper connection between researcher and participants.

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