

EDITORIAL: Revisioning education in Oceania: Walking backward into the future, together

Adreanne Ormond & Kabini Sanga

It is our joy to gift to you, readers, the IEJ: CP Special Issue 2023, a compilation of accepted papers from the OCIES 50th Anniversary Conferences (Virtual and Face-to-Face [F2F]) convened by Victoria University of Wellington (Virtual, 10-11 November 2022) and jointly with Fiji National University (F2F, 21-23 November 2022 in Lautoka, Fiji).

Besides being the 50th anniversary year, 2022 saw OCIES return to its annual conference in F2F mode following the global border lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we re-gathered at the Fiji National University campus in Lautoka, Fiji, OCIES conference leaders were mindful of the global crisis and its effects on Oceania's capacities for thought leadership, education thinking and sense-making. We knew we had to counter the negative effects of the pandemic crisis on teachers, students, learning and leadership. Even during the pandemic, OCIES leaders sought to sustain the community by organising virtual conferences, convening regular virtual meetings and initiating the Wellington Southerlies online seminar in collaboration with Victoria University of Wellington. Throughout the COVID pandemic, concerns about the future—of Oceania peoples and education—were always at the fore of OCIES leadership thinking.

As Oceania thought leaders, conference conveners saw OCIES as a relational community—a family. Hence, in preparing for the 2022 F2F annual conference, we were cognizant of the valuable ontological, epistemological, axiological and pedagogical linkages—the commons—between the past, the present and the future. Moreover, we were mindful of the relational and cooperative nature (particularly of our Indigenous worldviews and communities) and our shared futures. Our chosen conference theme, 'Revisioning education in Oceania: Walking backward into the future, together,' reflected these foundational understandings. We crafted a conference theme premised on a shared ontology, an integrated mindset and a collaborative perspective of our world, ourselves and of time. With this theme, we encouraged OCIES members and conference participants to be wise in their reflections about the past and courageous in their future aspirations.

For this Special Issue, we called for proposals based on the conference thematic categories, as follows:

1. The Past—Present issues, tensions and or lessons. We sought proposals to reflect on the Oceanic educational past and explore the tensions between the past and the present. Whatever the schooling/institutional level of research interest, disciplinary foci, research subject matter or educational ideals, this theme provided opportunities for submissions about past issues, experiences, performance, and insights, together with new insights and experiences of the present.

2. The Present—Future issues, tensions and or potentials. We called for proposals to include anticipations of Oceania's educational futures based on reflections on the past and people's intense connections with the present. We encouraged authors to explore the tensions between the present and our expectations about the not-yet-here. Whatever the schooling/institutional level of interest, disciplinary foci, research subject matter or educational ideals, this theme provided opportunities for papers about past-present issues, experiences, performance and insights, together with authors' anticipated and expected futures.

We accepted 12 proposals, representing a mix of empirical and theoretical papers. By the time authors submitted their full papers and blind reviews were undertaken, we were left with seven papers. All accepted papers met all required criteria.

Like other recent IEJ: CP Special Issues, the 2023 Issue is marked by the following key features and commitments. First, most authors are new and emerging researchers, some of whom are first-time authors. By intentionally supporting New Generation OCIES members to publish, this affirms through enactment the OCIES commitment to the intentional socialisation of OCIES members and by contributing intellectually to this education community. Second, mentoring was central in our editorial minds and a consistent commitment in all aspects of the production of this Issue. Throughout the entire process of publication, experienced joint authors, the Special Issue administrator, IEJ: CP technical staff, manuscript reviewers and the Special Issue co-editors have played their roles as mentors to the authors and affirmation of their work. Third, a team of OCIES experts have offered service competently and generously towards the publication of this Special Issue, thereby demonstrating the OCIES members' commitment to agency, stewardship of gifts and generosity of hearts. Hence, to the following colleagues, we offer our acknowledgement and appreciation for their valuable contributions: Laura van Peer, Special Issue administrator; Martyn Reynolds, Rebecca Spratt, Tepora Wright, and Adreanne Ormond, Manuscript reviewers; Philip Wing Keung Chan and Hongzhi Zhang, IEJ: CP Senior Editors; and Miriam Verbeek, Copy Editor.

SUMMARY OF PAPERS

In the language of the Community Voice article (Sanga, Reynolds & Ormond in this Issue) about conference as feasting, we offer the following summary outline of the articles in this Special Issue. We thank the authors for gifting their works to us. In turn, and in the spirit of 'conference as feasting', we pass on these gifts to you for connection, as exchange, for sharing and for your further distribution.

The first three articles tackle the theme of the Past—Present. First, Tim Baice of Auckland University argues that while conventional equity policies in higher education are focused on dismantling barriers and redressing inequalities that restrict the participation and success of students from historically excluded groups, such equity policies often contribute to the problems they seek to address. In a case study of his own university, the University of Auckland, Baice uses a Sāmoan *Manogi* (fragrance) framework to critique equity policies and discourses, offers deep insights into policy impacts on diverse students and proposes ways of re-framing considerations for collective rethinking and revisioning of equity in Oceania.

Second, Grace Rohoana of the Solomon Islands National University observes that Solomon Islands Education has shifted from its policy on basic education that promotes equitable access to quality basic education to one that prioritises high student enrolments to generate revenue. Offering a detailed analysis of this policy shift, its implications on quality education and financial viability, and the challenges posed by policy shift tensions, this study sought a balanced perspective from which policymakers, school leaders and education stakeholders might re-frame their policy responses.

Third, Meleana Koloto, an independent researcher, uses her Victoria University of Wellington PhD research to explore how Tongan families support and care for their members with *siva-tu'amelie* (special needs) education. Using a multi-layered approach to ensure safe spaces for participants, the study obtained rich, high-quality family stories. It generated strength-based perspectives on a subject often associated with negative connotations. Contrary to common notions of Tongan families viewing their members with *siva-tu'amelie* through a medical or religious lens, this study offers new framings on how Tongan society, educators and the education system might perceive individuals with *siva-tu'amelie*.

The next two articles explore the theme of the Present–Future. First, Elizabeth Moore of Victoria University of Wellington delves into the innovative use of *pā'ina* (Hawaiian for the potluck) as a metaphor to reimagine a research approach that fosters collective understanding between non-Indigenous knowledge seekers and Indigenous knowledge guardians in Indigenous knowledge contexts. Exploratory and courageous, this paper is assertive in its pursuit to offer ways of undertaking respectful and honouring research relationships and encounters. The study argues for embracing the broader research context, promoting reciprocal and respectful relationships, assuming complexities and drawing from Oceanic principles such as *vā/va/wā* in negotiating research spaces in ways that support harmony and balance within relationships. The study offers the *pā'ina* metaphor as a potentially transformative approach for respectful and inclusive research with Indigenous communities.

The second article in this thematic category is by a team of authors: Dominique Mahuri (University of the South Pacific), Vilive Cagivinaka (Fiji National University), Sereima Baleisomi (Fiji National University), Onelau Faamoemoe Soti (National University of Samoa), and their mentor Martyn Reynolds (Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington). Based on a *tok stori* (Melanesian oral form) session by the authors on ‘quality education’ at the OCIES 2022 F2F Conference at the Fiji National University, this article highlights the perspectives on the dynamics of quality education as seen from frontline educators from diverse Pacific settings. The woven discussion includes explorations of tensions between colonial pasts and the present and points to hopeful expectations about the not-yet-here. The resultant mat balances prevalent notions of quality that flow from distant places into Pacific settings with locally derived positional understandings and, in so doing, offers contextual flesh and currency to some of the key concepts valued by regional initiatives.

In the final category, two articles have overlapping contents in the theme of the Present–Future and that of the Present–Past. The first is by Dominique Mahuri (University of the South Pacific and Principal, Santos East School, Vanuatu), Jeremy Dorovolomo (University of the South Pacific, Fiji) and Amton Mwarakurmes (University of the South Pacific, Vanuatu). In this study, Mahuri and his mentors Dorovolomo and Mwarakurmes investigate the common and relevant Issue of the relationship between student academic

(school) achievement and sociocultural factors. Based on their research of Pentecost Island teachers in Vanuatu, the study uses Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning to explore their study questions. The study noted the complexities of contexts, with their intertwining systems of collective behaviours and simultaneous interactions within environments. The study showed that in this Vanuatu example, sociocultural factors affecting academic achievement included kava as a sociocultural keystone, religious responsibilities of community members, domestic commitments towards families and wider communities and traditional formalities such as *bolololi* (Traditional pig-killing ceremony), *mateana* (funerary ceremonies) and *lagiana* (marriage). The study concludes that local communities influence the relationships between teaching, learning and student success. This paper offers ways of making teaching culturally inclusive, assisting students to acquire important communal values, maintain their spiritual and cultural duties and living sustainably with their environments while adhering to the virtues of national citizenship and governance. The second of this category is by Afrada Shah of the Fiji National University. In this Fiji case study, Shah explores the lived experiences of Fiji students during the COVID-19 global pandemic using an online reflective assessment. Covering issues of online study, student reflections and pandemic-related experiences, this study offers insights for Oceania educators as we gaze into our educational futures. This study supports Sustainable Development Goal 4, confirming that students experienced challenges that were financial, learning-related, lifestyle-oriented and related to mental health. The study also offers nuanced Fiji student experiences, reflecting the local sociocultural context. For future thinking, this study offers ideas related to reviving traditional systems (*veisa*, Fijian barter system), strengthening social connections using technology and ways of applying values, such as resilience and genuine care in times of pandemic crises.

Finally, in this Special Issue, in the Community Voice section, Sanga, Reynolds and Ormond offer readers a gift, stirring our reimaginings of our conferences, gatherings and OCIES community.

It is with much delight that we now recommend these articles as gifts to you for your intellectual feasting.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA

Authors and readers are free to copy, display and distribute this article with no changes, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives (IEJ: CP), and the same license applies. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. The IEJ: CP is published by the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (formerly ANZCIES) and Sydney Open Access Journals at the University of Sydney. Articles are indexed in ERIC, Scimago Journal (SJR)Ranking / SCOPUS. The IEJ:CP is a member of the Free Journal Network: <https://freejournals.org/>

Join the IEJ: CP and OCIES Facebook community at Oceania Comparative and International Education Society, and Twitter: @OceaniaCIES

Su'esu'e manogi: Conceptualising the fragrances of equity in higher education: A case study from Oceania

Tim Baice

The University of Auckland, New Zealand: t.baice@auckland.ac.nz

Equity policies in higher education are focused on dismantling barriers and redressing inequalities that restrict the participation and success of students from historically excluded groups. In some universities across Oceania, 'underrepresented' includes students of Pacific heritage alongside students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, rural areas, students with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ students. Despite good intentions, equity policies can often contribute to the problems they seek to address with an overt focus on equity groups and identities. Little attention is directed towards reviewing the education ecosystems that create barriers to higher education. My research adopts an Indigenous Pacific (Sāmoan) framework, 'Su'esu'e manogi, in search of fragrances' as a conceptual tool to critically analyse and understand historical and contemporary manogi (fragrances) that frame and inform current equity policies and discourses in Oceania. Manogi is used as a metaphor to represent the worldviews, theories and ideologies that underpin equity policies and discourses. Using a case study, I present the findings of research that reviewed equity policies and discourses at the University of Auckland and their implications for Pacific learners. I found a series of tensions and disharmonies in manogi based on the interpretation of equity subscribed to by the institution. Equity policy discourses that are disparaging produce disharmony and unpleasant pungent manogi when they are based on deficit framing and are relegated to the periphery of higher education priorities. Equity policy discourses that are harmonious and produce sweet aromatic manogi for Pacific students are framed by commitments to social justice and sustainable development, recognise the principle of difference and the impact of structural factors on achievement. Drawing on the inspiration of the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for Pacific Peoples) and 'Revisioning education in Oceania: Walking backwards into the future together', my research presents timely considerations for collective rethinking and revisioning of equity in Oceania.

Keywords: Pacific education; higher education; equity policy.

INTRODUCTION

The individual and societal benefits of higher education are considerable, including increased earning potential, improved health outcomes and greater life satisfaction. Higher education is fundamental to global sustainable development, as enshrined in Goal 4 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. However, despite the universal recognition of its importance, higher education for some communities remains elusive. Students from historically excluded backgrounds face various obstacles that prevent access or undermine successful outcomes, such as the financial costs of higher education, discrimination and bias. Other inequities stem from the 'historical, cultural and epistemological foundations of modern higher education systems, which are essentially shaped by their colonial origin and Eurocentric biases' (Ramphele, 2023, p. 13). Equity policies in higher education are developed to address the obstacles that prevent access and successful outcomes for historically excluded groups. While most

conceptualisations of equity incorporate principles of inclusion, social justice and equal opportunities, there is no universal definition. Moreover, some understandings of equity can be underpinned by problematic educational ideologies that often undermine equity aspirations (Baice, 2021).

Although a sizeable body of international research critically explores equity policies in higher education, there is limited research that problematises equity from Indigenous Pacific perspectives. Drawing on the philosophy of Sāmoan scholar, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Tupuola Tufuga Efi, my research adopted a Sāmoan framework, '*Su'esu'e manogi*, in search of fragrances' as a conceptual tool to critically analyse ideologies and worldviews that shape equity policies and discourses at the University of Auckland. *Manogi* (fragrance) serves as a metaphor to represent the worldviews, theories and ideologies that underpin equity policies and discourses. A study of fragrances is an alternative approach to the design of qualitative research, one that uses a cultural metaphor to engage in educational discourse and reclaim Pacific cultures and ways of thinking and knowing (Sanga, 2013). I am interested in revealing sweet-smelling fragrant scents representing positive outcomes for Pacific learners and deciphering these from pungent and foul scents that are disparaging. A Sāmoan poststructuralist discourse analysis (Galuvao, 2016) was used to uncover thematic manogi from global, national, and institutional equity policies and discourses that perfume higher education to understand their implications for Pacific learners. Achieving equity in the educational attainment of Pacific tertiary students is outlined as a key objective in the mission statements or charters of universities in Aotearoa (Nakhid, 2011). Although the number of Pacific students accessing higher education has improved, parity of achievement has not been realised (Matapo & Baice, 2020).

A growing body of Pacific education research that problematises educational challenges in Aotearoa and the Pacific has evolved alongside an expanding body of Pacific research that integrates Pacific worldviews, values and methodologies. The recent proliferation of Pacific research is rooted in seminal works by Pacific scholars advocating for 'Indigenous knowledges against a backdrop of broader discourses concerning postcolonialism and self-determination' (Tualalelei & McCaffery, 2019, p. 190). In Pacific education, Pacific scholars developed the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for Pacific Peoples by Pacific Peoples (RPEIPP) in 2001. Central to RPEIPP is the Indigenisation of education in the Pacific, the privileging and honouring of Pacific knowledge systems and ways of being alongside global education values (Nabobo-Baba, 2013). Grounding my research in the legacy of RPEIPP resonates with the theme of this special issue: *Revisioning education in Oceania: Walking backwards into the future together*. By using a Sāmoan conceptual framework to make sense of equity in higher education, my research anticipates an educational future where conceptual understandings of equity in Oceania can be improved by drawing on Pacific knowledge. The following section considers the *manogi* of equity—the different fragrances that perfume definitions of equity in higher education literature.

EQUITY *MANOGI* IN THE LITERATURE

My search for conceptual clarity about equity found an array of definitions that scent and mark the concept in different ways. Although equity is a cherished goal, evidenced by its centrality in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Four, equity in higher education is a contested term in its meaning, understanding and practice (Barrow & Grant, 2019). Across the literature are varied conceptualisations of equity based on competing educational ideologies, resulting in a 'terminological vagueness' (Papastephanou, 2018, p. 210). Equity in higher

education is commonly defined as a means to achieve social justice, ensuring individuals are given equal opportunities to participate and succeed irrespective of their socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, religion or ability (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). Equity policies are positioned as solutions to address inequities, such as financial barriers and discrimination.

Further semantic ambiguity occurs when equity is conflated and used interchangeably with other educational ideals. For example, equality and equity are often used interchangeably even though they are not synonymous (Baice, 2021). Vavrus (2017) conveniently deciphers equality as ‘sameness and uniformity’, whereas equity recognises the need for differential allocation of resources and different types of support to different degrees (pp. 6-7).

While there is no universal definition of equity groups, Salmi and D’Addio (2021), drawing on a global sample of equity policies in higher education institutions, outlined a diversity of target equity groups where the most common examples include ‘individuals in the bottom income/wealth range, women, minorities (ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural) and people with disabilities’ (p. 49). Papastephanou (2018) distils two versions of equity: i) horizontal equity, which refers to the equal treatment of unequals and ii) vertical equity, the unequal treatment of unequals. Horizontal equity inaccurately assumes the ideal of political equality as an accomplished reality. Further, it assumes that individuals are equally placed to seize the benefits of equity irrespective of various existential conditions (Papastephanou, 2018). Vertical equity, likewise, promotes an overt focus on the natural ability of individuals, where academic success (and failure) is attributed to individual ability, bypassing sociocultural and political explications (Papastephanou, 2018). Vertical or affirmative equity promotes social justice but does little to critique and reform the educational and societal ecosystems that produce inequities. However, transformative conceptualisations of equity call out structures that produce inequities in higher education (Papastephanou, 2018). The terminological vagueness across higher education literature makes it unclear what version of ‘equity’ equity policies in higher education subscribe to.

POLICIES AS TOOLS OF GOVERNANCE

Policies permeate all aspects of life, shaping and influencing how we act and what we do. A poststructuralist understanding of policy draws on the Foucauldian theory of discourse to describe policy as a form of discourse, drawing attention to how ‘policies exercise power through a production of truth and knowledge’ (Ball, 1993, p. 14). Understanding policy as discourse reveals the ‘constitutive’ nature of policies, where rules and regulations are underpinned by a range of specific types of knowledge (professional, expert, cultural) that determine how we produce the kinds of subject identities we are encouraged to become (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Policies (and the institutions that develop them) determine institutional order and further shape how order is maintained through the active categorisation of people, places and things into governable subjects, places and objects (Shore & Wright, 2003). A core focus of policies is addressing specific problems, problematisations that ‘produce problems as particular types of problems’ (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 6). Policies cannot work unless they problematise their territories, creating and identifying problems, which policies then work towards fixing (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). A growing focus in the study of policy treats policy as a cultural phenomenon, which allows for greater reflection on the way policy has become an ‘increasingly central concept and instrument in the organization of contemporary societies’ (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 7). As social and cultural constructs, policies require careful and critical scrutiny to ascertain their stated and unstated meanings. In this way, policies are infused

with a range of diverse and sometimes competing *manogi*, requiring careful consideration by researchers and institutions alike.

EQUITY AND PACIFIC LEARNERS

Pacific peoples¹ are the third largest ethnic minority group in Aotearoa New Zealand, representing 8% of the population (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). Pacific peoples have a long history of connection with Aotearoa, including ancestral *whanauga*² ties with Māori through colonialism and featuring a more recent history of large-scale labour migration that has contributed to their status as a priority group in government policy. Socioeconomic concerns for Pacific peoples have remained enduring challenges, including an over-representation among the unemployed, lower-skilled workers and low-income earners (Nakhid, 2011). In education, successive targeted government policies in Aotearoa New Zealand, between 1996 and the present, have been directed towards improving the participation and successful outcomes of Pacific learners as a priority group. Tongati'o (1998) raised concerns about low levels of achievement resulting from 'contextual, systemic, and structural difficulties faced by Pacific communities in schools and within the broader community' (p. 134), which continue to affect educational achievement for Pacific peoples today, despite having the highest of educational aspirations. In higher education, despite growth in the overall participation rate, the achievement levels of Pacific students fall below national benchmarks. In addition to ongoing socioeconomic challenges, the impacts of monocultural curriculum and organisational structures have marginalised Pacific knowledge systems and cultures. Pacific students have also been marginalised by inequitable classroom practices, cross-cultural misunderstandings, deficit theorising and low teacher expectations (Matapo & Baice, 2020).

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

My researcher positionality is heavily shaped by my experiences as an equity practitioner and advocate for Pacific peoples at the university. In my time at the university, I encountered a series of tensions between discourses of equity and practices at the coal face. My role as the 'Pasifika Success Coordinator' is not traditional. Roles like mine were created to provide academic and pastoral support to Pacific learners to contribute to university and government goals of lifting Pacific students' academic achievement, retention and completion rates. Despite my role and a plethora of targeted academic support programmes across the university, the parity gap continues. This is one of the enduring tensions I've encountered in my work. The second tension was the discrepancy between the framing of equity in higher education policy and how it was practised at the grassroots level. On the one hand, in the equity policy, I saw how Pacific learners were framed, devoid of any references to Pacific ways of knowing, being and doing. On the other hand, incorporating Pacific ways of knowing, being and doing is fundamental to my outreach and engagement with Pacific students. Roles and programmes like mine are infused with Pacific cultural values and practices to ensure they are culturally relevant and sustaining for Pacific learners, leading to an enhanced sense of belonging and well-being (Si'ilata, 2014). Altogether, such tensions represent disharmony, a dilemma that led to feelings

¹ An umbrella term coined by Government ministries in New Zealand to describe migrants from the Pacific region and their descendants.

² Māori: (noun) relative, relation, kin, blood relation.

of guilt and frustration in my inability to reconcile what appeared to be irreconcilable differences.

Drawing inspiration from the ‘rethinking’ and ‘reversioning’ espoused by RPEIPP, I dug deeper into the ‘Sāmoan Indigenous Reference’ articulated by Tui Atua as the body of knowledge that comprises distinctive Sāmoan ways of knowing, being and doing. I was spurred on by Tui Atua’s (2009b) provocation to all Sāmoan and Pacific peoples to continually engage in a search for meaning, nuance and metaphor ‘to find substance and establish context in our dialogue with our ancestors, with ourselves and with other cultures (Tui Atua, 2009a, p. 91). To make sense of these tensions between discourses and practices, ideals and realities, I drew on Va’ai and Casmira’s (2017) theorisation of *itulagi* (literally side of heaven – worldviews) and began thinking about how to reconcile diverse sets of *itulagi* that at first glance appear to be irreconcilable – or at least, did not appear to be in dialogue with one another. My research blends a Sāmoan (Pacific) *itulagi* and conventional (Western) *itulagi* deliberately as part of the RPEIPP movement to lessen the epistemological dominance of Western hegemonic discourses of education and create equal space for Indigenous knowledges and worldviews (Vaai & Casimara, 2017). To make sense of diverse sets of *itulagi*, I used the metaphor of *manogi* (fragrance) to represent discourses, ideals, worldviews and practices and began forming my conceptual framework around a cultural idea of fragrance, thus engaging in a challenge to achieve balance, a harmony of *manogi*.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: *SU’ESU’E MANOGI*

The study of fragrances is an alternative approach to the design of qualitative research, one that draws heavily on Sāmoan (Pacific) indigenous knowledge to frame and guide the research. I do this following a technique used by Sāmoans (and others) who, for generations, have used metaphors as part of proverbial expressions to transmit important social messages that promote critical and reflexive thinking. Metaphors convey complex meanings at many levels, allowing knowledges to be repurposed as a metaphorical vehicle to convey new or alternative meanings (Carter & Pitcher, 2010). Moreover, they can help people to remember a point in a way that a simple statement of fact does not.

I appreciate the way Tui Atua (2009b) articulated the power of allusions, allegory and metaphors in the Sāmoan mind as:

[L]inguistic tools that have the ability to make meaning, to privilege beauty, relatedness and keep the sacredness of the other, whilst scientific discourse privileges precision and evidence, often to the detriment of beauty, relatedness and intellectual titillation. The challenge. . . lies in how to bring together the objectives of allusive and allegorical discussion with the best of science. (p. 71)

I used a Sāmoan conceptual framework captured in the proverbial expression *Su’esu’e Manogi* (in search of fragrance). Scent has a powerful cultural resonance for Sāmoans, where people, places and memories are associated with sweet aromas. *Manogi* provides ‘powerful tools for evoking feelings, image-filled messages about social behaviour and appropriate conduct’ (Suaalii-Sauni et al., 2009, p. 2). Tui Atua (2009b) referred to the prevalence of *manogi* within the Sāmoan indigenous reference as the ‘Sāmoan culture of fragrances’ illustrating the socio-cultural significance of fragrances by which they serve as metaphors that speak to social and environmental connections and connectedness, denoting a relational *vā* between humans and the environment. With Samoa being traditionally an oral culture, much of the meaning, nuance and metaphor of Samoan culture is captured in the language (Tui Atua, 2009c). His Highness highlights this by sharing:

Su'esu'e manogi: *Conceptualising the fragrances of equity in higher education: A case study from Oceania*

[I]n the Sāmoan language, the products of nature offer a wide and colourful repertoire of metaphors for the yearnings of life and expressions of hope. To speak of a Sāmoan fragrance culture is to speak of the fragrances of our natural environment that inform, define, enhance and lift our connections with and between ourselves and our environment. (Tui Atua, 2009d, p. 9)

Su'esu'e implies a purposive search for a deeper understanding of 'meaning, nuance, and metaphor' (Tui Atua, 2009b). In full, the proverb reads: 'Su'esu'e manogi e su'i ai lau 'ula, fatu ai lou titi aua ou faiva malo (Searching for fragrances to fashion a garland and skirt, to gird the pursuit of your political aims)' (Clifford, 1986, as cited in Suaalii-Sauni et al., 2009, p. 1). The expression is:

Offered by one's supporters to bolster the spirit, a reminder that one never searches for great heights alone; they go with the blessing and prayers of those close to them. (Suaalii-Sauni, 2009, p. 1)

Although the proverbial expression evokes sweet scents that are balanced and in harmony with one another, Tui Atua also warns of the negative potency of fragrances in which there is a lack of balance or disharmony. In his efforts to warn the Government of Samoa of the dangers of becoming a safe haven for money laundering and offshore bank accounts, Tui Atua (2000) drew on the pungent metaphor of pig shit as a tool to criticise the Government's inaction. In response to those who saw such risks as opportunities for further investment in Samoa, Tui Atua responded with an old Samoan expression that, although could be considered crude, offered the familiarity of the image and scent 'E te fiu e uu le tae puaa, e pipilo a,' meaning, 'No matter how often you perfume pig-shit, it will always stink like pig-shit' (Tui Atua, 2000, p. 106).

The tension in the balance and harmony of fragrances can also be seen in discourses of equity that remain contingent on dominant forms of knowledge, alienating alternative forms of cultural knowledge (Ahmed, 2012). Despite what the positive perfumery discourses of equity profess, the reality of enduring disparities and the tensions I have personally encountered in my line of work highlights a disharmony riddled with tensions and contradictions. In the Sāmoan mind, when disharmony arises, harmony must be restored (Tui Atua, 2009c).

TOFĀ'A'ANOLASI: POSTSTRUCTURALIST POLICY DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

To complement my use of a Sāmoan conceptual framework, I drew on Galuvao's (2016) conceptualisation of *Tofā'a'anolasi*, a Sāmoan method of poststructuralist policy discourse analysis. A poststructuralist policy discourse analysis includes the examination of (i) the process by which policy problems are defined, (ii) the influence of identity differences in the shaping of policy problems and solutions, and (iii) how policy as discourse not only reflects but also contributes to producing subjectivities and socio-political realities (Allan & Tolbert, 2019, p. 141). *Tofā'a'anolasi* is a compound term, each of the components of which has a deep and nuanced meaning:

Tofā means wisdom. The '*a'ano*' means *uiga maotua* (deep meaning), and the word *lasi* means *tele* (many). Hence, *Tofā'a'anolasi* is the 'wisdom to identify the many deep meanings of texts'. Deep thinking is, by its nature, critical as it opens the possibility that one may reject assumptions and conventions. It is a Sāmoan framework for investigating educational practices from the perspectives of Sāmoans. (Galuvao, 2018, p. 748).

I use *Tofā'a'anolasi* as a conceptual tool to 'read' and make sense of *manogi*, understand deeper meaning, identify intended and unintended consequences, and decipher between sweet fragrant

manogi from pungent ones and represent tensions and disharmony. Reconceptualising equity from a Sāmoan (Pacific) *itulagi* requires a careful balancing act, a balance of *manogi* to ensure a harmony of scents.

I adapted Galuvao's approach to include a broader focus on Pacific students in a higher education context. The following questions guide the analysis of discourse using the *Tofa'a'anolasi*:

- How are Pacific peoples positioned in equity policy?
- What assumptions are made about Pacific peoples in equity policy?
- What are the implications of these assumptions for Pacific peoples?

I used a comprehensive sampling of documents to explore the equity policy³ and associated documents from the University of Auckland. I also reviewed policy proposals and other related documents to equity policy to provide a broader macro perspective that acknowledges the multidimensional and complex factors that shape and impact education policy (Galuvao, 2016). The dataset included equity policies and discourses from the New Zealand tertiary sector and the New Zealand Government. Together, the documents represent contemporary *manogi* of equity that frame the way equity is understood and practised in higher education. The University of Auckland is New Zealand's largest public research university and has traditionally had the highest proportion of Pacific tertiary learners. Pacific students constituted 11% of the total student body in 2020, but Pacific pass rates are 8% lower than the overall domestic pass rate (Waipapa Taumata Rau, The University of Auckland, 2022).

UNCOVERING *MANOGI*: PRESENTING HARMONIES AND DISHARMONIES. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.

By interrogating the unquestioned assumptions of policy problems, we start to understand the varied and often conflicting ways equity is understood. We then begin to understand what consequences this understanding has for constructing identities and subjectivities in equity policies. This is primarily a result of divergent interpretations of equity in higher education policies based on particular ideologies and values imposed on education. I found three tensions (disharmonies) in *manogi* across the data: i) Equity for all, ii) Equity and parity, iii) Equity as a challenging priority. The presentation of thematic commonalities across the dataset highlights the interconnections between sectors and how discourses at one level shape and impact equity policy discourses at other levels. Below, each theme represents one of the three key tensions in the understanding and practice of equity in education policies and institutions.

Thematic tensions

Equity for all

A key tension in *manogi* identified in the dataset is the shift from equity as a means to redress specific challenges for targeted groups of students (target equity learners) to an understanding of equity as a corrective measure applied to all who encounter obstacles in their journeys in higher education. The shift evident here is based on the problematic nature of sameness that

³ The reference to the University of Auckland Equity policy refers to the policy as it was in 2021 at the time of this study. In 2022, the Equity policy was reviewed to reflect *Taumata Teitei*, the University's strategic plan. The 2022 policy was not reviewed as part of this research.

equity policies promote based on vertical understandings of the concept of equity (Papastephanou, 2018).

The following quote is an example of when the distinctive nature of equity is subsumed into discourses of equality and equal opportunities based on the assumption that once equity of access is achieved, all learners have the same opportunities to succeed:

All members of the University are to support equitable access, participation, engagement and **success for all staff members and students, including** Māori as well as those from equity groups. (emphasis added) (University of Auckland, 2017a, p. 2)

While equity policies are developed to support priority populations who have experienced various obstacles in accessing and succeeding in higher education, the clarity and purpose of equity policies can be rendered ambiguous when positioned alongside references to success for all (Baice, 2021).

The positioning of equity in a normative framework—that applies equally to all—undermines the ability of governments and higher education institutions to make strategic improvements in equity outcomes for priority populations (Baice, 2021). This is because discourses of equity that promote sameness conceal stark differences between students, shifting the focus away from a necessary 'unequal treatment of unequals'. Equity policies should promote fairness, but not at the expense of target equity groups (Nakhid, 2011).

Equity and parity

The second key tension in *manogi* is using parity to measure equity learners' achievements against an idealised standard. Parity is premised on promoting a state of sameness that cannot be achieved realistically by students from different backgrounds with varying levels of access to the capital needed to succeed in systems that remain unchanged. The measurement of achievement in higher education institutions globally has been criticised as an unreliable indicator of an institution's performance in educating students, given the measures are rarely adjusted for differences in the makeup of student cohorts (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2017). Published performance data are not adjusted for the diverse characteristics of students that shape and frame their educational experiences and outcomes. In equity policy discourses, Pacific and other equity learners' achievements at the University of Auckland are measured against an idealised student (New Zealand European Pakeha).

The fundamental aims of the parity targets are for Pasifika learners to reach appropriately benchmarked participation rates and obtain (at least) parity of educational achievement with non-Pasifika learners. The achievement parity targets (measured using course/credit and qualification/programme completion rates) are benchmarked to the achievement of non-Pasifika within each provider. (Tertiary Education Commission, 2017, p. 11)

The concept of parity requires further conceptual and theoretical clarification because it fails to consider student differences in structural positionings, obstacles experienced and varying degrees of access to different forms of capital and capabilities (Baice, 2021). M. Reynolds (personal communication, 22 September 2023) suggests that while seeking parity is a useful indicator of inequitable achievement, it is not a useful goal as it limits Pacific ambition to sameness and subtly defines what counts as achievement, leaving little room for alternatives.

Equity a challenging priority

Although equity appears as a key priority, it is often structurally positioned as secondary to the University's business operations: generating income, being fiscally responsible and improving international rankings. The third key tension in *manogi* explored here is the positioning of equity as a domestic challenge contrasted against commitments to improving international student intake and global rankings, framed as positive areas of strength for the University.

To support the pursuit of equitable outcomes for Pacific students in higher education, most universities in New Zealand rely on equity funding from the Tertiary Education Commission, a dedicated pool of government funding to improve participation in and achievement at higher levels of tertiary education. Equity funding is a key feature of the New Zealand education system that attempts to ameliorate inequality (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2017). However, government spending on equity has been insufficient to systematically provide targeted support to equity group learners (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2017). Equally problematic is the reliance of universities on a limited pool of government funds to support the success of their students. The level of institutional resources and investments dedicated to achieving equity goals was unclear in my review of equity policy. The limited nature of equity funding does little to incentivise higher education institutions to deliver better outcomes for equity group learners.

With the same funding per student (regardless of need) and institutions facing major funding pressures overall, universities are forced to limit how much support they can afford to offer individual students – regardless of the potential wider societal benefits of helping these students succeed. (Universities New Zealand, 2018, p. 9)

Recognising our fiscal challenge: We must also be mindful of our commitment to meeting our aspirations for Māori and for equity groups with their unique challenges while being fiscally responsible. (University of Auckland, 2017b, p. 17)

The substantial reliance on limited funding from the Government to finance the pursuit of equitable outcomes within universities undermines the prominence of equity as a critical priority for universities to achieve. The unintentional discursive consequence here is that the prioritisation of equity, while admirable, is subject to and is conflicted by other priorities and the fiscal limitations of the sector.

The following section outlines the *manogi* that frame the construction of equity learner identities in equity policies and discourses.

EQUITY LEARNER IDENTITIES

Tensions and disharmonies of *manogi* present in defining equity have created further tensions and disharmonies in constructing equity learner identities in equity policy and discourses. Policy efforts to promote equity for Pacific students rely heavily upon discourses reinforcing their portrayal as 'disadvantaged learners'. Two fundamental tensions emerged from the findings: a) the uncritical use of the concept of equity in policy discourses and b) the lack of problematising equity in the context in which it is being used. Both tensions are problematic, given concepts of equity are value-laden political processes informed by the hegemonic normative standards of a given organisation/society (Fowler, 2013). The analysis of documents revealed descriptions of Pacific students as at-risk of poor achievement, having inadequate preparation due to prior schooling and low socioeconomic statuses alongside enduring marginalisation, discrimination and harassment in their academic studies.

Su'esu'e manogi: *Conceptualising the fragrances of equity in higher education: A case study from Oceania*

Social inequality: inequality of income in NZ higher than OECD average. Lower incomes are more concentrated amongst Māori and Pacific. (University of Auckland, 2014, p. 1)

Insufficient and inappropriate academic preparation among Pacific students, particularly in STEM subject areas influences low rates of participation and achievement. (University of Auckland, 2017b, p. 12)

The deficit framing of Pacific learners in education has been studied extensively where such framing contributes negatively to efforts devoted to improving academic success for Pacific learners (Chu, Glasgow, et al., 2013; Chu, Abella, et al., 2013; Hunter et al., 2016; Matapo & Baice, 2020). Additionally, extensive research interrogates how success and achievement are defined in narrow and linear ways, which fail to incorporate broader/alternative definitions and measurements (Koloto, 2021; Nakhid, 2011; Si'ilata, 2014). A common assumption of deficit framing is that accountability for issues of poor participation and achievement lies solely with the communities they affect. Often, little attention is directed at critiquing the impact of educational policies, governance and organisational structures.

The deficit framing of equity learners was further complicated by a sense of dualism in the construction and designation of identities and subjectivities in equity policies that did not problematise the power relations they established (Allan, 2010). The duality reveals the prominence of binary oppositions in policies, 'us' (general students) versus 'them' (equity priority learners), where hierarchies are reflected and reinscribed (Allan, 2010). This tension occurs when one group serves as the modelled ideal in which the 'other' is defined negatively (in this research, Pakeha and Pacific). The structural positional embedding of binary oppositions remains mostly unacknowledged and unquestioned in educational policies (Allan, 2010; Iverson, 2010). The problem with deficit framing and its discursive association with Pacific students is that the frames become fixed and naturalised identities rarely critiqued and examined within the policymaking process. Moreover, deficit framing shapes the staff's deficit treatment and understanding of Pacific students (Matapo & Baice, 2020).

A close examination of discourses in the sector highlights the pervasiveness of deficit framing of Pacific learners in New Zealand.

Pasifika participation and achievement also being an issue at all levels and dragging down averages. (Universities New Zealand, 2018, p. 1)

The pervasiveness of deficit framing of Pacific learners across the sector is an unintended consequence of equity policies and discourses by Government. Some equity policies and discourses at the government level consistently construct Pacific learners as non-autonomous, non-agentic subjects (Baice, 2021). Evident in the language across government policy is a sense of Pacific learners and their communities as vulnerable and whose learning is susceptible to a range of external circumstances and threats. Examples include:

Ensuring these needs are met is a priority so that Pacific learners and families are ready and able to learn (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 22)

We'll know we have been successful when: Pacific learners and families are free from racism and discrimination in education; Pacific learners and their families feel accepted and included; Cultural safety; Caring, collaborative, inclusive learning communities; Learning environments that value cultures, faith and beliefs. (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 12)

The University of Auckland's equity policy references ensuring safe, inclusive and equitable work and study environments. The policy defines inclusion as including everyone and not excluding any part of society. Yet, further on in the policy statement and the guidelines, equity

initiatives are directed only at those with the requisite talent and potential to succeed in a university with a high international standing:

The University recognises that equity will enhance its national and international reputation. This commitment to equity outcomes will attract, retain and support talented people to achieve their potential. This will benefit the creative and intellectual life of the University, and support engagement with the University's diverse communities and stakeholders. (University of Auckland, 2017, p. 1)

Discourses of institutional excellence evident in aspirations for enhancing talent, success for those with potential, and the emphasis on global positioning (university rankings) contribute to understanding Pacific students as commodities who possess an economic value that can enhance the University's reputation (via the achievement of equity outcomes) and achieve government priorities (ensure that the workforce is broadly representative of society). The tension in *mangoi* evident here is one between higher education as a public good that enables the development of capacities and capabilities of individuals and their communities versus criticisms of a neo-liberalisation business model of higher education. The consumer/commodity identity overshadows a focus on students' political agency and their role as catalysts for change, which is reoriented from its social justice origins to change achieved through the delivery of greater market choice and competition (Wright & Rapper, 2020). The following section considers the implications for higher education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN OCEANIA

The findings of this study show there is much work to be done in the conceptual and theoretical clarification, understanding and defining of equity within equity policies and discourses to ensure a shift from affirmative to transformative understandings and practices of equity (Talbert, 2010). This shift is necessary to challenge the discursive framing and dominant view of Pacific students as 'at risk'. One of the ongoing challenges here is how educators and policymakers in Oceania describe genuine challenges for some students while avoiding the continued promulgation of a singular narrative of Pacific students as 'at-risk' with specific needs for safety and support (Talbert, 2010). The challenge, then, is ensuring there are balanced approaches, an active harmonising of *manogi* underpinned by a shift on the focus of equity discourses and policies from diagnosing the deficiencies of individuals to calling out the structures that create barriers. Although, as Nakhid (2011) contends, the challenge within any institution is that such structures are endemic and 'made invisible by institutionalisation, making their practices difficult to disrupt' (p. 546). Using Pacific knowledges and Pacific research methods to identify, unpack and reconceptualise deeply ingrained educational ideals and structures is one way researchers in Oceania engage with transformative rethinking (Sanga, 2013).

Equity policy discourses that are harmonious and produce sweet aromatic *manogi* for Pacific students are those that are clearly framed by commitments to social justice and sustainable development, recognise the principle of difference and the impact of structural factors on achievement, and are strategically funded at the highest levels of government/institutions. Taken together, this set of *manogi* is culturally sustaining for Pacific students because they represent equity discourses that are responsive to context-specific positionality and dynamics and hint towards the transformation of structures (social, economic, political) as part of the achievement of equity. Equity policy discourses that are disparaging and produce disharmony and unpleasant pungent *manogi* are based on deficit models and deficit framing, relegated to the periphery of higher education priorities, partially funded, exclusively reliant on government

funding, discursively framed as government priorities or statutory obligations and reduces students to commodities within a broader economic focus.

CONCLUSION

As an educational concept and ideal, equity in higher education is ambiguous and lacks conceptual and theoretical clarity. In my attempt to make sense of equity in Oceania, I recast equity policies and discourses as *manogi* (fragrances) to make sense of their distinctive scents, to further understand how they perfume higher education and shape discursive realities for Pacific learners in Aotearoa. I found a series of *manogi* that were mainly pungent and disparaging, and further, I draw attention to ways in which harmony (a balance of sweet *Manogi*) can be achieved. A re-conceptualisation of equity in Oceania is required to ensure that it resonates with and draws on Pacific knowledges to improve our conceptual understandings and practices of equity. Reconceptualising equity and restoring harmony in *manogi* must begin with a commitment to discursive equity—to the search for more precision in the defining and understanding of equity in education through an exploration of alternative conceptualisations informed by diverse world views (Papastephanou, 2018).

'Revisioning education in Oceania' requires ongoing research grounded in the rethinking and reconceptualising espoused by RPEIPP. The Indigenisation of Pacific education calls for epistemological justice, a re-conceptualisation of educational ideologies that incorporates Pacific-rooted notions of knowledge, learning and wisdom (Thaman, 1997) alongside global educational values (Nabobo-Baba, 2013). Such a task requires ongoing *talanoa* and critical reflection with and between institutions and communities. By drawing on relational ontologies from Pacific cultures (*vā* (Sāmoan) *tauhi vā* (Tongan)) to reframe understandings of equity on relational approaches that centres connections to people in accordance with the context (time and place/land) (Koloto, 2021), validates and legitimises Pacific ways of being and doing (Thaman, 1997).

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.
- Allan, E. J. (2010). Feminist poststructuralism meets policy analysis: An overview. In E. J. Allan, S. V. D Iverson, & R. Ropers-Huilman (Eds.), *Reconstructing policy in higher education. Feminist poststructural perspectives* (pp. 11–36). Routledge.
- Allan, E. J., & Tolbert, A. R. (2019). Advancing social justice with policy discourse analysis. In K. Strunk, & L. A. Locke (Eds.), *Research methods for social justice and equity in education* (pp. 137–149). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bacchi, C., & Goodwin, S. (2016). *Poststructural policy analysis. A guide to practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Baice, T. (2021). *Su'esu'e manogi: Conceptualising equity in higher education policy* (Unpublished master's dissertation), The University of Auckland.
- Ball, S. J. (1993). What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 13(2), 10–17.

- Barrow, M., & Grant, B. (2019). The uneasy place of equity in higher education: Tracing its (in) significance in academic promotions. *Higher Education*, 78(1), 133–147.
- Carter, S., & Pitcher, R. (2010). Extended metaphors for pedagogy: Using sameness and difference. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(5), 579–589. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.491904>
- Chu, C., Glasgow, A., Rimoni, F., Hodis, M., & Meyer, L. H. (2013). *An analysis of recent Pasifika education research literature to inform improved outcomes for Pasifika learners*. Ministry of Education. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika_education/an-analysis-of-recent-pasifika-education-research-literature-to-inform-and-improve-outcomes-for-pasifika-learners
- Chu, C., Abella, I. S., & Paurini, S. (2013). *Educational practices that benefit Pacific learners in tertiary education*. Ako Aotearoa. <https://ako.ac.nz/assets/Knowledge-centre/NPF-10-001A-Pasifika-Learners-and-Success-in-Tertiary-Education/RESEARCH-REPORT-Educational-Practices-that-Benefit-Pacific-Learners-in-Tertiary-Education.pdf>
- Fowler, F. C. (2013). *Policy studies for educational leaders* (4th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Galuvao, A. (2016). *Filimānaia: A Sāmoan critique of standardised reading assessments in New Zealand primary schools* (Unpublished doctoral thesis), Auckland University of Technology. <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/10635>
- Galuvao, A. (2018). In search of Sāmoan research approaches to education: *Tofā'a'anolasi* and the Foucauldian toolbox. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(8), 747–757. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2016.1232645>
- Hunter, J., Hunter, R., Bills, T., Cheung, I., Hannant, B., Kritesh, K., & Lachaiya, R. (2016). Developing equity for Pāsifika learners within a New Zealand context: Attending to culture and values. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 51(2), 197–209. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-016-0059-7>
- Iverson, S. V. (2010). Producing diversity: A policy discourse analysis of diversity action plans. In E. J. Allan, S. V. D. Iverson, & R. Ropers-Huilman (Eds.), *Reconstructing policy in higher education: Feminist poststructural perspectives* (pp. 193–214). Routledge.
- Koloto, M. L. (2021). Contextualizing Tonga inclusive special education in a global inclusive education policy. *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 20(2), 39–51.
- Matapo, J., & Baice, T. (2020). The art of wayfinding Pasifika success. *MAI Journal*, 9(1), 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.20507/MAIJournal.2020.9.1.4>
- Ministry of Education. (2020). *Action plan for Pacific education 2020–2030*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/further-education/policies-and-strategies/tertiary-education-strategMinistry/>
- Nabobo-Baba, U. (2013). Transformations from within: Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative. The development of a movement for social justice and equity. *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 12(1), 82–97.

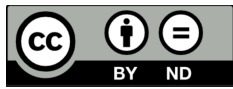
Su'esu'e manogi: *Conceptualising the fragrances of equity in higher education: A case study from Oceania*

- Nakhid, C. (2011). Equity for Māori and Pasifika students: The objectives and characteristics of equity committees in a New Zealand University. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(4), 532–550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2011.613703>
- New Zealand Productivity Commission. (2017). *New models of tertiary education*. <https://www.productivity.govt.nz/assets/Documents/2d561fce14/Final-report-Tertiary-Education.pdf>
- Papastephanou, M. (2018). Interrogating equity discourses: Conceptual considerations and overlooked complexities. In S. Carney & M. Schweisfurth (Eds.), *Equity in and through education. Changing contexts. Consequences and contestations* (pp. 209–222). Brill Sense.
- Ramphele, M. (2023). Preface. In J. Salmi (Ed.), *Transforming lives at the institutional level. Equity promotion initiatives across the world* (pp. 13–15). The Lumina Foundation.
- Salmi, J., & D'Addio, A. (2021). Policies for achieving inclusion in higher education. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 5(1), 47–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1835529>
- Salmi, J., & Bassett, R. M. (2014). The equity imperative in tertiary education: Promoting fairness and efficiency. *International Review of Education*, 60(3), 361–377.
- Sanga, K. (2013). Indigenous Pacific emerging educational metaphors. *The International Journal of Diversity in Education*, 12(4), 37–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205749804802402>
- Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2003). *Anthropology of policy: Perspectives on governance and power*. Routledge.
- Si'ilata, R. (2014). *Va'a Tele: Pasifika learners riding the success wave on linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogies* (Unpublished doctoral thesis), The University of Auckland. <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/23402>
- Statistics New Zealand. (2018). *Pacific peoples*. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/tools/2018-census-ethnic-group-summaries/pacific-peoples-not-further-defined>.
- Suaalii-Sauni, T., Tuagalu, I., Kirifi-Alai, T., & Fuamatu, N. (2009). *Su'esu'e manogi. In search of fragrance. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi and the Sāmoan indigenous reference*. National University of Sāmoa.
- Talbert, S. (2010). Developing students: Becoming someone but not anyone. In E. J. Allan, S. V. D. Iverson, & R. Ropers-Huilman (Eds.), *Reconstructing policy in higher education. Feminist poststructural perspectives* (pp. 111–128). Routledge.
- Tertiary Education Commission. (2017). *Pasifika operational strategy 2017-2020*. <https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Publications-and-others/7d0971ac24/Pasifika-Operational-Strategy-2017-2020.pdf>
- Thaman, K. H. (1997). Reclaiming a place: Towards a Pacific concept of education for cultural development. *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 106(2), 119–130.
- Tongati'o, L. (1998). *Ko e Ako 'a e Kakai Pasifika: Pacific Islands peoples' education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Towards the 21st century*. *New Zealand Review of Education*, 7, 133–150.

- Tualualelei, E., & McFall-McCaffery, J. (2019). The Pacific research paradigm. Opportunities and challenges. *MAI Journal*, 8(2), 188–204.
<https://doi.org/10.20507/MAIJournal.2019.8.2.7>
- Tui Atua, T. (2000). *Talanoaga na loma ma Ga'opo'a*. Pacific Printers & Publishers.
- Tui Atua. (2009a). In search of meaning, nuance, and metaphor in social policy. In T. Suaalii-Sauni, I. Tuagalu, T. Kirifi Alai, & N. Fuamatu (Eds.), *Su'esu'e manogi: In search of fragrance. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi and the Sāmoan Indigenous reference* (pp. 79–92). National University of Sāmoa.
- Tui Atua. (2009b). More on meaning, nuance and metaphor. in T. Suaalii-Sauni, I. Tuagalu, T. Kirifi Alai, & N. Fuamatu (Eds.), *Su'esu'e manogi. In search of fragrance. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi and the Sāmoan Indigenous reference* (pp. 70-78). National University of Sāmoa.
- Tui Atua. (2009c). In search of harmony: Peace in the Sāmoan Indigenous Religion. in T. Suaalii-Sauni, I. Tuagalu, T. Kirifi Alai, & N. Fuamatu (Eds.), *Su'esu'e manogi: In search of fragrance. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi and the Sāmoan Indigenous reference* (pp. 104–114). National University of Sāmoa.
- Tui Atua. (2009d, March 7). '*Tau mai na o le pua ula*': *Samoan fragrances in Samoan thought* [Keynote]. Pacific Thought Symposium, Waitakere City Council Chambers.
http://www.head-of-state-samoa.ws/speeches_pdf/Fragrance%20and%20Samoan%20Thought_7%20March%2009.pdf
- University of Auckland. (2014). *The University of Auckland equity cycle*.
<https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/auckland/about-us/equity-at-theuniversity/Equity%20Cycle%20-%202019.pdf>
- University of Auckland. (2017a). *Equity policy*.
<https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/theuniversity/how-university-works/policy-and-administration/equity/equity-policy-and-procedures.html>
- University of Auckland. (2017b). *Investment plan*.
<https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/auckland/about-us/the-university/official-publications/otherpublications/investing-plan/university-of-auckland-investment-plan-2017-2019-finalupdated.pdf>
- Universities New Zealand. (2018). *Achieving parity for Māori and Pasifika - the university sector view*.
<https://www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/sites/default/files/UNZ%20Parity%20Discussion%20Paper%20One%20%28Aug%202018%29.pdf>
- Va'ai, U. L., & Casimira, A. (2017). Introduction: A relational renaissance. In U. L. Va'ai & A. Casimira (Eds.), *Relational hermeneutics. Decolonising the mindset and the Pacific Itulagi* (pp. 1–16). The University of the South Pacific and the Pacific Theological College.
- Vavrus, F. K. (2017). From gap to debt: Rethinking equity metaphors in education. *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 16(3), 5–16.
- Waipapa Taumata Rau, (2022). *Academic audit: Self-review portfolio*. The University of Auckland.

Su'esu'e manogi: *Conceptualising the fragrances of equity in higher education: A case study from Oceania*

Wright, A. & Rapper, R. (2020). Contesting student identities: Making sense of students' positioning in higher education policy. In A. Bagshaw & D. Mcvitty (Eds.), *Influencing higher education policy. A professional guide to making an impact* (pp. 65–77). Routledge.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Authors and readers are free to copy, display and distribute this article with no changes, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives (IEJ: CP), and the same license applies. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at. The IEJ: CP is published by the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (formerly ANZCIES) and Sydney Open Access Journals at the University of Sydney. Articles are indexed in ERIC, Scimago Journal (SJR)Ranking / SCOPUS. The IEJ:CP is a member of the Free Journal Network: Join the IEJ: CP and OCIES Facebook community at Oceania Comparative and International Education Society, and Twitter: @OceaniaCIES

Shifting policy perspectives and practices: From access to basic education to prioritising revenue collection

Grace Rohoana

Solomon Islands National University: grace.rohoana@sinu.edu.sb

School leaders in the Solomon Islands have shifted away from the basic education policy that promotes equitable access to quality basic education to practices that target high enrolment to generate revenue. This research highlights the implications of this shift and its impact on quality education. It aims to find the balance between the school's financial viability and the imperative to provide equitable and quality education for all children. The research examined the following questions: 1) What are the different types of fees charged for educating a child in the Solomon Islands? 2) Are schools enrolling students in numbers that match the infrastructure and human resources available locally? 3) Are the grants provided by the government adequate to administer schools? The significance of the study lies in its potential to inform education policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders about the consequences of this changing agenda. Parent's experiences of fees charged, school children's and teacher's experiences on the impacts of high enrolments are explored. School Leaders' rationale for charging different types of fees was sought. Twelve participants were involved in this research. Data collected via tok stori were recorded and subsequently transcribed, qualitatively analysed and thematically organised. Data showed that schools in the capital, Honiara, experienced high school enrolment, putting pressure on the limited infrastructure and overloading teachers. Apart from normal fees, schools charged fees for registration, school development, church programs, parent contributions and student transfers. The study provides important insights into the challenges posed by the shifting perspectives and practices towards prioritising revenue collection over access through increased student enrolment

Keywords: tok stori; practitioners; school fees; equity, access

INTRODUCTION

Increasing access to quality basic education for all children remains an educational priority for the Solomon Islands as a nation. The Education Framework 2016-2030, National Education Action Plan 2016-2026, the Fee-Free Education Policy 2009, the Grant Policy 2010 and the School Infrastructure Policy 2010 provided the direction for actions to implement the internationally agreed goals for universal basic education, captured in *Education for All* (UNESCO Bangkok, 1990). Basic education in the Solomon Islands is defined as the level of education from primary grade 1 to year 9 secondary level (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, n.d.). However, schools seemed to have deviated from the intended aims of access and (FFE) to increasingly focus on enrolling more students and collecting revenue. This research used Rationale Choice Theory to examine the reasons underlining the shift by school leaders. This article reports on the research results, identifying the impact of the change in school practices on teachers, students and parents and establishing why school leaders have deviated from government policies guiding access.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders about the complexities and consequences of shifting priorities in the education

sector. By providing a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities, the study can contribute to formulating more effective and sustainable education policies, ultimately benefiting the children of the Solomon Islands and potentially influencing educational practices in similar contexts.

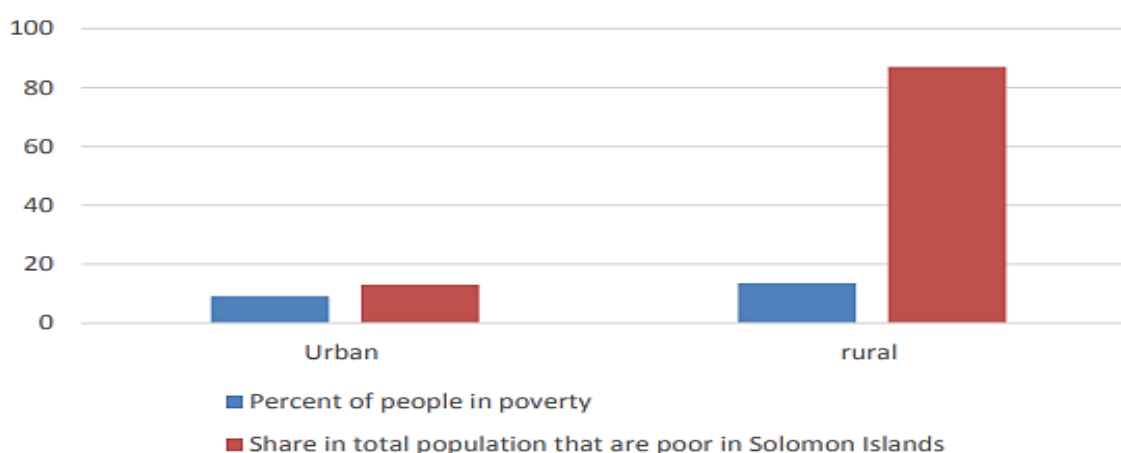
BACKGROUND

The Solomon Islands is an archipelagic state in the southwest Pacific Ocean, approximately 2,000 km northeast of Australia. Its land mass of 28,400 km² extends over nearly 1000 islands comprising nine main island groups. The capital, Honiara, is located on Guadalcanal, the largest island (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.) (see Figure 2).

The population of the Solomon Islands, estimated to be about 734,887, is predominantly Melanesian (about 95%), the rest being Polynesian, Micronesian, Chinese and European communities (Solomon Islands National Statistic Office, 2023). Sixty-three distinct languages are spoken in the country, with numerous local dialects. English is the official language, but Solomons' Pijin is the lingua franca for most people (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.).

Despite its natural and cultural wealth, the Solomon Islands contend with economic challenges. As one of the Pacific's least affluent nations, the country faces elevated costs associated with service delivery due to its small and geographically dispersed population. Most residents are engaged in subsistence and cash crop agriculture, with only a fraction participating in wage-earning endeavours. Some 12.7% of the population in the Solomon Islands live below the poverty line and are classified as 'poor', but poverty was recorded to be 87% in rural areas, as shown in Figure 1 (Solomon Islands National Statistics, 2015).

Figure 1: Rural-Urban dimensions of poverty



Source: Solomon Islands National Statistics Office and the World Bank Group (2015), *Solomon Islands poverty profile based on the 2012/13 household income and expenditure survey*.

The year 2020 witnessed the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Solomon Islands' economy, with a 4.5% decrease in GDP growth (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs, n.d.; Solomon Islands Government, 2022). This economic downturn persisted, with a further 4.5% contraction in 2022, marking the third consecutive year of

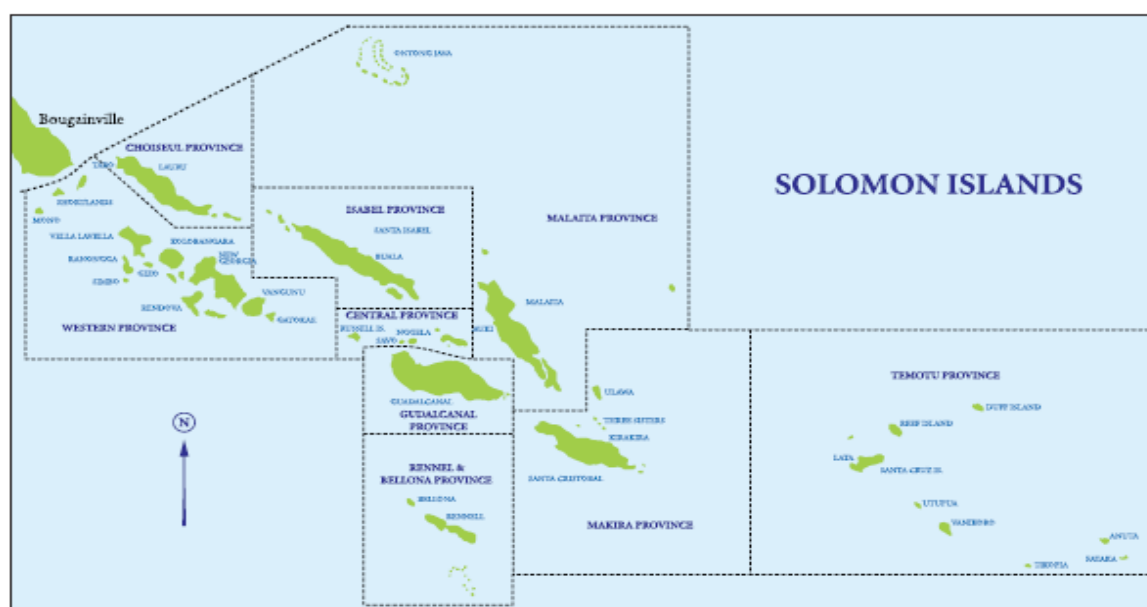
negative growth (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). COVID-19 has impacted employment with the ‘no job no job’ policy in the Solomon Islands, resulting in 26,000 people out of job (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

Education in the Solomon Islands is not compulsory. The Education sector has 1,050 schools, of which 243 are community high schools, 16 provincial secondary schools (PSS), 10 national secondary schools (NSS), 510 Primary Schools and 284 Early childhood Centres (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

Long-term trends show late age entry to school, high over-age enrolments, high levels of repetition in primary, low survival rates across the school years, gender parity inequities and infrastructure shortages (Solomon Islands National Education Strategic Plan 2022-2026, n.d.). Most students leave school before reaching senior secondary due to the cost of education, shortage of infrastructure and lack of accessibility to nearby schools (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

The unique blend of geographical, economic and demographic elements defines the backdrop against which the Solomon Islands’ educational challenges and policy shifts must be understood.

Figure 2: Map of Solomon Islands



Source: Solomon Islands Government. (n.d.). *Solomon Islands National Education Action Plan 2022-2026*

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rational Choice Theory states that individuals use rational calculations to make choices and achieve outcomes aligned with their objectives (Ganti, 2023). Adam Smith was one of the first economists to develop the underlying principles of the Rational Choice Theory. Applying this theory to schools suggests that school leaders make decisions to maximise their own benefits based on available options and incentives, and these decisions are made by weighing the potential costs and benefits of various choices. Rational Choice Theory assumes that individuals are rational actors who aim to maximise their self-interest while considering constraints and opportunities within their decision-making context.

When examining why school leaders change their practices from the original basic education policy that promotes students' enrolments to equitable, quality basic education to the new normal enrolment that seemed to prioritise revenue collection, Rational Choice Theory proposes that school leaders consider factors such as financial gains from increased enrolment, potential improvement in infrastructure due to increased funding, and prestige associated with higher student numbers. Furthermore, School leaders may face pressure from stakeholders, including government bodies, parents and their own institutions, to generate more revenue. These external forces can force school leaders to prioritise enrolment growth that even goes beyond the capacity of the available teaching and learning facilities.

Moreover, Rationale Choice Theory suggests that if schools face financial constraints, leaders may perceive that the capacity to generate needed additional revenue from school grants and parental contribution will become possible by increasing student enrolment. Using enrolment numbers as a determining factor to generate a substantive amount of revenue may also affect the quality of education because of infrastructure shortages and limited resources. Rational Choice Theory suggests that school leaders are willing to compromise the quality of education by enrolling more students to generate revenue to meet school needs that are not approved under the schools' grants policy.

METHODOLOGY

This research was guided by a qualitative research design suited to exploring feelings, ideas and experiences. Data collection was carried out in a narrative manner (Eze & Ugwu, 2023). The research was concerned with gathering data on the experiences and feelings of participants regarding school leaders' deviation from the basic education policy of promoting equitable access to quality basic education to practices that use enrolment to prioritise revenue collection. The fit between methodology and research field (Sanga et al., 2018) provided a direction for choosing Melanesia *tok stori* as the data collection instrument. Using the Melanesian *tok stori* method was influenced by the need to employ a communication mode relevant to the cultural context of study participants.

In its natural form, *tok stori* is an accepted means of sharing knowledge in Melanesia (Vella & Maebuta, 2018, cited in Sanga et al., 2020). The protocols for storytelling within this mode emphasise participation, relationship-building, trust, and active listening, sharing and responding (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018). Moreover, *tok stori* can be conducted in face-to-face settings, online or using digital devices, offering flexibility and user-friendliness for research in the Solomon Islands context. *Tok stori* for this research was conducted face-to-face with three parents, three school leaders, three schoolteachers and three students from three different secondary schools in Honiara who consented to participate in the *tok stori* sessions held at different times.

Research questions

To better understand the rationale behind the shifting policy perspectives and practices of school leaders, this article seeks answers to these questions raised in the *tok stori*.

- 1) What are the different types of fees charged for educating a child in the Solomon Islands?
- 2) Are schools enrolling students in numbers that match the infrastructure and human resources available locally?
- 3) Are the grants provided by the government adequate to administer schools?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of education as a fundamental human right and a powerful driver of development has long been recognised globally. Education for All (EFA) and Education for Sustainable Development are global initiatives directly linked to article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, n.d.) and the *Millennium Declaration* in 2000. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) emerged from development agendas from the World Bank, IMF, UN agencies and OECD—the agendas aimed to interlace human development with economic and social progress. Education was identified as an agent for poverty reduction, improved health, gender equality, peace and stability (UN News, 2015). The post-2015 development agenda demanded a broader, holistic and more ambitious vision than the EFA used for the MDGs, and this led to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), aimed at completing unfinished business of MDGs and moving beyond halfway targets to get to zero (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.). The MDGs and, later, the SDGs set global educational targets, with the Pacific Commitment for EFA goals outlined in the *Pacific Regional Education Framework, Moving Towards Education 2030* (PacREF) (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, n.d.). In aligning itself with these global commitments, the Solomon Islands demonstrated its determination and commitment to education through various past frameworks, including the current *Education Framework 2016-2030* and the *National Education Action Plan 2016-2026*.

Fee-free education initiatives

A significant approach to achieving the complexity of EFA goals, particularly in low-income countries, has been implementing a fee-free education (FFE) policy, which is the government's commitment to increase equitable access to quality basic education. Under the FFE commitment, the government subsidises all school fees by providing grants to schools to cover teaching and learning costs and relieving parents from the financial burden of paying fees. However, the grant policy regulating FFE requires parental contributions. The grant policy, however, does not specify the amount needed as a parental contribution for rural and urban schools, a loophole school leaders take advantage of to impose fees of varying amounts.

The introduction of the FFE policy resulted in a notable increase in primary children's and junior secondary education enrolments of 48% and 70%, respectively (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.). Initially, this initiative operated on a partnership and cost-sharing basis between parents and the government (Ministry of Education and Human Resources and Development, 2012).

Under the provisions of the FFE policy in the Solomon Islands, no child is to be removed from school even when parental contributions are not paid to the schools, exacerbating the issue that some children benefit from other children's contributions. Free education does not meet the indirect cost of education, which some parents cannot afford (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

In Papua New Guinea, Tuition Fee-Free Education (TFFE) covers children from year 1 of primary education to year 12 of secondary education. TFFE has helped alleviate the financial burdens for parents, but parents are still expected to pay for parental contributions and meet other education-related costs (Magury, 2022).

The concept of free education in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea can give parents false hope because education is not entirely free. Parents must still cover expenses such as contributions, uniforms, transportation, stationary and field trips.

Challenges in achieving EFA Goals through FFE

After 15 years (UNESCO, 2015). The findings of the UNESCO *Education for all 2000–2015: Achievements and challenges. EFA global monitoring report 2015* (UNESCO, 2015) found that after 15 years of pursuing EFA goals, only one-third of countries have achieved all measurable targets. The challenges related to FFE were explained as the gap between countries' policy, practice and economic capabilities to support and harness access agenda through free education (OECD, 2017). Aid donors' support to implement free education is vital, especially in low-income countries in the Pacific, like the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, which suffer significant challenges due to factors such as small economies, political instability, changing government priorities with leadership changes and external shocks such the COVID-19 pandemic (Magury, 2022; Grant & Hushang, 2021). For example, Papua New Guinea experienced political leadership changes, which saw the TFFE policy being abolished and later reactivated, leading to fluctuations in education budget allocation (Grant & Hushang, 2021). In the Solomon Islands, a change of leadership at the Ministry of Education level in 2021 led to statements that education is no longer free and parents must pay after COVID-19 (No Fee free Education this Year, News, 2021).

Despite budget constraints, FFE policies remain an ambitious agenda. In The Solomon Islands, the basic education policy outlined a partnership and cost-sharing arrangement between schools and parents. However, parents do not accept the cost sharing arrangement (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2009). Parents believed the free education policy would take the financial burden of educating children away from parents (Hess, 2013, cited in Viennet & Pont, 2017). The restrictive nature of the free education policy targeting academic activities caused schools to find ways to meet other operational and development needs.

FINDINGS

This study's school leaders' practices of shifting the focus of student enrolment from providing equitable access for all children to quality basic education (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2009) to targeting high enrolment for revenue collection has brought about significant consequences for the parents and the education system

This section presents the perspectives and experiences of parents, school principals, teachers and students to provide insight into how this shift in policy-related practice has affected access to education and the quality of learning. The major themes of the findings were drawn after analysing participant's responses to each research question.

1) What are the different types of fees charged for educating a child in the Solomon Islands?

Parents' expectations and realities

Parent 1 expressed confusion regarding the definition of 'fee-free education' as they find themselves still burdened with various contributions and fundraising requests. They argued that free education should remove all the financial burdens from parents.

Fee-free education had encouraged high enrolment. But I thought that the fee-free education should mean that no money should be requested from parents except for school uniforms,

lunch money and transportations that we meet. The school asked parents for contributions, and they asked us to contribute in fundraising drives. This is confusing.

Parent 2 shares the struggle faced when charged high transfer fees, which can be almost unaffordable, hindering access to what they perceive as quality education provided in prestigious schools.

When I asked the school to transfer my grandson to this school, they told me that I should pay SBD1000 in order to transfer the child. I think this is a form of fundraising because there is no rationale behind it. I do not have an employment, and I am a widow. I come to town to find better education for my grandchildren.

Parent 3 highlighted the economic challenges families face that rely on their salaries for survival and education expenses. This raises concerns about the policy's sustainability and impact on families' financial well-being.

I have four children, all in school, but the company where my husband is employed paid for the fees, but still, we have to borrow money from friends to keep the family till the next pay. I was thinking about those families that use their salary for survival while at the same time divide the income for fees and transport.

Parent 3 further highlighted that FFE had benefited families because the government pays the bigger portion, and schools are not pressuring parents to pay the parental contributions.

We can slowly pay for the parental contribution and other school contributions because I do not see any pressure from schools in getting us to pay. The bigger portion of the school fee is taken care of under the grant.

The future of the policy

The parents interviewed for this research were concerned about the future of the FFE policy and its enforcement. Parent 1 questioned whether the policy is still active and when it might end. The uncertainty surrounding the policy created anxiety among parents.

My child is now in year eight, and I am paying for her school fees in a boarding school that amounts to SBD2500 per semester, and parent contribution is SBD200-00. I am not sure if the fee-free policy that was imposed is still enforceable. When is this policy coming to its final term? It seems to me that the policy is not active.

The dormitories are too small, and when I see my daughter sleeping in an overcrowded room, I am worried about her health. Schools should enrol to fit their situation.

2) Are schools enrolling students in numbers that match the infrastructure and human resources available locally?

Impacts of high enrolment on quality of education

Students spoken with provided accounts of the negative effects of overcrowded classrooms caused by high enrolments and insufficient resources. They mentioned sharing desks and disruptive learning environments due to uncontrolled noise levels.

Student 1: There are many of us in a classroom, and we do not have enough desks for everybody. Three of us share a desk that is meant for two people.

Student 2: I have to ensure I arrive in school first to get a chair and desk. Those arriving late may have to listen to the teacher from the corridor.

Teacher 1 expressed the struggles to provide quality education in overcrowded rooms. They noted issues related to classroom management, limited resources and the need for specialised teaching strategies in overcrowded classrooms

I have an experience of teaching 70 students in a class. I do not understand if the student-teacher ratio has changed with the free education policy in place. Because I have a very big class, I choose to be absent from teaching a class just to take a break. I used teacher centred approach in teaching. We failed to follow OBE approach in teaching.

The call for teacher preparation

Teacher 2 stressed the importance of teacher preparation programs, particularly for new graduates, to equip them with effective classroom management skills and teaching strategies tailored to overcrowded classrooms.

New graduates will face real challenges with classroom management, and SINU [Solomon Islands National University] should best prepare teachers to teach in overcrowded classroom. They need to be trained to develop new and effective classroom management skills and teaching strategies that worked in overcrowded classrooms.

Q3 Are the grants provided by the government adequate to administer schools?

Challenges faced by principals

School principals acknowledge that the policy's grant allocations are inadequate to cover the high costs of operating schools, particularly in urban areas. Therefore, they resort to charging 'high parent contributions' to cover various expenses not covered by the grants, such as electricity, water bills and staff welfare. They noted that parents still cannot pay the contributions, and school leaders' intentions of enrolling more students do not overcome the funding gap.

We have very high cost of operating schools in town. The electricity and water bills are very high. Teacher's rental and welfare are covered by the school through parent contributions. Since the grants are inadequate, the school has to charge the fees in the name of parent contribution. But, we do not strictly demand parents to pay because the grant policy does not expect school leaders to force parents. The parental contribution is an obligation within the cost-sharing commitment for free education between government and parents. Many parents still cannot pay up their children's contribution because of financial difficulties. The MEHRD¹, through the grant policy, does not permit school leaders to send children out from school even if they do not pay for the parental contributions.

Inflating enrolments to maximise grants

One school principal admitted to inflating student enrolments to receive larger government grant allocations, while another admitted to accepting transfers even towards the end of the final semester. Participants also revealed other ways to generate larger grant allocations, such as keeping transferred students' names on the school's records, even when they moved to new schools. The more students enrolled, the more substantial the government grant, which raises questions about data accuracy and resource allocations to schools.

¹ MEHRD- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development.

Inflating the SIEMIS² form is a game that some schools are practising. Even when children transferred to another school, the former school do not erase the names but still count them in the SIEMIS form. What happened was that the transferred student's names can appear in their new school and old schools at the same time. Number is important. The more we enrol, the bigger the grant allocations to support schools financially through grant money and contributions.

The shift from the policy practices of enrolling to increase equitable access to quality basic education to a trend of enrolling students for revenue generation has implications for quality education. While the policy aimed to remove barriers to education, the voices of parents, principals, teachers and students, as reported here, revealed significant challenges and concerns. Addressing these issues will require a comprehensive approach that considers the sustainability of the policy, adequate funding, teacher training and strategies to improve the quality of education in overcrowded classrooms.

DISCUSSION

Shifting policy perspectives and practices from access to basic education to prioritising revenue collection captured the transformation observed in education policy priorities and practices in schools. This article investigated how this shift impacts various stakeholders, including parents, school principals, teachers and students, as discussed.

Parental expectations and financial burden

The shift in practice from the basic education policy intended to provide increased equitable access to quality basic education to an approach that appears to emphasise growing enrolment of revenue collection has significantly impacted parents.

Initially, parents expected that the free education policy would alleviate the financial burden of educating their children, limiting expenses to uniforms, lunch and transportation. The gap between parents' expectations and the reality of education policy is not unique to the Solomon Islands. Studies from various contexts have shown that parents often expect free education to remove financial burdens, including additional fees and contributions. For example, in Papua New Guinea, many parents think that when the government introduced the TFFE, it pays for all the requirements for educating a child (Magury, 2022). However, the reality proved more complex, with schools requesting additional contributions and organising fundraising drives. This shift in practices has led to confusion among parents and raised questions about communication within the education system. Clear communication within the systems and awareness of parents' needs are crucial in aligning parental and policy expectations (UNESCO MAB, 2018).

Furthermore, the burden of transfer fees imposed by some schools in the Solomon Islands can be a significant barrier to accessing quality education for low-income families. This aligns with the idea that high transfer fees hinder education access, particularly for vulnerable populations. The shift towards revenue collection challenges the fundamental principle of providing equitable educational opportunities to all, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

² SIEMIS is the Solomon Islands Education Management Information System.

Parents' financial situations

The shift in policy practice also reveals the diverse financial backgrounds of parents affected by these changes. While some parents struggle to meet basic survival needs and bear the extra charges imposed by schools, others are more financially stable. This variation underscores the policy's impact on families across different socioeconomic strata. The added financial strain cannot be overlooked, even among families with the financial means to cover these charges. It becomes evident that the policy, intended to reduce the financial burden on parents, has not achieved goal uniformly across all segments of society. It was also noted that some families paid contributions while other families did not, but schools could not expel students from the system because of the provisions of the Solomon Islands' FFE policy (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2008). Overall, the FFE program, regulated under the grant policy of 2010, still does not adequately address the educational challenges children from disadvantaged families in the Solomon Islands face because the cost of education remains one of the reasons why children from these families leave school early (Solomon Islands Government, n.d.).

Uncertainty about the policy continuity

One of the concerns among parents is the uncertainty surrounding the future of the free education policy. The fear that the policy might be abolished without warning adds anxiety to parents. The instability generated by this uncertainty can influence parents' decision-making processes regarding their children's education and financial planning.

Impact on school principals and their strategies

From the perspective of school principals, the shift in policy priorities is reflected in the challenges they face in sustaining their schools. Grants allocated under the free education policy often fall short of covering basic operational costs, including staff welfare and infrastructure development, due to the narrow scope of the policy provisions. Consequently, schools are forced to seek alternative means of financing, and that is to rely on parent contributions. The limitation of the policy was the lack of guidelines to regulate the amount that schools can request as parental contributions. The loophole in the policy allowed schools to charge different types of contributions and other types of fees.

Unlike their rural counterparts, urban schools encounter specific challenges in engaging parents in school development programs and fundraising activities. The contribution in kind was not possible for urban schools, especially with working parents. This urban-rural divide in parental involvement questions the feasibility of a uniform policy approach across diverse educational contexts.

Enrolment for revenue and its consequences

The most alarming revelation from this research is the practice of inflating enrolment figures to secure larger grant allocations. While this strategy may temporarily alleviate financial pressures on schools, it comes at the cost of educational quality. Overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of desks and disrupted learning environments have become the norm in such schools. Overcrowded classroom issues and challenges were also reiterated in a study on the challenges of FFE in the Solomon Islands (Wairiu et al., 2022).

School leaders have important roles in creating a climate that welcomes, supports and rewards innovative thinking and problem-solving (Dinsdale, 2017). Papua New Guinea experienced high enrolment and retention from its TFFE policy, contributing to lower the quality of education due to inadequate facilities, teachers and monitoring and evaluation of the policy (Honga, 2020). Similarly, in implementing access to primary education, the African nation of Tanzania experienced challenges related to a shortage of infrastructure, poor academic performance and a shortage of teachers (Haidari, 2021).

The capacity of countries to implement free education was questioned, given the mismatch between policy and practice. Uncontrolled enrolment strategies have broader implications for the integrity of the education system. They raise concerns about accountability in reporting enrolment figures and limiting the credibility of the educational data on which policies are based.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our research highlights the profound impact of the shift in policy perspectives and practices from prioritising access to quality basic education to a trend that emphasises revenue collection. This transformation has far-reaching consequences for parents, school principals, teachers and students. It underscores the importance of adequately financing the FFE program so that schools have enough funds to properly implement the basic education policy that promotes equitable access to quality basic education through free education. This involves aligning policy implementation with the needs and expectations of parents and students, ensuring equitable access to quality education and maintaining transparency and communication within the educational system. As policymakers continue to navigate these changing priorities, it is crucial to consider the voices and concerns of those directly affected by these policies. By addressing the challenges and uncertainties raised by our findings, policymakers can work toward a more balanced approach that prioritises both access to education and the sustainability of educational institutions.

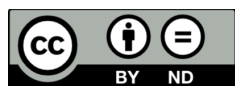
REFERENCES

- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d.). *Solomon Islands country brief*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon-islands/solomon-islands-country-brief>
- Dinsdale, R. (2017). The role of leaders in developing a positive culture. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 9(1) 42–45.
- Eze, V. H. & Ugwu, C. N. (2023). Qualitative research. *International Digital Organization for Scientific Research: Journal of Computer and Applied Sciences*, 8(1), 20–35.
- Grant W. W. & Hushang H, (2021), *The politics of undermining national fee-free education policy: Insights from Papua New Guinea*. *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, 8(8), 401-419. <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.339>
- Haidari, A. (2021). *Implementation of fee free policy in the provision of secondary education in Tanzania: A case of Gairo district* [Unpublished PhD Thesis]. The Open University of Tanzania. <http://repository.out.ac.tz/3441/1/DISSERTATION%20-%20ABEID%20HAIDARI%20-FINAL.pdf>

Shifting policy perspectives and practices: From access to basic education to prioritising revenue collection

- Honga, T. (2020). Benefits of the tuition fee free policy as perceived by Port Moresby Residents. *Spotlight*, 13(13).
- Magury, P.(2022). Who pays for what under the tuition fee free education. *Spotlight*, 15(5).
- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2008), *Policy statement and guidelines for grants to education authorities in Solomon Islands*.
<https://www.mehrd.gov.sb/documents?view=download&format=raw&fileId=486>
- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2009). *Policy statement and guidelines for basic education in Solomon Islands*.
<https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/17163b89-1b12-4788-8091-d37abfaa955e/resource/3c9bfd5f-7ec0-4220-9658-18b06ed29ea9/download/policy-statement-and-guidelines-for-basic-education.pdf>
- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2012). *Up-dated policy statement and guidelines for grants to schools in Solomon Islands*.
<https://www.mehrd.gov.sb/documents?view=download&format=raw&fileId=1071>
- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (n.d.). *Education strategic framework 2016-2030*.
https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/solomon_islands_education_strategic_framework_2016-2030.pdf,
- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development. (n.d.). *Increased grant for fee Free Basic Education*.
<https://www.mehrd.gov.sb/documents?view=download&format=raw&fileId=41>
- No Fee Free Education this Year. (2021). Solomon Star News Paper.
<https://www.solomonstarnews.com/no-fee-free-education-this-year/#:~:text=THE%20call%20for%20fee%20free,week%20in%20Gizo%2C%20Western%20Province.>
- OECD. (2017). Education Policy Implementation: A Literature Review and Proposed Education Framework, [https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/WKP\(2017\)11/En/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/WKP(2017)11/En/pdf)
- Pacific Forum Leaders, (n.d.), *Pacific regional education framework (PacREF) 2018–2030*.
<https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Pacific-Regional-Education-Framework-PacREF-2018-2030.pdf>
- Sanga, K., & Reynolds, M. (2019). Melanesian *tok stori* in leadership development: Ontological and relational implications for donor-funded programmes in the Western Pacific. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 17(4), 11–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801211058342>
- Sanga, K., Reynolds, M., Houma, S., & Maebuta, J. (2020). *Tok stori* as pedagogy: An approach to school leadership education in Solomon Islands. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 50(2), 377–384. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2020.31>
- Sanga, K., Reynolds, M., Paulsen, I., Spratt, R., & Maneipuri, J. (2018). A *tok stori* about *tok stori*: Melanesian relationality in action as research, leadership and scholarship. *Global Comparative Education*, 2(1), 3–19.
https://www.theworldcouncil.net/uploads/8/6/2/1/86214440/gce_wccesjournal_vol2-no1.pdf

- Solomon Islands Government, *Solomon Islands national education action plan 2022–2026*. <https://www.mehrd.gov.sb/documents?view=download&format=raw&fileId=4384>
- Solomon Islands Government. (14 March 2022). Minister of Finance speech. <https://solomons.gov.sb/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-Budget-Speech.pdf>
- Solomon Islands National Statistic Office. (2023). *Projected population by province 2010–2025*. <https://www.statistics.gov.sb/statistics/social-statistics/population>
- Solomon Islands National Statistics Office and the World Bank Group. (2015). *Solomon Islands poverty profile based on the 2012/13 household income and expenditure survey*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/922811528186449003/pdf/Solomon-Islands-poverty-profile-based-on-the-2012-13-household-income-and-expenditure-survey.pdf>
- UNESCO Bangkok. (1990). *World declaration on Education for All: Meeting basic learning needs*. <https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/assets/ECCE/JomtienDeclaration.pdf>
- UNESCO MAB. (2018). *Global communication strategy and action plan*. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/sc-18_conf_210_12_mab_comm_strategy-annex_1-en.pdf
- UNESCO. (2015). *Education for all 2000-2015: Achievements and challenges. EFA global monitoring report 2015*. <https://revistas.uam.es/jospoe/article/download/5654/6070/11930>
- United Nations News. (2015). *Despite major gains, world's education goals far from achieved – UNESCO*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/04/495422>
- United Nations. (n.d.). *Universal declaration on human rights*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights#:~:text=Article%2026,on%20the%20basis%20of%20merit>
- Viennet, R., & Pont, B. (2017). Education policy implementation: A literature review and proposed education framework. *OECD Education Working Paper No.162*. [https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/WKP\(2017\)11/En/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/WKP(2017)11/En/pdf)
- Wairiu, E. O., Dorovolomo, J. & Fitoo, B. (2022). Challenges to the fee free basic education in Solomon Islands. *Directions: Journal of Educational Studies*, 36 (1), 43–56. <http://repository.usp.ac.fj/13899/1/Challenges%20to%20the%20fee%20free%20basic%20education%20in%20Solomon%20Islands.pdf>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Authors and readers are free to copy, display and distribute this article with no changes, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the International Education Journal: Comparative

Shifting policy perspectives and practices: From access to basic education to prioritising revenue collection

Perspectives (IEJ: CP), and the same license applies. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at. The IEJ: CP is published by the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (formerly ANZCIES) and Sydney Open Access Journals at the University of Sydney. Articles are indexed in ERIC, Scimago Journal (SJR)Ranking / SCOPUS. The IEJ:CP is a member of the Free Journal Network: Join the IEJ: CP and OCIES Facebook community at Oceania Comparative and International Education Society, and Twitter: @OceaniaCIES

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

Meleana Koloto

affiliation: meleanakoloto@gmail.com

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.

REFERENCES

- Chu, C., Abella, I. S., & Paurini, S. (2013). *Educational practices that benefit Pacific learners in tertiary education*. Ako/ <https://ako.ac.nz/assets/Knowledge-centre/NPF-10-001A-Pasifika-Learners-and-Success-in-Tertiary-Education/6d7e53028e/RESEARCH-REPORT-Educational-Practices-that-Benefit-Pacific-Learners-in-Tertiary-Education.pdf>
- Churchward, C. (1959). *Tongan dictionary* (1st ed.). Taula Press.
- Cobb, S. (2010). Appreciative inquiry. In D. Christie (Ed.), *The encyclopaedia of peace psychology* (pp. 47–50). Wiley-Blackwell Publishers.
- Connelly, L. M. (2007). Understanding qualitative research. *MedSurg Matters*, 16(1), 14–15.
- Cooperrider, D., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 1, 129.

- Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2012). *Strength-based approach: A guide to writing transition learning and development statements*. https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/professionals/learning/strength_bappr.pdf
- Dray, B. (2008). History of special education. In E Provenzo & J. Renaud (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia for social and cultural foundations of education* (pp. 744–747). Sage.
- Fehoko, E. (2014). *Pukepuke Fonua: An exploratory study on the faikava as an identity marker for New Zealand-born Tongan males in Auckland, New Zealand*. (Unpublished Master's thesis). Auckland University of Technology.
- Farrelly, T., & Nabobo-Baba, U. (2012). *Talanoa as empathic research*. Paper presented at the International development conference, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Forlin, C., Sharma, U., Loreman, T., & Sprunt, B. (2015). Developing disability-inclusive indicators in the Pacific Islands. *Springer*, 45(2015), 197–211.
- Gharabaghi, K., & Anderson-Nathe, B. (2017). Strength-based research in a deficits-oriented context. *Child & Youth Services*, 38(3), 177–179.
- Halapua, S. (2004). *Talanoa process: The case of Fiji*. East-West Centre.
- Hammond, W. (2010). *Principles of strength-based practice*. Greater Fall Connections. <https://greaterfallsconnections.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Principles-of-Strength-2.pdf>
- Hornby, G. (2012). Inclusive education for children with special educational needs: A critique of policy and practice in New Zealand. *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, 1(1), 52–60.
- Hornby, G. (2014). *Inclusive special education: Evidence-based practices for children with special needs and disabilities*. Springer.
- Hornby, G. (2015). Inclusive special education: Development of a new theory for the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities. *British Journal of Special Education*, 42(3), 234–256. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12101>
- Jenson, K. (2018). Discourses of disability and inclusive education. *He Kupu The Word*, 5(4), 52–59.
- Johansson-Fua, S. (2014). Kakala Research framework: A garland in celebration of a decade of rethinking education. In M. 'Otunuku, U. Nabobo-Baba, & S. Johansson-Fua (Eds.), *Of waves, winds and wonderful things*. The USP Press.
- Kaitani M, & McMurray C. (2006). *Tonga: A situation analysis of children, women and youth*. https://www.unicef.org/pacificislands/TONGAN_SITAN.pdf
- Kauffman, J. M., & Hallahan, D. P. (2005). *The illusion of full inclusion: A comprehensive critique of a current special education bandwagon*. PRO-ED.
- Kaufusi, M. (2009). Delivering inclusive education in Pacific Island villages: the Tongan Inclusive Model for Education. In P. Puamau & F. Pene (Eds.), *Inclusive education in the Pacific*. Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific.

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

- Knibbs, Underwood, MacDonald, Schoenfeld, Lavoie-Tremblay, Crea-Arsenio, . . . Ehrlich. (2010). Appreciative inquiry: A strength-based research approach to building Canadian public health nursing capacity. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 17(5), 484–494.
- Leaupepe, M. (2015). Inclusive education in the Cook Islands: Responsibilities, assumptions and challenges. In J. Rombo & G. Lingam (Eds.), *Inclusive education for exceptional individuals: A Pacific perspective*. The University of the South Pacific Press.
- Lewis, A. (1995). *Children's understanding of disability*. Routledge.
- Manu'atu, L. (2000). *Pedagogical possibilities for Tongan students in New Zealand secondary schooling: Tuli ke ma'u hono ngaahi malie*. (Unpublished EdD thesis). University of Auckland.
- Manu'atu, L. (2001). *Tuli ke Ma'u Hono Ngaahi Malie: Pedagogical possibilities for Tongan students in New Zealand secondary schooling*. (Unpublished PhD thesis). University of Auckland.
- Manu'atu, L. (2003). TalanoaMālie: Innovative reform through social dialogue in New Zealand. *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 27(4).
<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/talanoamalie-innovative-reform-through-social-dialogue-new>
- Mauigoa-Tekene, L., Howie, L., & Hagan, B. (2013). *Understanding special education from the perspectives of Pasifika families*. www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications
- McCaffery, J., & McFall-McCaffery, J. T. (2010). O tatou o ag'i i fea?/ oku tau o ki fe? where are we heading? Pacific languages in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *AlterNative*, 6(2), 86–121.
- Mead, M. (2003). *Tikanga Maori: Living by Maori values*. Huia Publishers.
- Narayan, S., & Schlessinger, S. (2017). When theory meets the 'reality of reality': Reviewing the sufficiency of the social model of disability as a foundation for teacher preparation for inclusive education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 44(1), 81–100.
- 'Otunuku, M. (2011). How can *talanoa* be used effectively as an indigenous research methodology with Tongan people? *Pacific-Asian Education A journal about education in Pacific circle countries*, 23(2), 43–52.
- Powell, J. (2011). The paradox of special education Both school segregation and inclusive education are on the rise. *WZB-Mitteilungen*, 134, 23–25.
- Price, P. (2009). Guidelines to include children with disabilities in school systems. In P. Puamau & F. Pene (Eds.), *Inclusive education in the Pacific*. Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific.
- Purdue, K. (2006). Children and disability in early childhood education: 'Special' or inclusive education? *Early Childhood Folio*, 10(2006).
- Reed, J. (2007). *Appreciative inquiry: Research for change*. Sage Publications.
- Sanga, K. (2004). Making philosophical sense of indigenous Pacific research. In T. Baba, O. Mahina, N. Williams, & U. Nabobo-Baba (Eds.), *Researching the Pacific and indigenous peoples: Issues and perspectives*. Centre for Pacific Studies.

- Sanga, K., & Reynolds, M. (2017). To know more of what it is and what it is not: Pacific research on the move. *Pacific Dynamics: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 1(2), 198–204.
- Taufe‘ulungaki, A. (2001). The role of research: A Pacific perspective. *Journal of Educational Studies*, 23(2), 3–13.
- Tecun, A., Hafoka, I., ‘Ulu‘ave, L., & ‘Ulu‘ave-Hafoka, M. (2018). Talanoa: Tongan epistemology and Indigenous research method. *AlterNative*, 14(2), 156–163.
- Thaman, K. H. (1992). Looking towards the source: A consideration of (cultural) context in teacher education. *Directions: Journal of Educational Studies*, 14(2), 3–13.
- Thaman, K. (2007). Nurturing relationships and honouring responsibilities: A Pacific perspective. *International Review of Education*, 54, 459–473.
- Tufue-Dolgoy, R. (2010). *Stakeholders’ perspectives of the implementation of the inclusive education policy in Samoa: A cultural fit*. (Unpublished PhD thesis). Victoria University of Wellington.
- Vaiioleti, T. (2006). Talanoa research methodology: A developing position on Pacific research. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12(2006), 21–34.
- Warnock, M. (2010). Special educational needs: A new look. In L. Terzi (Ed.), *Special educational needs: A new look* (pp. 11–45). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Williams, V. (2013). *Learning disability: Policy and practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zandee, D. (2014). Appreciative inquiry and research methodology. In D. Coghlan & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Action Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Authors and readers are free to copy, display and distribute this article with no changes, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives (IEJ: CP), and the same license applies. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at. The IEJ: CP is published by the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (formerly ANZCIES) and Sydney Open Access Journals at the University of Sydney. Articles are indexed in ERIC, Scimago Journal (SJR)Ranking / SCOPUS. The IEJ:CP is a member of the Free Journal Network: Join the IEJ: CP and OCIES Facebook community at Oceania Comparative and International Education Society, and Twitter: @OceaniaCIES

Pā'ina: Using the metaphor of a potluck to reimagine a third space for ethical research in Indigenous contexts

Elisabeth Moore

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand: elisabeth.r.moore@gmail.com

This paper delves into the innovative use of the potluck, or pā'ina, as a metaphor to reimagine a research approach to foster collective understanding between non-Indigenous knowledge seekers and Indigenous knowledge guardians in Indigenous contexts. By embracing the broader research context, this metaphor strives to create a dialogical, relational and ethical space for knowledge seekers to engage with knowledge guardians, promoting a reciprocal and respectful relationship. Central to this metaphor is recognising the insider/outsider binary and the need to transcend it. Indigenous knowledge is often guarded and restricted, granted access based on relationships and shared experiences. Understanding the complexity of these socio-spatial relationships is crucial for researchers to navigate respectfully. The metaphor also draws from the Oceanic concept of vā/va/wā, signifying the space between entities and the importance of maintaining harmony and balance within relationships. This relational space between the self and the other allows for transformative encounters and meaningful connections. To navigate this third space, researchers must undergo introspective reflexive exercises to understand their situationality and how it influences their research. Knowledge seekers must unsettle their histories, understand context, listen to the stories of others, create a shared understanding and launch new relationships centred on respect and reciprocity. Throughout the research process, the metaphor of pā'ina encourages researchers to be active participants, nurturing relationships with communities they seek knowledge from and reflecting upon their role within it. The pā'ina metaphor offers a transformative approach for Western academia to critically examine its historical impact on Indigenous communities and embrace a more respectful and inclusive research paradigm. By centring Indigenous voices and building meaningful relationships, this third space provides an opportunity for collaborative and sustainable research to benefit all stakeholders.

Keywords: community-centric research, cultural sensitivity in research, researcher positionality, power dynamics in research, decolonised research approaches, ethical engagement with Indigenous communities

INTRODUCTION

The sweet melody of Hawaiian Slack Key guitar fills the air as guests enter the house. They see the sign that says 'E Komo Mai. Welcome' and leave their *slippahs* (the pidgin word for flip flops) outside the door, as is customary in Hawai'i. The hosts greet all with a kiss and a hug, and the host shows them to the kitchen, where they can put down their heavy dishes. In the kitchen, the counter quickly fills with bowls of food, taking on the look of a Hawaiian-style buffet: fresh fish, *poke* (seasoned raw fish), *tako* (octopus), *poi* (pounded taro root), edamame, macaroni salad and many more cultural foods. Once everybody arrives, everyone gathers in a circle, and the host blesses the food. People line up, fill their plates with the bounty and compliment each other on their dishes. The evening continues with sounds of conversation, laughter and music until the last guest leave, putting on their slippahs at the front door.

This essay investigates and expands on using a potluck as a metaphor for a new approach to research. The metaphor illustrates the importance of shifting perspectives in research in which researchers view their work through the eyes of those they seek knowledge from and ensure that the knowledge is upheld throughout the research process. It aims to build collective understanding between knowledge seekers, who are non-Indigenous to the place where they stand, and knowledge guardians, who are the Indigenous peoples of a place, by examining the broader context of research.

POTLUCK OR *PĀ'INA* AS A BRIDGE

This scene of a *pā'ina*, the '*olelo Hawai'i* (Hawaiian language term for a small gathering around food like a potluck (Pukui & Elbert, 1986)), is a common way of getting together and is a fond and familiar memory of my experiences growing up in the islands of Hawai'i. As a non-Indigenous settler in Hawai'i living among Indigenous peoples, potlucks were places where I could meet with people from different backgrounds than mine and connect with *Kanaka O'iwi* (Native Hawaiians). Within the shared context of a meal, we could acknowledge our differences, respect these differences, and transform our relationship into one that was generative and respectful.

At one New Year's Eve *pā'ina*, my family and I were invited to celebrate with a local *Kanaka O'iwi* family. When we, a *haole* family (non-native Hawaiian) from Hawai'i, entered the house, we were greeted by the hosts, who invited us graciously, but an air of suspicion surrounded the aunts and uncles at the dinner table. Although my father worked with the host of the potluck, we were strangers to the other guests. As the '*ōlelo no'eau* (poetic saying) reflects, '*No nehinei a'e nei no; heaha ka 'ike?*' ([He] just arrived yesterday; what does he know?) (Pukui, 1983), we were *malihini* (guests), strangers in their home and context, and we had lots to learn.

One *kupuna* (honoured elder) brought a dish of raw beef liver, *limu* (seaweed) and '*inamona* (a Hawaiian condiment made from roasted nuts of the kukui, or candlenut tree) that I had never had before. The *kupuna* told us that most people, even *Kanaka O'iwi*, do not like this dish. The guests were impressed when my father reached for seconds, and the *kupuna* told stories of their memories of the plate. This conversation over food led to stories about their childhood on the west side of O'ahu and what life was like for *Kanaka O'iwi* during that time. This was a rare opportunity to listen to stories told by *kūpuna* (honoured elders) that I may not have had access to if I had not shared a meal with them. By laughing and telling stories together over food, we created a relationship that allowed me to hear their stories and knowledge. We formed a reciprocal relationship through mutual trust and understanding.

Food at a *pā'ina* tells stories about those who cooked the dish, and those who attend are obliged to listen to these stories (Julier, 2013). Responsibility for a successful meal is distributed among all who attend because every *pā'ina* guest is expected to bring a dish to contribute to the communal meal. As a result, the dynamics between the host (insider) and guests (outsider) transform into one that is more like kin. This blurring of boundaries between the insider and outsider suggests egalitarian sociability where each participant is obliged to help with the meal (Julier, 2013). However, the egalitarian nature of a *pā'ina* does not automatically assume that the guests transform into the host, but rather one where each guest's uniqueness and contribution are upheld and acknowledged (Julier, 2013).

As a result, this metaphor of a *pā'ina* is a relational space where respect and reciprocity are paramount, and the binary of the insider and the outsider is disrupted. By creating a shared reality through a metaphor of an event where food is shared, and stories told, new relationships

can form, and old relationships strengthen (Julier, 2013). The *pā'ina* is used as a cultural bridge between differing groups by sharing food that has meaning to those who make it, and, in turn, aims to lessen differences and create community (Jönsson, 2021).

PĀ'INA AS TRANSFORMATION

Traditional Western approaches to research often perpetuate a binary framework that reinforces the legacy of colonisation (Smith, 1999). These conventional paradigms have frequently framed the research process as a one-dimensional journey of discovery, setting up a stark dichotomy between the knower and the known, the observer and the observed. The binary perspective, rooted in positivism and objectivity, tends to prioritise the perspective of the researcher's worldview while lowering the knowledge and wisdom of the researched communities to a subordinate position (Derby & Macfarlane, 2020; Porsanger, 2004; Smith, 1999). As a result, it perpetuates and exacerbates the historical power imbalances wrought by colonisation. Indigenous and culturally diverse knowledge systems are often sidelined, diminished or dismissed within this binary framework, reinforcing a hierarchical structure where traditional Western knowledge reigns supreme (Porsanger, 2004). Recognising this problematic binary is crucial for advancing more inclusive and equitable research practices that acknowledge the multiplicity of knowledge traditions and foster genuine collaboration across cultural boundaries.

Because of the natural power imbalance embedded in research (Porsanger, 2004), Western academic researchers must pay particular attention to their role in research. Much of the literature on the researcher's role describes the history of research and the importance of being a good host in Indigenous contexts (Aluli-Meyer, 1998; Mead, 2016; Johansson-Fua, 2020). However, there is a lack of research on what it means to be a good guest researcher. The metaphor of a *pā'ina* offers an opportunity to reimagine how knowledge seekers, particularly those in the Western academy, approach research. It gives guidelines for what is the appropriate protocol for a guest to follow when invited by hosts to enter their home.

UNDERLYING CONCEPTS

My relationship to this research begins with my connection to my home, Kailua-Kona, on the Island of Hawai'i, and the place I have settled for my studies, Aotearoa NZ. As a non-Indigenous woman to Hawai'i and Aotearoa, I have grappled with my position as a settler on *Kanaka' Oiwi* and *tangata whenua* (people of the land) soil and the implications of calling these places home. Hearing the stories of the devastation caused by colonialism and the aftermath of this contact into the modern day has caused me to contemplate my role and sense of belonging. Through the relational and transitive Oceanic concepts of *wā/vā/va*, I have understood my relationship to the land I call home. Though I do not belong to this land and ocean genealogically, I do belong to this land and ocean in the way that I nurture my relationship with it and with the people who have called it home for thousands of years. One honours place and people in the way they relate to them.

Insider/Outsider

Researchers seek knowledge and understanding, often searching for what they want from others. Traditional European/colonial knowledge seekers usually take the position of an

observer, or outsider, to those they observe to achieve a higher level of rationality and objectivity. However, this binary view of knowledge acquisition does not acknowledge the complexity of the human experience and the relationships that form when research is performed. Recent scholarship (Cobb et al., 2019; Crossa, 2012; Hurley & Jackson, 2020; Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019) emphasises the need for understanding research as more complex than insider/outsider, either/or relationships, which is achieved by acknowledging socio-spatial relationships—suggesting that this either/or relationship does not affirm the complexity of the human experience and the notion that our reality is shaped by the relationships that we hold.

Unlike traditional colonial perceptions of knowledge, which should be accessible to all, Indigenous knowledge restricts who can access it and the qualifications to access it. Sanga and Reynolds (2020) critique this colonial view of knowledge by saying it limits the complexity of knowledge acquisition and sharing, especially in the Pacific. When describing the case of a tribal meeting, the authors explain, ‘The “house” of a person who truly understands and practices the knowledge gains credibility not by claiming it but by enacting the privilege of practice. One honours secret knowledge through how one relates to it’ (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020, p. 105). The ability to access knowledge is based on how one relates to the knowledge and those who hold it. These relationships can also be dynamic and not limited to the insider/outsider binary. A relational approach to this dynamic allows for the position of the researcher to change, which accounts for the complexity of human relationships.

Besides, the insider/outsider binary approach to research acknowledges the complexity of the human condition and relationships. It reinforces the ‘us versus them’ apparent in settler colonial constructs: those who hold power and those who do not. This binary needs to be pulled apart to ensure these constructs are not reinforced so that new relationships can emerge. *Kanaka O’iwi* scholar Hōkūlani Aikau suggests centring the role of the researcher on the notion of obligation and responsibility, *kuleana*, as a *malihini* (guest) (Aikau, 2019). She draws upon the ‘*ōlelo no’eau*’ (Pukui, 1983, as cited in Aikau, 2019) that describes the role of a guest, *Ho’okahi no lā o ka malihini* (one is only a guest for a day, then they must work). Traditional guests cannot continue to stay outsiders but are obligated to contribute to their host group. Aikau offers the term of *hoa’āina* (friend of the land), ‘a friend, caretaker, partner who is tied to and bound to ‘āina [land] based on *kuleana* that is not genealogical but that comes from *hanalima*, working with our hands in the *lepo* (dirt, soil)’ (Aikau, 2019, p. 87). A *ho’āina* is a guest who doesn’t sit around and watch others work but works alongside those who invited them, creating relationships through contribution and listening (Aikau, 2019).

In the context of Aotearoa, Māori have a process for transforming relationships between the insider and outsider. This transformation is seen in a *pōwhiri*, a Māori formal welcome. At a *pōwhiri*, the *manuhiri* (visitor) has *tapu* (sacred) when they come to the *marae*. The *tapu* is lifted from the *manuhiri* after the *pōwhiri* process, and they become *noa*. *Tapu* means sacredness or set apart from everyday/normal things (Mead, 2016). Something’s or someone’s *tapu* is inherited through *whakapapa* (genealogy) and history. In the context of a *pōwhiri*, the *manuhiri* has *tapu* when they come to the *marae*. The *tapu* is reduced during the *pōwhiri* process, and there is the state of *noa*. *Manuhiri* are brought back to a state of *noa* once they partake in the feast at the end of the *pōwhiri* (Mead, 2016). Through acts of sharing food and shared understanding, unity between the guest and the host can be made. However, once the *tapu* of a *manuhiri* is transformed into being *noa*, they are not transformed into *tangata whenua* with the same privileges. To be *tangata whenua* is a matter of birthright (Mead, 2016). But much like *hoa’āina*, they are no longer simply strangers but are expected to contribute.

Vā/Va/Wā (the space between)

The emphasis on the importance of relationships is a central aspect of many Indigenous worldviews. An essential element of the Oceanic view of reality is the concept of *vā* in Samoan or *va* in Tongan or *wā* in *te reo Māori* (Māori language) and *'olelo Hawai'i*. Albert Wendt (1996) defined *vā* in *Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body* as the space between, one that is not empty and separates but an area that relates and holds all entities in unity. *Vā* is the space where relationships occur. It is a 'socio-spatial' space that recognises the connection and the importance of balance in relationships (Cobb et al., 2019). The space holds the context of the relationships and gives meaning to things. Thus, as the relationships and contexts change, the purpose changes.

Vā, as a socio-spatial concept that acknowledges the interconnectedness and balance within relationships, mirrors the *pā'ina's* focus on the interplay between knowledge guardians and seekers, where the space between them holds the context and purpose of knowledge sharing. Both the *vā* and the *pā'ina* frameworks underscore the fluidity of relationships and their ability to evolve as contexts change, emphasising the cultural and social richness inherent in the spaces where people come together, whether for a communal meal or the exchange of knowledge.

Motutapu and thirdspace

The potluck table is a 'third space' where these relationships can occur, much like Seu'ula Johannson-Fua's use of the Pacific metaphor of a *Motutapu* (Johannson-Fua, 2016). Historically, *Motutapu* was an island off the main islands and considered a thirdspace in the Pacific. The thirdspace of a *Motutapu* is where visitors to the island can negotiate their relationships with the hosts, and the hosts can decide if they are welcome. Johannson-Fua argues for a third space that 'enables other positions to emerge'. She further explains, 'it displaces, unsettles the histories that constitute it and at the same time it settles the "unsettle"'. Though this third space is a place of tension, as a *Motutapu*, it is also a 'place of rejuvenation, a sanctuary, a place to launch new journeys'.

Much like the *Motutapu*, the metaphor of the *pā'ina* potluck is a dialogical, relational and ethical space for knowledge seekers to engage with knowledge guardians in Indigenous contexts. By practising relationality, negotiating and nurturing our relationships with each other and respecting people, land and ocean, outsiders can be a part of this shared context (Johannson-Fua, 2020). The focus of this essay is to turn the binary in research of insider/outsider upside down and introduce one based on the guest and host relationship. This reframing of the research relationship acknowledges the complexity of relationships in research.

This third space of a *pā'ina* is where guest researchers unsettle their histories, understand the context and provide a space to launch a new relationship with Indigenous knowledge centred on respect and reciprocity.

THE PHASES OF A PĀ'INA/ POTLUCK

The Set Up

The role of the host in the invitation is to set the event's purpose; what will the purpose of this get-together be? Is it a celebration of an event or holiday? Is it just to get people to meet one another for the first time? Is it to welcome new people into the community? Is it to resolve

conflict? Whatever the purpose, the underlying motivation behind creating the event is to bring people together for a common goal or purpose. The occasion binds the purpose of the potluck with who is invited (Julier, 2013).

Deciding the purpose of a *pā'ina* dinner is much like knowledge guardians setting the purpose of inviting knowledge seekers into their community. A knowledge seeker would be permitted into the space through careful consideration and dialogue between knowledge guardians (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021). Considerations include determining whether the research addresses a specific issue, shares knowledge, or builds relationships. Setting clear research intentions provides a foundation for the entire research process. Knowledge guardians, akin to *pā'ina* hosts, understand their community's cultural and historical contexts. They guide the research process to ensure it respects cultural norms and sensitivities.

Much like the host of a *pā'ina* dinner determines the purpose of the gathering, Indigenous knowledge guardians, who act as hosts in their own right, wield the crucial responsibility of defining the purpose when inviting knowledge seekers into their community. This purpose-setting process involves meticulous deliberation and open dialogue between knowledge guardians and guest researchers (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021)—this phase concerns co-decision-making by the knowledge seeker and knowledge guardian, not just design. Knowledge guardians have the autonomy to decide when and how they are willing to participate in research.

As guest researchers step into unfamiliar contexts, they bring their unique perspectives and backgrounds into the community's space. Therefore, researchers must remain cognisant of the dual contexts. By utilising thoughtful discussion methods and engaging in meaningful dialogue, they can establish essential relationships and foster cohesion between themselves and the community members (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021). This purpose-setting phase serves a profound objective in research collaborations: the creation of a shared understanding and the transmission of knowledge, much akin to the underlying motivation of a *pā'ina* dinner—to bring people together for a common goal or purpose, binding the specifics of the research event and those who are invited.

The invitation

The next phase in a *pā'ina* is to invite people to the potluck. The invitation sets the event's tone and context and predicates the event's purpose: what is the aim, who is invited, who is omitted and what dish is appropriate to bring. Within these parameters, those who are invited can act accordingly and assume what the proper protocol is. In contrast, whoever comes without an invitation is an unwelcome guest and could put the whole event off balance.

In the realm of research, the phase of extending invitations, akin to the *pā'ina* dinner's invitation process, serves as a critical juncture for defining the research's purpose and scope. Just as an event invitation outlines the aim, guest list and appropriate contributions, a research invitation establishes the study's parameters (Kwaymullina, 2016). As a result, the guest researcher must focus on the context, understanding how they relate to others and their role in the lives of those they are researching (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021). Knowledge seekers, who view themselves as guests, seek and wait for the invitation to enter the relationship-building process with knowledge guardians. Taking this supplicant role places the knowledge guardians as the priority and acknowledges the host's sovereignty. This affirms that their host has the power to determine whether the research is worthwhile. This process emphasises the importance of contextual understanding for researchers, compelling them to consider their role and relationship with the community under investigation (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021). Adopting the perspective of

knowledge seekers who await an invitation aligns with respecting the host community's sovereignty and authority in deciding the research's worthiness and direction.

Like most events, some guests positively contribute to the common goal, and some are uninvited. *No aku birds!* is a phrase I often heard when invited to a *pā'ina* in Hawai'i. *Aku* birds are those that swoop in and take food from other birds. This metaphor of the *aku* bird is often used in a *pā'ina* to represent a guest who does not contribute a dish at a potluck. In a research setting, these uninvited guests can take many forms. First, a researcher can just show up without an invitation. As any good guest knows, if you are not invited, you don't go. Second, they can be researchers who decide what is needed for the community without acknowledging what the purpose of their invitation was from the host. They can also be a researcher who is simply an observer invited by other guests to gather and use data for their purposes. At a *pā'ina*, the guest is expected to do more than just show up for the event; they must contribute.

What do you bring?

Once guests receive the invitations, they must decide whether to accept them. If they choose to accept, guests must decide what their contribution to the meal will be. Some invitations specify what one is supposed to bring, while others let the guests contribute what they want. Whatever the case, the contribution must be within the set parameters of the host and be beneficial. These parameters can also be linked to the participants themselves, what is appropriate to wear, what kind of language is allowed at the event, what subjects can be talked about, what topics of conversation are forbidden, who is allowed to speak, and who should listen. Respect for these rules generates a sense of belonging to the community.

Researchers must approach their work with high self-awareness and consideration for what they bring to the research process. This includes acknowledging their own perspectives, biases and preconceived notions. Just as guests at a *pā'ina* potluck must be thoughtful about the dishes they contribute, researchers should carefully consider how their methodologies, cultural backgrounds and prior experiences may influence their interactions with the communities they engage with. These factors can significantly impact the research environment, potentially leading to misunderstandings or power imbalances. Therefore, researchers need to engage in critical self-reflection and actively seek to minimise their presence's adverse effects. By doing so, researchers can create a more equitable and respectful research environment, fostering trust and collaboration with the communities they study.

In the research context, the Hawaiian concept of *ho'opono* offers profound insights into ethical and culturally sensitive engagement with Indigenous communities (Aluli-Meyer, 1998). *Ho'opono* (right behaviour) (Meyer, 1998) serves as a guiding principle for guest researchers seeking to establish meaningful relationships with Indigenous knowledge guardians. It underscores the importance of adhering to cultural protocols, norms and values when entering these communities. Researchers must approach their work with a deep respect for the historical and contextual factors that shape the lives of the people they study. By doing so, they demonstrate cultural sensitivity and contribute to maintaining harmony, balance and order within these communities. *Ho'opono* calls upon researchers to be conscious of their own position and to act in ways that foster mutual understanding and respect. This requires self-reflection and truthfully answering the question, 'how am I contributing?' and whether this contribution is positive or negative.

In Indigenous research, this self-awareness is crucial as it empowers guest researchers to situate their identities within the specific Indigenous context they are investigating. Indigenous academics (Hurley & Jackson, 2020; Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019) have advocated for this approach, emphasising the need for researchers to recognise their historical and social positioning, significantly impacting their research interactions. By grounding themselves in their positionality, researchers can approach the research process more consciously and reflectively, aligning their work with the epistemologies and ontologies of the Indigenous community.

Who are you?

The age-old adage ‘You are what you eat’ pertains to more than just diet. In the context of a potluck, the dish cooked for the event can be understood as an extension of your identity and history. Foods brought to a communal table signify a participant’s ‘moral and social contribution’ (Julier, 2013). For instance, the dish may have cultural significance or represent family history. In the context of a potluck, the dish brought to the communal table symbolises a participant’s moral and social contribution and often carries cultural or familial significance.

An aspect of understanding context is understanding history. Knowledge seekers enter the research process with history and positionality that shape how they encounter their research subjects—these relations to history and context anchor researchers in the epistemologies and ontologies they employ. By grounding in relational positionality, researchers can reflect upon how these histories and contexts influence their research questions. Non-Indigenous researcher, Veronica Crossa (2012), explains, ‘A researcher’s positioning in a web of power relations shapes how subjects engage with them, and therefore informs all aspects of field research’ (p. 117). The issue’s essence does not lie solely in a researcher’s identity but in the knowledge tradition to which they have been exposed, trained or have come to regard as the prevailing paradigm for research excellence.

As *Kanaka O’iwi* scholar, Manulani Aluli-Myer (2006), writes, ‘Self-reflection of one’s thoughts and actions helps you understand that who you are, how you were raised, what you eat . . . all act as agents for your mindfulness or mindlessness. And all affect how you see and experience the world’ (p. 273). Guest researchers must be aware of their positioning within power dynamics, considering the historical backdrop of colonialism and striving to mitigate power imbalances throughout the research process.

The meal

The meal can begin once the hosts have prepared the space, the guests have arrived, and the host welcomes those who have come with a speech or prayer. Hosts and guests take food from the buffet table and find a place to sit, sometimes with people they know and occasionally next to people they do not. With food being shared, new connections and old bonds are strengthened. It is an entry point to unveil different dimensions of social relations. These dimensions are often revealed in the stories told at the meal. The role of the knowledge guardian is to tell the stories they feel comfortable sharing and for the knowledge seeker to listen. As a guest and knowledge seeker, one must be mindful of the language used when speaking and know when to listen. The stories told by knowledge guardians have history and context. They also tell of what the right thing is to do, the protocol.

Sharing food in this context serves as a metaphor for sharing knowledge and stories within Indigenous communities. As researchers engage with community members, they can strengthen

existing connections and form new ones. These interactions unveil different dimensions of social relations, often through the stories told by knowledge guardians. For researchers, it is imperative to adopt a humble and respectful posture, similar to that of a guest at a potluck. Being mindful of language, actively listening, and respecting the historical and contextual richness of the stories shared by knowledge guardians aligns with research protocol that values the cultural heritage and perspectives of the community. Ultimately, this approach helps researchers understand the protocols governing the community and guides them in conducting ethical and culturally sensitive research.

In Hawaiian epistemology, the self-reflection needed to create and heal relationships is called *hana pono* (Meyer, 1998). *Hana pono* is used as a guide for the correct behaviour and explains how effective relationships and knowledge acquisition can occur. By adhering to the protocols described in *hana pono*, harmony, balance and order are found in your community. If this harmony is disrupted, there is a process for setting things right, *ho'oponopono* (Aluli-Meyer, 1998). Manulani Meyer explains the deeper meaning of this process:

Ho'oponopono reflects Native Hawaiian epistemology because of its focus on the maintenance and return to harmonious relationship. It is a key philosophical element in understanding the weight of causality with regard to how one exists in the world. It was a world based on inter-relatedness, not separateness and isolation. It was a world where the natural and supernatural environment offered itself for dialogue . . . Knowledge is found in other, reflected off other, continued from other, nurtured through other. (p. 45-46)

Only by making things suitable by *hana pono* (right behaviour) can the harmony of *ho'oponopono* be achieved (Meyer, 1998). *Ho'oponopono* happens at the table with others through collaboration. Where you give the space for others to say their truth, to allow the truth and hurts to come forward, and for it to be led by the spirit of *aloha*, it acknowledges that research is not a one-way process but rather a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and insights. As in the *ho'oponopono* process, where issues are resolved through dialogue and understanding, guest researchers should engage in meaningful conversations with Indigenous knowledge guardians. This involves actively listening to their stories, respecting their perspectives and working collaboratively to address any issues or conflicts arising during the research journey. *Ho'oponopono* encourages researchers to recognise the interconnectedness of knowledge, where wisdom is found in the collective experiences and narratives of the community.

The conclusion of the Pā'ina

The goal of a potluck dinner is for new relationships to be formed and a community to be built. Everyone invited must do their part for a potluck to reach its goals. The successful potluck is a mix of different plates that share different identities, where not only one is praised, but all are. Queer author W.G. Tierney (1997) writes about how potlucks are used in queer communities to support inclusion within the community. He writes:

I get to the table not because I have proven any similarity to you, but because you cannot do without me in a world that is based on mutual respect and understanding (agape) . . . Rather, [we] desire and demand to be equal partners at the table where we honor each other's differences. In effect, we not only get to the table, but we also have a say in what's on the menu (producing meaning). (p. 55)

In other words, a potluck dinner celebrates uniqueness while also fostering connectedness, thus diminishing the distance between the self and the other.

This merging of the self and other is central to the Indigenous worldview. Intimate relationships with other humans, nature and spirituality are the cornerstone of Indigenous knowledge (Porsanger, 2004). Mutual respect and understanding are foundational principles that should guide a researcher's approach to their subject, especially in Indigenous research contexts. These principles underscore the importance of recognising the autonomy, knowledge and agency of the individuals or communities being studied. Researchers must approach their subjects with humility, openness, and a genuine willingness to listen and learn. It involves acknowledging the historical, social and cultural contexts that have shaped the subjects' experiences. Through this approach, researchers can build trust and meaningful relationships. To achieve this type of relationship, there must be active participation, responsibility and reciprocity by all in the community (Hart, 2010; Gianan, 2011). Being an active participant requires accepting responsibility (acknowledging the history and context) and respectful participation (following cultural protocol). In doing so, one can become a part of the greater community (where the self and the other become one).

CONCLUSION

A meal is an enticement to gather people together. Still, the real value behind the scenes at these meals is the transformation that occurs through creating new relationships and maintaining old ones. By nurturing these relationships, new possibilities can emerge. As a non-Indigenous knowledge seeker, I wanted to create a metaphor that enhances decolonisation processes within my group. The principles that underpin the *pā'ina* have informed and continue to inform my work as a researcher in Aotearoa in a Māori research centre. As a *manuhiri* on this land, I have been able to transform my relationship with the land and the people who call it home by actively contributing to decolonising spaces. I have created lasting relationships through this work and extended my *whānau* (family).

There is a need for traditional research paradigms to critically examine their history and acknowledge their role in continuing the narrative of colonisation through research. By using relationality approaches to understanding history and context rooted in Indigenous and feminist thought, more ethical, reciprocal, understanding and decolonising research can be done. The metaphor of a potluck provides a third space where Western-trained researchers take a step back, and Indigenous voices are centred. It is about mutual self-becoming, where self-awareness and reflection help heal the collective. It is the often uncomfortable and unsettled position of listening to the stories of others (Aveling, 2013). Listening and hearing what is said is part of the learning and unlearning process needed to create more reciprocal and respectful relationships.

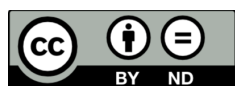
The focus of this essay is to turn the gaze around to deconstruct and decentre the normativity of Western paradigms in research, not to focus on the shortcomings of the 'other' (Indigenous researchers) in the academic context. Instead of knowledge seekers deciding what they think is appropriate, in a *pā'ina* research approach, the research method is negotiated through analysis of history, context and protocol to come together to create a shared understanding and productive relationships. Research by non-Indigenous peoples in Indigenous contexts must ensure that Indigenous self-determination is reached. It must support Indigenous peoples in their own goals and own research. It must centre on decolonising spaces; for this to occur, researchers must decolonise their approaches.

At a potluck, 'food tells a story and those who partake are obliged to listen' to these stories (Julier, 2013). Potlucks create spaces where people come together for a common goal of creating community and shared understanding. This shared understanding can only be achieved by acknowledging history and context, acknowledging differences and building respectful and reciprocal relationships that uphold uniqueness and connectedness. Relationships like these can lead to a change in the conversation of research. This change in the conversation can lead to research to find more meaningful ways that we all (Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples) may live together and sustain the land we depend upon (Kwaymullina, 2016).

REFERENCES

- Aikau, H. K. (2019). From *malihini* to *hoa'āina*: Reconnecting people, places, and practices. In N. Wilson-Hokowhitu (Ed.), *The Past before Us: Mo'okū'auhau as methodology* (pp. 81–93). University of Hawai'i Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7r428d.12>
- Aluli-Meyer, M. (1998). *Native Hawaiian epistemology: Contemporary narratives*. (EdD thesis). Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Aluli-Meyer, M. (2001). Indigenous and authentic: Hawaiian Epistemology and the triangulation of meaning. In *Handbook of critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. SAGE Publications, Inc, 2008. 217–231. Web.
- Aluli-Meyer, M. (2006). Changing the culture of research: An Introduction to the Tirangulation of Meaning. *Hūlili: Mutidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being*. 3(1), 263–279.
- Aveling, N. (2013). 'Don't talk about what you don't know': On (not) conducting research with/in Indigenous contexts. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(2), 203–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2012.724021>
- Cobb, D. J., Couch, D., & Fonua, S. M. (2019). Exploring, celebrating, and deepening Oceanic realities. *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 18(2), 1–10.
- Crossa, V. (2012). Relational positionality: Conceptualizing research, power, and the everyday politics of neoliberalization in Mexico City. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 11(1), 110–132.
- Derby, M. & Macfarlane, S. (2020). From the *rākau* to the *ngākau*: In pursuit of authentic and reliable research partnerships, experiences, and findings. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 26, 116–122. <https://doi.org/10.26686/nzaroe.v26.6900>
- Fasavalu, T. I., & Reynolds, M. (2019). Relational positionality and a learning disposition: Shifting the conversation. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 18(2), 11–25.
- Hart, M. A. (2010). Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and research: The development of an Indigenous research paradigm. *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work*, 1(1), 1–16.
- Hurley, E., & Jackson, M. K. (2020). *Msit No'kmaq*: An exploration of positionality and identity in Indigenous research. *Witness: The Canadian Journal of Critical Nursing Discourse*, 2(1), 39–50. <https://doi.org/10.25071/2291-5796.43>
- Gianan, N. (2011) Delving into the ethical dimension of *Ubuntu* philosophy, *Cultura*, 8(1), 63–82. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10193-011-0004-1>

- Johansson-Fua, S. U. (2016). The Oceanic researcher and the search for a space in comparative and international education. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 15(3), 30–41.
- Johansson-Fua, S. (2020). *Motutapu*. In *Relationality and learning in Oceania* (pp. 42-56). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004425316_003
- Jönsson, H., Michaud, M., & Neuman, N. (2021). What is commensality? A critical discussion of an expanding research field. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(12). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18126235>
- Julier, A. P. (2013). *Eating together: Food, friendship, and inequality*. University of Illinois Press. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306115579191v>
- Kwaymullina, A. (2016). Research, ethics and Indigenous peoples: An Australian Indigenous perspective on three threshold considerations for respectful engagement. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 12(4), 437–449. <https://doi.org/10.20507/AlterNative.2016.12.4.8>
- Mead, H. M. (2016, November 29). *Tikanga Maori* (Revised Edition). Huia Publishers.
- Porsanger, J. (2004). *An essay about indigenous methodology*. Semantic Scholar. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/An-essay-about-indigenous-methodology-Porsanger/fd700907e90d08f40ccb5f7bbeabb35482322981>
- Pukui, M. K. (1983). *Olelo No 'eau: Hawaiian proverbs and poetical sayings*. Bishop Museum Press.
- Pukui, M. & Elbert, S. (1986). *Hawaiian dictionary: Hawaiian-English English-Hawaiian* (Revised and Enlarged Edition). University of Hawaii Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824842260>
- Sanga, K., & Reynolds, M. (2020). Knowledge guardianship, custodianship and ethics: A Melanesian perspective. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 16(2), 99–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180120917481>
- Sanga, K., & Reynolds, M. (2021). Bringing research back home: Exploring Indigenous Melanesian *tok stori* as ontology. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 17(4), 532–542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801211058342>
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Tierney, W. G. (1997). *Academic outlaws*. Sage.
- Wendt, A. (1996). *New Zealand electronic poetry centre. Tatauing the post-colonial body*. span 42-43, 15-29. <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/wendt/tatauing.asp>.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit

Pā'ina: Using the metaphor of a potluck to reimagine a third space for ethical research in Indigenous contexts

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Authors and readers are free to copy, display and distribute this article with no changes, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives (IEJ: CP), and the same license applies. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>. The IEJ: CP is published by the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (formerly ANZCIES) and Sydney Open Access Journals at the University of Sydney. Articles are indexed in ERIC, Scimago Journal (SJR)Ranking / SCOPUS. The IEJ:CP is a member of the Free Journal Network: Join the IEJ: CP and OCIES Facebook community at Oceania Comparative and International Education Society, and Twitter: @OceaniaCIES

From the ground up: Weaving a *tok stori* of quality education

Dominique Mahuri

University of the South Pacific: dommeemahuri@gmail.com

Vilive Cagivinaka

Fiji National University: vilive.cagivinaka@fnu.ac.fj

Sereima Baleisomi

Fiji National University: Sereima.Baleisomi@fnu.ac.fj

Onelau Faamoemoe Soti

National University of Samoa: f.soti@nus.edu.ws

Martyn Reynolds

Victoria University of Wellington: msdfreynolds@gmail.com

Quality education is an often-heard term that has no single meaning. In this paper, we use the metaphor of mat weaving to structure an exploration of various elements that inform quality education. A warp of literature-derived threads is woven with the weft of practitioners' ideas of quality education to form the mat. These local perspectives were gifted through tok stori, a Melanesian oral form, through a session held at the OCIES 2022 Conference at the Fiji National University. The session brought together frontline educators from diverse Pacific settings to explore the dynamics of quality across contexts 'from the ground up', a seldom investigated direction. The woven discussion includes explorations of tensions between colonial pasts and the present and points to hopeful expectations about the not-yet-here. The resultant mat balances prevalent notions of quality that flow from distant places into Pacific settings with locally derived positional understandings and, in so doing, offers contextual flesh and currency to some of the key concepts valued by regional initiatives.

Keywords: Quality education; Pacific; contextualisation; tok stori; localisation; Fiji; Samoa; Vanuatu.

INTRODUCTION

Quality education is more often mentioned in educational discourse than it is defined. However, exactly what people mean by this term is significant because seeking quality education absorbs time, energy, money and other resources. Inappropriate definitions of quality education can lead to communities being poorly served by irrelevance or, worse, by socially and culturally erosive educational initiatives.

Quality generally denotes how good or bad something is. Claims of quality, therefore, involve judgements or evaluative statements informed by context. According to Hirst and Peters (1970), “‘educating’ people suggests a family of processes whose principle of unity is the development of desirable qualities in people” (p. 19). Desirability is also a contextual commodity. From this point of view, quality education focuses on processes that successfully grow skills, such as aptitudes, knowledges and abilities, that groups value. This approach is helpful for its processual and multifaceted emphasis and is valuable in a climate where the markers of educational quality can be reduced to potentially misleading numeric indicators (Thorpe et al.,

2023). Hirst and Peter's thinking admits both formal education, sometimes called schooling, and informal education—separate but potentially linked aspects of Pacific life.

In this article, we take a storied approach to investigating what quality education might mean in diverse Pacific contexts. We use the metaphor of mat weaving, a ubiquitous and well-understood activity in the Pacific region, as an organising feature. The weft of our investigation is formed by the contextual stories of four individuals gifted as part of a conference *tok stori* session and clarified and developed through subsequent *tok stori* engagements. The warp is provided by a conceptual discussion that links individuals' stories, framed by key aspects of the literature. The result of the weaving process foregrounds some contextual dynamics of quality education and points to thinking about what would be useful to contextualise. In this way, the article honours cultural ideas anchored in the past to map ways forward for regional initiatives that aim to deliver quality education.

We begin with a brief general literature review, which points to the significance of position, conceptualisation and change in considering what quality education could mean. The focus is then regionalised through two significant Pacific documents, *Tree of Opportunity* (Pene et al., 2002) and the foundational document of the *Pacific Regional Education Framework* (PacREF) (PacREF, 2018). We developed five points to form our warp from this activity. We then discuss the *tok stori* methodology before introducing the contributors and their individual stories to form our weft. The stories are then brought together through the analytical weaving process in light of the literature. Finally, honouring mats as purposeful artifacts, we offer observations regarding the usefulness of the exercise.

QUALITY EDUCATION IN THE LITERATURE

The literature on quality education is vast. Here, we feature two of many literature reviews chosen for differences in breadth and approach.

General literature

The comprehensive work of Barrett et al. (2006) reviewed how educational quality in low-income countries has been understood by international agencies, a significant group for the Pacific region in terms of funding. The review examines high-level documents and establishes five dimensions of quality education. The first, effectiveness, captures the degree to which education meets the needs of individuals and society and also examines the functioning of institutions, particularly schools. Second, efficiency is a dimension concerned with the extent to which inputs – generally money and other tangible resources – lead to desired educational outputs. Third, equality examines how well education is being accessed by the disadvantaged. Fourth, relevance looks at relationships between education, development and the purpose of education. Fifth, the dimension of sustainability, an ill-defined concept, sees quality as a present- and future-focussed matter.

Barrett et al. (2006) suggest that one's role or position in education informs the conceptualisation of and the balance between the five quality elements. For example, they suggest an economist's worldview dominates World Bank thinking with the result that dimensions, such as effectiveness and efficiency, are emphasised. By contrast, the United Nations-sponsored Education for All (UNESCO, 2002) movement stresses the dimension of equity. Structural position informs where people look when discussing and measuring quality. The result can be that notions and quality indicators can be generated at great physical, social and cultural distance from those intended to benefit.

A more recent review by Yoo et al. (2019) examined 121 papers from selected academic journals between 1960-2010. This temporal scope adds time as a dynamic to discussions of quality education. Yoo et al. found changes in the prevalence of four lenses used for conceptualising quality education: the post-colonial lens, which identifies quality in anti-elitism, consequent inclusion, increased consideration of local circumstance and the reduction of one-way teaching-learning relationships; the input-output lens in which quality reflects the degree to which education serves development; the human rights lens that values economic, political and cultural development (expanded by some to include human and environmental security and sustainability); and, finally, the social justice lens, which finds quality in the way education works to overcome inequalities and equalises the distribution of wealth and opportunities.

Yoo et al. (2019) report that the input-output lens numerically dominated their 50-year sample. However, from the 2000s, the human rights perspective on quality education grew, as did the social justice approach from 2010. The post-colonial lens remains relatively underrepresented. Overall, their analysis suggests that economically founded ideas of quality education are still dominant and that where quality is being rethought, it is through other ‘universally’ framed lenses, such as human rights and social justice. They report that cultural sustainability and more local and contextual rethinking of education are becoming part of the overall discourse of quality education but in relatively muted forms.

Key Pacific documents

Focussing the discussion on the Pacific region, Pene et al. (2002) provide papers that formed the written foundation for the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for Pacific Peoples (RPEIPP) initiative. The word ‘quality’ occurs in Pene et al. at least 65 times in contexts such as the educational relevance of human values and qualities, good citizenship, teacher training, responding to colonial legacies, the balance between school and informal education and the potential roles of local communities in introduced educational systems.

As initial advocacy research, Pene et al. (2002) made a case for change to encourage local Ministries of Education to clarify country visions for quality education useful in future dialogue with donors (personal communication, K. Sanga, 20th July 2023). A post-colonial lens is evident in a critique of input-output lenses on Pacific education, quality as efficiency, absence of relevance and weak emphasis on sustainability, especially in the cultural domain. The papers in Pene et al. point to the tension between universal ideas of quality education and local definitions in a context where education historically has offered inadequate rewards for the investment of Pacific peoples.

The more recent *Pacific Regional Education Framework* foundational document (PacREF, 2018) refers to quality over 50 times. The preface describes quality education and training as fundamental steps towards knowledge and technology-driven economies, sustainable societies and cultures for Pacific Island Nations. One of four policy areas links quality and relevance. Relevance is imagined in programmes and learning environments where values, knowledge and skills are locally derived, learning is holistic, a rights-based agenda is prevalent, and learning is not elitist nor used to exclude others. Teacher professionalism is a second policy area centred on quality, recognising the significance of teachers in the education of the young. Unresolved tensions can be seen in PacREF between universal and local ideas of quality, social and economic focusses, ‘soft’ measures of quality such as well-being and ‘hard’ measures such as achievement data and, finally, the pasts of colonial histories and the future of self-determining entities.

Key points: The warp

Although the sample of literature discussed here is limited, the ideas involved make possible five helpful points about quality education to form the warp for our weaving. First and most obviously, the concept of quality education is evidently hard to define conclusively. Second, one's position in education is likely to be reflected in the balance between and conceptualisation of various elements that define quality. This affects how quality is measured and, consequently, judgements about its presence or absence. Third, links between quality education, post-colonial contexts and sustainability are significant in the Pacific region. Fourth, there is potential to incorporate local Pacific values within pedagogy and curriculum as aspects of quality in the region. Finally, the significance of contextualisation is apparent through its relevance as an element in quality education. These observations provide a platform that suggests the value of the garnering of stories of frontline educators to offer positional insights and deeply contextual thinking about quality education in the Pacific, a region where the influence of colonial education still resonates. These five points will be reprised later.

METHODOLOGY

This paper arises from a session convened at the Oceania International and Comparative Education Society (OCIES) conference held at the Natabua Campus of the Fiji National University between 21–23 November 2022 and convened by Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington and Fiji National University. The session was titled '*Quality Education: A tok stori*'.

Tok stori denotes a Melanesian orality, a traditional conversational form that, in research, validates the whole person so that emotions, experiences, physical, mental and spiritual dimensions, and relationships are all valued (Sanga & Reynolds, 2023). *Tok stori* is dynamic; by weaving narratives, speakers come together as a collective, intensifying relationships and enhancing mutual understanding (Iromea & Reynolds, 2021). The form has been used in conference settings to produce papers that articulate keynote contributions (Sanga, Johannson-Fua et al., 2020), discuss relationality (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019) and explore *tok stori* itself (Sanga et al., 2018). In the present case, *tok stori* is used to explore quality education.

The data in this paper is centred on a one-hour *tok stori* session at which four of the authors were invited speakers, and the fifth was chair. Following that session, further digital *tok stori* sessions were staged to expand and clarify ideas from the initial session, and emails were also exchanged. Contributions were given in English, recorded, transcribed and analysed using Informed Grounded Theory (Thornberg, 2012), a process that involves coding data by testing initial sensitising concepts. In this case, initial codes derived from notions of quality education in the literature were shaped/augmented according to the *tok stori* data. This process drew from the evident tensions in the relevant literature while providing a frame for the contextual contributions of the speakers. The process was coordinated by Martyn Reynolds, an educator with 35 years of experience who is originally from the United Kingdom but now holds a post-doctoral position at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand.

In line with the weaving structure of this article, we now offer narrative moments about quality education from the speakers in the order of the conference as weft. In each case, we first provide a short biographical statement as context.

THE STORIES – THE WEFT

Stori one: Dominique

Dominique Mahuri, from Pentecost Island, Vanuatu, has been a teacher for 15 years. He is currently working as a school Principal under the Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training.

Vanuatu is a country comprising over 80 islands in a chain in the western Pacific Ocean. It can be described as part of Melanesia, characterised by cultural diversity, indicated by the 140+ languages spoken there. Vanuatu's education system has evolved significantly over the years. As former colonial powers, the British and French played a key role in shaping Vanuatu's educational landscape, contributing to literacy and numeracy teaching. Both colonial powers established separate educational systems, reflecting their beliefs, culture and language. After Vanuatu gained its independence, a unified education system was sought whereby cultural diversity, local languages and traditional knowledge would be included in the curriculum. Efforts have since been made to improve education quality and promote inclusivity.

Dominique is mindful of the way French and British colonial legacies have shaped schools in Vanuatu, which has resulted in a dual state system, with attendant markers of quality represented in literature through a narrative of unpayable school fees, low literacy and insufficient school places (Hughes, 2004) and by reference to United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (McCormick, 2016). In Dominique's experience, however, communities see quality education as 'about embracing their values, giving back to the community, respecting communal protocols and norms and establishing lots of relationships within the communities'.

The centrality of community in local definitions of quality education in Dominique's *tok stori* integrates the human and the non-human—the notion of community is inclusive. Community embraces 'shared concepts—consciously or unconsciously. The river, the bird, the mountain, they all affect the whole in one way or another'. Quality education, therefore, is holistic and, from Dominique's point of view, has three elements: the teacher, the student and 'the space – the school that is your house . . . the values . . . the church . . . the environment . . . the physical space, what they [learners] see, meet, say'. This approach asks the question: 'What does a child learn on the way to school from the bush they walk through on the way?' as well as what is taught in classrooms. Informal education and schooling are proximal and integrated.

In the Vanuatu context, living a *kastom* life is a choice for many. While some may see this as 'rejecting modern goods and services, for example, clothes, food and education (Hughes, 2004, p. 357), *kastom* holistically embraces traditional practices and values as positives to the extent that *kastom* schools have been set up. Among their functions described in the literature is the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge, reinforcing the integration of people and their environment. Dominique speculates that the origin of *kastom* schools in the 1980s involved elders from villages realising they needed to teach the young to be ni-Vanuatu and that borrowing some structures from the missionaries, such as schools, would be a way forward. As such, *kastom* schools are 'an adaptive approach to the transmission of *kastom* and culture' (McCarter et al., 2014, p. 5).

Some children stay in *kastom* school and later blend into the *kastom* economy, and some migrate between systems. Dominique's experience suggests that those who leave *kastom* school and come to the state school system bring evidence of valuable, high-quality learning. 'They give respect to protocols, keeping up traditions. They behave differently [to students who have not attended *kastom* schools]—they attend, listen, are concerned with doing things "properly"

or in an orderly manner.’ Consequently, it is clear to him that ‘kastom schools have an important role in promoting behaviours, attitudes and skills’ with transferable potential. This is in addition to cognitive knowledge, ‘agriculture, survival skills, meditation, stories, songs, the (traditional) calendar and language’, featured in *kastom* schools.

For many Ni-Vanuatu who engage with the formal education system, Dominique says the outcome of a qualification is ‘a plus’, in addition to being ‘skilful and knowledgeable in *kastom*’. In rural schools particularly, the concept of quality education includes ‘*being able to conform to the rules, to live in traditional society*’, to be able to do important things well in the community. ‘Having a qualification doesn’t equal being qualified. Giving respect, weaving into the right way of doing things, how you behave—these are the evidence of quality learning, of who you are before you go to school.’ School should not strip these facets out because ‘these are the reasons you will be respected and listened to more’. Thus, while the *kastom* school system sits parallel to, but separate from, the state system, *kastom* ideas of quality underpin thinking in both.

Stori two: Vilieve

Vilive Cagivinaka is from Fiji. He has been an academic and a teacher educator for 24 years and works for the Fiji National University. His expertise includes teacher education, higher education administration, programme development and review.

Fiji is located in the central Pacific and is often described as Melanesian. The most common language spoken is English, followed by Fijian or iTaukei, the language of the Indigenous people, which comprise 62% of the population (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The Bau dialect is considered the standard language among the iTaukei. Fiji Hindi-speaking Indo-Fijians, the descendants of indentured labourers (Whitehead, 1981), comprise 34.2% of the population. Sub-groups exist within that community linked to religion and cultural groups, further complicating the ethnic situation (Goundar, 2017). Other ethnic groups comprise the remaining 3.8% of the population, many hailing from Pacific Island countries (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Puamau (2001) suggests that colonisation impacted the lives of Indigenous Fijians, including by transforming the Fijian traditional learning system and values, introducing Eurocentric agendas and disregarding indigenous knowledge. The widespread use of English in schooling and elsewhere highlights the persistence of colonial structures in this post-colonial era.

The geographical setting of Fiji shapes the education system. Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, the two main islands, are both rugged and mountainous, complicating communication between and within them. Many outer islands remain relatively isolated. Schools in remote areas are managed mainly by the iTaukei and have predominantly iTaukei students. Christian missionaries established schools attended mainly by the iTaukei, later adopted by various provinces, communities and Christian denominations. Indo-Fijian communities also established schools, mostly affiliated with Muslim or Hindu groups (Whitehead, 1981). These can be differentiated further based on cultural connections, such as Sangam and Sikh. Management of Indo-Fijian schools previously reflected these layers, enabling the promotion of cultural and ethnic interests. However, the government took over all community-based schools in 2014, restricting the role of school committees. Consequently, cultural and religious practices were removed from schools.

Fiji’s diverse and inclusive society presents a multifaceted challenge for policy and decision-makers. However, despite the complexity, which leads to differing definitions and perspectives on quality education, shared themes and interests transcend differences (Koya-Vaka’uta, 2004).

Vilive recognises Fiji's complexity when imagining what quality education might mean in Fiji. He proposes the ubiquitous Pacific fruit salad as a metaphor that accounts for the pattern of representation that sits at the heart of quality education. 'The various fruits are in there. You need all the fruits in [appropriate] proportion so that when you enjoy the fruit salad, you are not only tasting one fruit. You should be able to taste all the fruits . . . Otherwise, it is not a quality fruit salad.'

At a national level, the metaphor points to the need for balance and inclusion in the curriculum since one of the functions of education in Fiji should be fostering unity through mutual understanding. Diversity of religions and ideologies brings social and cultural wealth but raises concerns about respecting the rights and fulfilling the needs of all citizens (Lingam & Lingam, 2014). Balance among the cultural 'fruits' is a challenge for the Fiji Ministry of Education. To Vilive, the metaphor is also essential at the individual level. Learners 'should be able to taste themselves, see their needs being addressed and see something relevant to them. They will not be pleased if they fail to find themselves in the salad. There will be resentment.'

In this complex situation, the metaphor provides a broad base for ideas of quality, recognising the legitimacy of diverse views of parents and communities. 'For some, their idea of quality is good grades. Others see quality if education provides a decent job. And some parents send their children to school to be a good person'. Vilive says that from an iTaukei perspective, embracing goodness may entail upholding the environment, treating people with respect, safeguarding and venerating traditional customs and observing language. Because economic, social, and cultural outcomes variously feature as markers of quality education, an inclusive salad is required to conceptualise purpose, answering the longstanding regionally significant question, 'Education for What?' (Bugotu et al., 1973) in layered, nuanced ways.

In Fiji, quality education is not an individually held value. In Vilive's experience, education is 'not for your personal benefit, but for your community'. iTaukei people have obligations within the vanua (Nabobo-Baba, 2006, 2008), the place-centred spiritual and philosophical backbone of Fijian life, as do other Fijians within clan, family and religious structures. Therefore, quality education is characterised by the ability to make substantive and appropriate contributions to one's community(ies). This can be captured by the notion of *solesolevaki*, 'communal collaboration' (p. 146) or 'collective community effort' (Movono & Becken, 2018, p. 151). *Solesolevaki* is a form of social capital implicated in the mobilisation of Fijians both now and in the past, contributing to social sustainability and coherence (Raisele, 2021). To Vilive, *solesolevaki*, as an element of quality education, has great potential to support Fijians going forward at village and nation-building levels. Modelled on 'solidarity in the traditional community', *solesolevaki* is a marker of quality education 'because you cannot achieve [success] on your own'. *Solesolevaki*, in the context of quality education, extends in time so that the benefits sought are for 'the people that are behind me, my Vanua, my relatives, my children'.

The fruit salad metaphor of quality education stands in contrast to the past. Vilive says, 'We've been accepting one structure, the European western structure. It has not worked. It has failed us. We have gained confidence now to start questioning.' Rejecting imposed narrow notions of quality in education embodied in individualism and competition has made space for more 'fluid' ideas. Times have changed, and in Fiji, 'the indigenous people will not be isolated anymore. We need to live together. The iTaukei have been living with others, accepting them and giving them a home. How can others live with us? Can we accept each other's distinctiveness and keep our own in a peaceful, coexisting environment? Now, the world has become smaller in the sense that everyone is connected. Therefore, the concept of quality now

encompasses education that is friendly to everyone, not just a select few.’ Quality education as a fruit salad requires balance, temperance, careful listening and the confidence to approach difficult conversations with respect and hope.

Stori three: Sereima

Sereima Baleisomi is from Macuata, Fiji. She is a lecturer in primary education at the Fiji National University.

For her thinking on quality education in Fiji, Sereima turns first to one of her parents. ‘My mother would say, “It’s no point having so many qualifications when you don’t have the wisdom to be wise. If you have so many qualifications, but you cannot make wise decisions, it comes to nothing.” That’s one perspective on quality education.’ Sereima maps the holistic qualities of wisdom as involving ‘the head, the hands and the feet,’ a unity in which ‘knowledge, skills and attitudes work together in complementary ways’.

A cultural reference given by Sereima in her story is *yalomatua*. Tuimavana (2020) explains *yalomatua* as ‘wisdom’ or ‘mature spirit’, denoting when the *yalo* or soul gains the status of the *matua* or old. A person can be young ‘but behave in adult-like status [and] have an attitude to become self-sufficient or self-reliant [which] permeates their whole being’ (p. 89). *Yalomatua* is contextual in that it depends on what people value. ‘For those who value traditional relationships, *yalomatua* would mean knowing your relations, knowing how to perform traditional practices, and so on. For those who value education, *yalomatua* would mean prioritising schoolwork, managing time well, and so on.’ *Yalomatua* as quality education involves gaining information and being ‘able to use and interpret’, which might lead to ‘A grades’ but, more importantly, to ‘wise decisions for the self and community’. A mark of the absence or presence of quality education is that ‘the whole people is shamed or praised’. To Sereima, quality is expressed in ‘the balance between the individual, the individual-in-relationship, the collective’. When significance is given to ‘emotion, *yalo*, the spirit or inner person—the economy of mutual care, you’ll know your relationships and relational obligations and will have the higher knowledge of the home. And then if you get a qualification on top of that, that’s like the icing on the cake. It’s not the cake.’ The quality of education, therefore, can be found in the weaving of two knowledges of school and home rather than placing these in competition or opposition.

Balance, however, is not easy. Looking individually, Sereima recalls, ‘One time I saw this boy. I was trying to walk into a supermarket, and then he had a whole bucket of roti to sell. This is during school, mind you, so I think for the parents, education it’s not a priority. I think the priority was putting food on the table.’ This story tells that where poverty exists, the enabling potential of school knowledge can be sacrificed for more immediate needs and gaining any quality in or from formal education becomes impossible.

Obtaining a balance is not simple at the national level. Sereima recalls deliberate attempts to bring the iTaukei and Indo-Fijian communities together in classrooms through language. ‘The teacher training college tried to teach conversational Fijian and Fiji Hindi. You know, in the hope that when [trainees] go [out to school], at least they would be able to code switch at a conversational level’. One aim was to balance the representation and wisdoms of each group in the teaching space. A second was the reasonable hope that by hearing their own language, ‘the students will feel more welcome in the space . . . breaking the ice between the teacher and the student.’ However, Sereima admits ‘it didn’t work’. This linguistic and relational initiative aimed at living well together took place in a context where ‘[we’ve] been together in this community in Fiji for more than a century. But [we] haven’t picked up conversation language.’

Bilingualism has generally involved English rather than Fijian/Fijian Hindi, reinforced by the education system. This shows one way past and present relationships affect the balances involved in quality education in colonised contexts such as Fiji.

These language-centred recollections return the story to the question of culture when constructing a fruit salad of quality education in Fiji at the classroom level. As Sereima says, '[Vilive] is talking about culture, but my question is "Who's culture?" In a diverse society like Fiji, whose culture do we promote? Is it the students' culture or the teachers'?' Sereima's questions about what quality might mean point to cultural democracy (Helu-Thaman, 2009) and asking questions is 'a positive start'.

Stori Four – Moe

Onelau Faamoemoe Hakai Soti is from Samoa. She has 15 years' experience at the Curriculum Division, Ministry of Education. Moe has also been an academic and a teacher educator for the same period and currently works for the National University of Samoa.

Samoa is made of nine volcanic islands, the main ones being Upolu and Savai'i. It has an international reputation as a tropical paradise. This image can mask social, political and economic challenges, including providing an education system to serve the country's present needs (Tuia, 2019). Samoa became independent from New Zealand in 1962 and was previously under German administration. Various villages have their own protocols, but compared to some other Pacific jurisdictions, Samoa is culturally and linguistically uniform, with Gagana Sāmoa being spoken across the country.

Moe's story of quality education focuses on teachers and their training. Education is a relational practice in which students' cultures have a place, but in which the cultures that teachers carry, both personal and professional, are also part of the negotiation, which provides parameters for quality. From this point of view, quality is constructed in the relationships between 'qualified teachers', who have spent time studying various forms of effective knowledge transmission, have gained subject knowledge beyond the ordinary, and know about how learning happens. 'Quality learning resources' are materials that can be used effectively in pedagogic ways because, for example, they are relevant, significant and reflect local experience. 'Quality ongoing professional development' recognises that the world is not static and that education is a journey that no teacher ever completes.

Moe suggests that in her context and according to her research, evidence of quality is a matter of layers, in that teachers 'shape and mould the younger generation of their country' to be 'good and useful citizens', children acquire the knowledge 'to be successful for their age at school', and pedagogic activities performed 'challenge the brains of the children'. These layers co-locate the social, academic and cognitive as aspects of education relevant to quality.

Prior to the arrival of the missionaries in the 1830s, Samoan life was mainly focused on family and village lifestyles. Everyday tasks such as cooking, fishing, hunting, weaving, housekeeping and boat building were used as education of the young (Coxon, 1996; Faoagali, 2004; Petana-Ioka, 1995). However, under colonial administration, a hierarchy was established so that practical activities were relegated compared to academic 'book' work. Under the Pastor school system from the 1830s, practical work was placed in a hierarchy based on gender. For example, it was assumed that Food and Textiles Technology education was to prepare young girls as *faifeau's* (ministers') wives and as mothers. The relegation of these areas of the curriculum continues to be a problem.

A further holistic aspect of Moe's vision of quality education is that teachers should not only teach children but also embrace the needs of parents. If they find some parents 'who only want [their children to be] lawyers, doctors, while collar workers', teachers have a role in delivering both the 'academic core' such as literacy and numeracy and 'practical subjects'. In some cases, parents need education to appreciate the quality of this balance by not favouring the historic attention on academic education of colonial education. In a dynamic situation, Moe suggests teachers also feel the pull of the past so that professional learning and development, which encourages teachers to avoid a 'drift back into the past' will preserve a situation where 'they are doing their job to work hand-in-hand with students'- *focusing* on learning through a relationship of partners rather than as a distant expert. These matters address the issue of whether quality Samoan education involves the preservation of the educational past or is an agent of change seeking a more locally relevant educational future (Pereira, 2006).

Moe tells a research story of enacting this layered vision of quality from the point of view of her specialist area, Food, Textiles and Technology. She recalls that the quality of education 'can vary . . . where teachers were struggling to teach without teaching resources in a mainly practical oriented subject' like Visual Arts, Health and Physical Education and Music. If quality here is a balance or integration of action and thought, 'teachers need more power to explore teaching and learning in the classroom and its capability to develop intellectual skills and higher-level thinking' so that no false separation divides the practical and academic.

To bring depth to practical activities, 'professional development for teachers should emphasise not only [practical] skills and knowledge'. Still, it should enable teachers to 'explore their own values and beliefs in developing content and pedagogical experiences to change teacher practice'. This, in turn, requires attention to 'the conditions that surround teacher professional development'.

On a practical level, quality in teacher development includes a dual focus: on students through 'assisting schools to be more selective when focusing their training and development on student learning needs' and on teachers 'developing strategies to change classroom teaching practice'. In systems terms, a progressive journey towards quality is supported by 'ongoing induction for the new teachers to develop teaching goals, knowledge and strategies that they need', including 'ongoing teacher training at school-based level'. Unfortunately, experience tells Moe that 'some of the school principals had never allowed this to happen in the schools'. For example, 'some principals do not link the importance of the thematic approaches of teaching and learning the core subjects versus the practicals in the classroom'. Moe's story shows how ideas about quality education require enactment at the micro level and places emphasis on the quality of educational leadership, capable of embracing *fa'aSamoa* (Samoan philosophical) ideas of leadership (Finau, 2017) as a key aspect of quality education since teacher education *is* student education.

DISCUSSION: WEAVING THE MAT

We now turn to weave together the warp of five points developed from the literature and the weft of the four stories from the *tok stori* to produce a mat that we hope will be of value.

First, the four frontline narratives reinforce the first point that quality education is hard to define, even when discussion is limited to the Pacific region. Dominique's *stori* provides a clear distinction between markers of quality held in *kastom*, and those which are typically used in education systems introduced to the region, such as examination passes; Vilive and Sereima's

stories illustrate how ideas of quality vary across and within communities in Fiji; and Moe's experience shows how different members of the teaching profession seem to understand quality in varied ways. Glib, unelucidated use of the term 'quality education' in the Pacific is likely, therefore, to be problematic.

Second, the narratives support the point that one's position in an education system affects ideas of quality. Our aim has been to present a 'bottom-up' perspective. This contrasts with 'top-down' views. Our reading of Barrett et al. (2006) suggests that quality is theorised primarily through efficiency and effectiveness when seen from both 'above' and afar. However, the frontline positions given here by Pacific practitioners stress elements such as relevance and sustainability, particularly in cultural terms. These elements may seem less solid than statistical measures used for assurance of efficiency and effectiveness but are, nonetheless, both visible and clearly felt in the four narratives. The presence of *solesolevaki* and *yalomatua* as indicators of quality education are examples, as is the integration of hands-head-heart and/or social/academic/cognitive in education as markers of quality in the stories of Sereima and Moe.

The salience of links between quality education, post-colonial contexts and sustainability suggested as the third point by our literature review is given flesh by the four contributions to our *tok stori*. These show how ideas of quality constructed in the wake of colonial history vary. In Dominique's context, *kastom* schools borrow from colonial institutional structures but provide a village-based alternative fitting to those who value a *kastom* economy. The presence of *kastom* schools also provides the basis of opportunities to migrate to and from the state education systems and, therefore, provides a choice on how to engage with education in its introduced form in Vanuatu. The fruit salad metaphor gains power from Fiji's post-colonial population diversity. It provides a thought platform for the potential contributions of education to unity-in-diversity in Fiji's multi-ethnic context. Moe's observations involve a partnership between learners and teachers, an element of the post-colonial lens developed by Yoo et al. (2019). When Moe speaks of a 'drift back into the past' on the part of teachers who are not sustained by continued professional learning, she refers to the power of inertia that maintains the dominant role of teachers over learners derived from colonial educational models. Cultural sustainability is the subtext of concepts such as *kastom*, *solesolevali* and *yalomatua* in accounts of quality education.

Echoing a theme from Pene et al. (2002) and central to the RPEIPP initiative, the practitioners' narratives illustrate the fourth literature-derived point by showing various ways to integrate Pacific values into pedagogy and curriculum. Across the various cultural references, a central axis is the link between quality education and benefits to the group. Although elements of quality education, such as effectiveness and efficiency, and lenses, such as the input-output lens, may value benefits to the country-as-group through economic development, there are differences between this and the *tok stori* accounts in terms of scale and tangibility. Quality in the four narratives is constructed at a small scale; for example, for Moe in classrooms and schools, for Dominique in villages and culture groups, and for Sereima in community collectives. Paradoxically, the visibility and tangibility of attitudes and actions in small-scale contexts contrasts with the intangibility and immediate invisibility of the benefits that accrue to the national collective from, say, the examination successes of individuals.

Finally, our weaving heightens the significance of contextualisation, the core of the fifth point derived from the literature. Since quality is subjective and the 'desirable qualities in people' (Hirst & Peters, 1970, p. 19) that justify education are contextually sanctioned, seeking ideas of quality from the frontline is a valuable exercise. Contextualisation is a layered phenomenon that ranges from changing to embrace a few local words or names in thinking from distant

places to wholesale reconsideration of the purposes of education (Sanga, Maebuta et al., 2020), the visions and values that underpin the work of educators, and the way quality is framed in each context. Ontological ideas such as holism, time and relationality underpin various ideas in the narratives, as do contextual political perspectives, such as the appropriate balance between the individual, collective and nation in education and the role of culture in schools. Further, context means negotiating local relationships between formal (school-based) education and informal education. This involves a discussion about the permeability of the spaces between the two, indicated by Dominique's story of walking to school, and between wisdoms speaking from the past, such as the words of Sereima's mother and the imagined demands of unknown futures, present in Vilive's remark that quality education is tied to 'the people that are behind me, my Vanua, my relatives, my children'. Context is significant in these matters since there is no universal way of experiencing education or defining quality.

CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF THE MAT

This article has woven a warp derived from international literature and key regional documents and a weft of *tok stori* contributions from frontline educators from the Pacific region to form a mat that we hope will be useful in inviting further thought and exploration. Mats can be beautiful but should always be useful. Therefore, we conclude by offering some thoughts about the usefulness of the communal exercise we participated in.

First, we reiterate that no assumptions can be made about the meaning of quality education. The mat warns us that assumptions give power to the assumer that affects everybody who 'sits' in the model of education which eventuates.

Second, the mat has been made by weaving various sources of evidence about quality education. This balances the seductively easy-to-collect forms of evidence (often used to support effectiveness and efficiency as cornerstones of quality education) with hard-to-quantify but locally visible results of education, such as the embodiment of attitudes and the enactment of values. These are aspects that support sustainability and relevance as mainstays of quality.

Third, the weaving process we have employed suggests that Pacific education would look very different if the direction of consultation were adjusted to listen more carefully to frontline practitioners who have deep knowledge of context. The writers in Pene et al. (2002) knew this well, and we hope those charged with progressing PacREF also recognise the potential of frontline consultation at conceptual and practical phases of initiatives. Asking questions of frontline educators has great potential.

Within our stories, a wide range of elements of quality education presented by frontline educators is present. Story 1 shows the significance of behaviour, attitudes and culture in concepts of quality. Story 2 shows how sweetness and balance are potential indicators of quality when the importance of peaceful, honourable co-existence is understood. Story 3 highlights the salience of the balances between the individual, the individual-in-relationship and the collective in understandings of quality education. Story 4 points to the quality of educational leadership as a key aspect of quality education since teacher education and student education are two sides of one coin. This rich range of elements reflects positional, experiential and contextual wisdom about quality in education and counters reductive approaches to the field.

Turning to methodology, *tok stori* as an orality has proved helpful in investigating conceptual thinking informed by experiential learning. Investigating matters such as quality education through oralities does not produce tidy or simplistic answers but can expand the discussion. Complex and hard-to-define ideas can be more completely appreciated as a result. Careful

weaving can produce insight from diversity and commonalities from differences. It also honours the separation and individuality of *stori* strands.

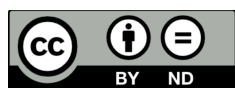
Finally, we hope that our exercise in weaving honours Epeli Hau'ofa's (1994) vision for our region, a sea of islands in which diversity is a strength as we negotiate the tensions between colonial pasts and the present we all feel in education. Collective work is a source of inspiration that has enhanced our appreciation of each other and points with expectation to the not-yet-here.

REFERENCES

- Barrett, A., Chawla-Duggan, R., Lowe, J., Nickel, J., & Ukpo, E. (2006). *Review of the 'international' literature on the concept of quality in education*. EdQual.
- Bugotu, F., Maeke, D., Paia, H., Ramoni, M., & Arnold, B. (1973). *Education for what? A report on the findings of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate Educational Policy Review Committee*. Honiara, Solomon Islands: Department of Education Government Printer.
- Coxon, E. (1996). *The politics of modernization in Western Samoa education*. Canterbury University Press.
- Faoagali, S. (2004). *Bridging the gap between the old and the new secondary curriculum in Samoan school curriculum*. (Master of Teaching and Learning), Christchurch College of Education, New Zealand.
- Fasavalu, T. I., & Reynolds, M. (2019). Relational positionality and a learning disposition: Shifting the conversation. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 18(2), 11–25.
<https://openjournals.library.usyd.edu.au/index.php/IEJ/article/viewFile/14035/12641>
- Fiji Bureau of Statistics. (2022). 2019-2020 Household income and expenditure survey.
<https://www.statsfiji.gov.fj/>
- Finau, S. P. (2017). *Women's leadership in traditional villages in Samoa: The cultural, social, and religious challenges*. (Docoral thesis). Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.17060429>
- Goundar, P. R. (2017). *In simple words*. Vicars Press.
- Hau'ofa, E. (1994). Our sea of islands. *The contemporary Pacific*, 6(1), 148–161.
- Helu-Thaman, K. (2009). Towards cultural democracy in teaching and learning with specific references to Pacific Island Nations (PINs). *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 1–6.
- Hirst, P. H., & Peters, R. S. (1970). *The logic of education* (Vol. 16). Routledge.
- Hughes, D. (2004). Reflecting on early literacy development in the context of Vanuatu. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 5(3), 349–360.
<https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2004.5.3.7>

- Iromea, J., & Reynolds, M. (2021). Access, ethical leadership and action in Solomon Islands education: A tok stori. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 20(3), 31–44.
<https://openjournals.library.usyd.edu.au/index.php/IEJ/article/viewFile/15491/13791>
- Koya-Vaka'uta, C. F. (2004). *Searching for an inclusive national consciousness through education: Ethnicity, identity and diversity: The Case of Fiji*. Paper presented at the Global Pedagogies: Equity, Access and Democracy in Education, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia.
http://paddle.usp.ac.fj/collect/paddle/index/assoc/anzcies0/4_02.dir/doc.pdf
- Lingam, G. I., & Lingam, N. (2014). Leadership and management training for school heads: A milestone achievement for Fiji. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 42(2), 1–17.
- McCarter, J., Gavin, M. C., Baereleo, S., & Love, M. (2014). The challenges of maintaining indigenous ecological knowledge. *Ecology and Society*, 19(3), 1–12.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-06741-190339>
- McCormick, A. (2016). Vanuatu education policy Post-2015: 'Alternative', decolonising processes for 'development'. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 15(3), 16–29.
- Movono, A., & Becken, S. (2018). Solesolevaki as social capital: A tale of a village, two tribes, and a resort in Fiji. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 23(2), 146–157.
- Nabobo-Baba, U. (2006). *Knowing and learning: An indigenous Fijian approach*. Institute for Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
- Nabobo-Baba, U. (2008). Decolonising framings in Pacific research: Indigenous Fijian Vanua research framework as an organic response. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 4(2), 140–154.
- PacREF. (2018). *Pacific regional education framework (PacREF) 2018–2030: Moving towards education 2030*. Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific/Pacific Islands Forum.
- Pene, F., Taufe'ulungaki, A. M., & Benson, C. (Eds.). (2002). *Tree of opportunity: Re-thinking Pacific education*. Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific, Institute of Education.
- Pereira, J. A. (2006). *Aspects of primary education in Samoa: Exploring student, parent and teacher perspectives*. (Doctoral thesis). University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- Petana-Ioka, K. (1995). *Secondary education in Western Samoa. Development in the English curriculum 1960's-1990's*. (Master of Education thesis). University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- Puamau, P. Q. (2001). A post-colonial reading of affirmative action in education in Fiji. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 4(2), 109–123.
- Raisele, K. (2021). Reconstructing social capital in Fijian classrooms: Lessons learnt from Solesolevaki. *Directions: Journal of Educational Studies*, 35(2), 49–56.
- Sanga, K., Johannson-Fua, S., Nabobo-Baba, U., & Reynolds, M. (2020). The keynote-as-storied-discussion: A Pacific departure. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 19(2), 8–19.

- Sanga, K., Maebuta, J., Johansson-Fua, S., & Reynolds, M. (2020). Re-thinking contextualisation in Solomon Islands school leadership professional learning and development. *Pacific Dynamics*, 4(1), 17–29. <https://dx.doi.org/10.18124/gyp6-bc39>
- Sanga, K., & Reynolds, M. (2023). Melanesian Tok Stori research. In J. Okoko, S. Tunison, & K. D. Walker (Eds.), *Varieties of qualitative research methods* (pp. 303–308). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04394-9_48
- Sanga, K., Reynolds, M., Paulsen, I., Spratt, R., & Maneipuri, J. (2018). A tok stori about tok stori: Melanesian relationality in action as research, leadership and scholarship. *Global Comparative Education*, 2(1), 3–19.
- Thornberg, R. (2012). Informed grounded theory. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 56(3), 243–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2011.581686>
- Thorpe, K., Houen, S., Rankin, P., Pattinson, C., & Staton, S. (2023). Do the numbers add up? Questioning measurement that places Australian ECEC teaching as ‘low quality’. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 50, 781–800. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00525-4>
- Tuia, T. T. (2019). Globalization, culture and education in Samoa. *International Online Journal of Primary Education*, 8(1), 351–363.
- Tuimavana, R. (2020). The concept of self and success from an iTaukei perspective in Fiji: Before and after education and development. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 9(4), 98–113.
- UNESCO. (2002). Educational for all: Is the world on track? EFA Global Monitoring Report 2002. UNESCO. <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2002/education-all-world-track>
- Whitehead, C. (1981). *Education in Fiji: Policy, problems, and progress in primary and secondary education, 1939–1973*. Canberra, Australia: Australian National University.
- Yoo, S.-S., Yang, H., Moon, E., & Hwang, Y. (2019). Seeking the meaning of quality education: Paradigm changes from the 1960s to the 2010s. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, 16(2), 55.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Authors and readers are free to copy, display and distribute this article with no changes, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives (IEJ: CP), and the same license applies. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at. The IEJ: CP is published by the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (formerly ANZCIES) and Sydney Open Access Journals at the University of Sydney. Articles are indexed in ERIC, Scimago Journal (SJR)Ranking / SCOPUS. The IEJ:CP is a member of the Free Journal Network: Join the IEJ: CP and OCIES Facebook

From the ground up: Weaving a tok stori of quality education

community at Oceania Comparative and International Education Society, and Twitter:
[@OceaniaCIES](#)

Teachers' perceptions of socio-cultural practices on students' academic achievement in North Pentecost, Vanuatu

Dominique Mahuri

Santos East School, Vanuatu: dommeemahuri@gmail.com

Jeremy Dorovolomo

University of the South Pacific, Fiji: Jeremy.dorovolomo@uspc.ac.fj

Amton Mwarakurmes

University of the South Pacific, Fiji: amton.mwarakurmes@usp.ac.fj

This study investigated teachers' perceptions of sociocultural factors affecting students' academic achievement in Zone Five North Pentecost, Vanuatu. This paper reports on a qualitative study involving 45 participants, identified as 'a culture-sharing group'. The study documented participants' attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and shared approaches to sociocultural and classroom practices concerning students' academic work. Teachers' perceptions from etic and emic perspectives within their cultural and social context and their meanings and processes were investigated. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning proposes that learning happens through interaction within the socio-cultural context. All contexts are complex, with intertwining systems of collective behaviours and simultaneous interactions with the environment. Diverse sociocultural factors affecting academic achievement were identified, including kava as a socio-cultural keystone, religious responsibilities of community members, domestic commitments towards families and wider communities and traditional formalities such as bolololi (Traditional pig-killing ceremony), mateana (funerary ceremonies) and lagiana (marriage). These aspects of daily interactions among Zone Five communities influenced the relationship between teaching and learning pedagogies. Despite setbacks to learning, teachers suggested the urgent need for a culturally inclusive curriculum to assist students in acquiring important communal values, understanding their spiritual and cultural phenomena, living sustainably with their environment and maintaining a healthy life while adhering to the virtues of citizenship and governance.

Keywords: Vanuatu, socio-cultural practices, traditional knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

A UNESCO (2006) report noted the changing trends in teachers' perceptions towards socio-cultural practices in schools. The document outlined the need for thorough preparation of teachers so they can develop students to uphold the principles of good human relations and a sense of responsibility within their societies. The report also urges teachers to contribute significantly by teaching and being professional regarding individuals' social, cultural and economic progress. In Vanuatu, socio-cultural practices in traditional societies play a fundamental role in the daily lives of communities and their schools. These practices are daily societal aspects that significantly impact students' academic learning. In the educational context, parents, teachers and stakeholders perceive these societal practices as affecting how students learn in schools. Hongboontri and Keawkhong (2014) state that sociocultural practices are perceived as society's norms, characteristics and social behaviours. These are ways of life

in which a person interacts daily with his/her immediate environment. The cultural context influences teachers' beliefs and actions towards students and learning. Thaman (2008) encouraged research that will enable a better understanding of the socio-cultural practices of Pacific societies to appreciate better relationships among people within a community and how relationships impact student learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' beliefs and perceptions towards students' learning and academic achievement remain hegemonic, which affects learning within schools and local communities. As Taufe'ulungaki (2002) puts it, 'the failure of education in the Pacific can be attributed to a large degree to the imposition of an alien system designed for a western social and cultural context, which is underpinned by quite different values' (p. 15). Therefore, it is essential to enshrine core values in a school's curriculum that are relevant and contextualised (Taufe'ulungaki, 2009). The *Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy* (VESS) anticipated the *Vanuatu National Curriculum Statement* (VNCS), which aims to offer an effective and relevant education for all ni-Vanuatu and guide the national government in achieving quality education standards based on values derived from Vanuatu's unique culture and beliefs. The official VNCS document was the recent platform that influenced how teachers perceived their work and day-to-day interaction with students in their classrooms. The document was the first of its kind in Vanuatu. It was also aimed at harmonising the language and curriculum content of Anglophone and Francophone streams, thus achieving an integrated bilingual school system. Teachers' assessment and evaluation practices in schools have changed because of a more coherent continuum of learning that begins from kindergarten and continues to Year 13/14. The Statement was framed following values relevant to Vanuatu's educational needs (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2010).

The values that VNCS targets identify students' civility and expertise as paramount ingredients in forming better citizens. The national statement supports a coherent continuum of learning standards at all levels by recognising diverse cultures and national identity. Several government reports and international recommendations, including *Re-Thinking Vanuatu Education Together Conference 2002* (See review by Watson-Gegeo, 2005), *Education Master Plan 2000-2010* (See Republic of Vanuatu, 1999), the *Austin Report 2004*, and *CRP Summit Resolutions and National Forums 2009 & 2010* (See Asian Development Bank, 2009), have outlined the need to recognise and contextualise social and cultural elements in formal learning.

Understanding the perceptual processes in practice and research in education is complex. Practitioners, researchers and learners often have problems understanding why a person behaves or learns a certain way. The complexity of understanding human perception makes its definitions and theories interdisciplinary (Zheng, 2015) and speculative. Conversely, belief is a firm conviction or acceptance of something. Belief is the individual truth one holds about physical and social realities. Beliefs are based on trust and confidence in knowing that something exists or is true. Beliefs are the fundamental building blocks in our conceptual structure. One of the overarching explanations for belief in education is one's personal philosophy, opinion or conviction about learning and teaching (Tarman, 2012). Teachers' strong convictions about pedagogies affect how they respond to learners' needs in school (Tarman, 2012).

Beliefs, perceptions, expectations and attitudes guide and direct teachers' and learners' responses toward school and student achievement. Teachers' perceptions and beliefs influence

their pedagogical practices and students' efficacy and success (Ferguson, 2003). Teachers' perceptions and beliefs of social and cultural factors affecting pedagogies vary with context. Equally, students from Pacific cultures have unique knowledge acquisition and epistemology systems that influence their ways of thinking and behaviour and, in turn, their academic achievement (Thaman, 2014). In Pacific settings, teachers and students bring their cultural baggage to school, including things learned and experienced from their societies (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). It is challenging for teachers to deal with diverse attitudes, beliefs and perceptions affecting students' educational responses in schools, including in Pacific Island countries. However, understanding that beliefs strongly impact teachers' actions and students' achievements will guide teachers in schools to re-examine their pedagogies.

Teachers' willingness to adopt new teaching strategies in schools depends on teachers' beliefs and perceptions (Sanz et al., 2015). Teachers must be aware that students' local cultures frame their knowledge and how they arrive at knowing (epistemology). The lack of teachers' cultural understanding in schools often results in assumptions that students are unintelligent or ill-behaved if they do not adhere to the teacher's expected norms. Thaman (2009) argued that teachers do not link students' experiences with their teaching. Teachers in schools should recognise and understand this context to influence their actions and interactions. Understanding students' socio-cultural environments is crucial to meeting their learning needs. Teachers' understanding of sociocultural environments are also critical because of their contribution to students' academic success and positive teacher-student relationships (Thaman, 2009).

Bakalevu (2000) found that Fijian students faced problems with Mathematics because of the mismatch between the school's expectations and students' cultural backgrounds. Mathematics has been conceptualised as neutral and culture-free, which can marginalise students if not embedded in their context. Students' academic success in Pacific schools is achievable if their socio-cultural backgrounds are accounted for and contextualised. In addition, a student's sociocultural background can affect the teacher's expectations and teaching strategies in schools (Bakalevu, 2000). For instance, Gay (2000) reports that some classroom rites and social protocols do not favour students whose cultures are passive. In sum, Burnett (2004) asserts that teachers in the Pacific Islands should be astute observers, reading their school context and being intelligent interpreters of their school community. These skills will create a harmonious atmosphere that should promote academic success for learners.

Socio-cultural factors also influence teacher performance and student achievement in schools. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory stresses society's significant contributions to individual development. Vygotsky argued that More Knowledgeable Others (MKO), such as parents, teachers, peers and culture, were responsible for developing learners' higher-order functions. Thaman (2012) continually argued the salience of the Pacific student's culture in the teaching and learning space and defines culture as a way of life, thinking and being of a group of people, which include their language, knowledge and value systems. This 'way of life' includes how people remember important skills, knowledge and values, communicated to the young for cultural continuity and survival. The curriculum contains the culture it intends to transmit, and if it is devoid of Pacific cultures and worldviews, it becomes culturally undemocratic (Thaman, 2012).

Children attending school each day have their 'virtual school bags' with them. These 'bags' contain experiences, skills and talents learned at home and in the wider world (Thomson, 2002). Students' 'virtual school bags' contain the things they have accumulated over time that derive from various sources. Burnett (2004) points out that location, gender, social class, media and cultural background profoundly influence Pacific values. These variables, experienced through

socialisation and the home environment, affect how children learn, creating an unequal footing across groups (Nawele, 2006).

The concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2011) presents another way of looking at the great range of experiences and understandings students acquire from their environment. Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital is a widely recognised concept underpinning his theory of social reproduction. It has been examined by sociologists of education because of its important potential in the educational process, explaining how students' understandings and experiences are accumulated. Social capital is accrued in a similar way to financial capital. Moreover, Bourdieu (2011) claims that students coming from upper-class families perform better in schools and become more successful than those from lower income groups. This is due to the power of cultural capital that matches the expectations of the school and not the ability or academic competency of the student.

Roundell (2003) argues that society is destroyed when negative perceptions undermine its education system. Students' academic achievements are affected when pedagogical strategies conflict with the socio-cultural aspects of the school. Thaman (2012) argues these systems greatly influence the relationship between teachers, students and learning. In Pacific states, students in schools have diverse perceptions and beliefs about academic achievement and the strategies for achieving higher grades. Schools and universities in Pacific Island states continue to make wrong assumptions about socio-cultural systems and academic achievement (Thaman, 2012). Nabobo-Baba (2006) points out that the 'gap' between school and indigenous knowledge and epistemology can only be bridged if teachers in schools understand children's cultural backgrounds. Research in schools has found mismatches between pedagogy and students' socio-cultural backgrounds. A case study conducted in rural schools of Malekula Island in Vanuatu reported that the Western style education system alienates students from their heritage and local epistemologies (Shipman, 2008). Shipman reported the 'gap' that Western education systems have created in Vanuatu's local communities alienates students from their cultural worldviews. This scenario suggests manipulation and inadvertently makes local people appear to have no agency and disadvantages them. A similar case study was conducted in an urban school in Vanuatu, exploring teacher's beliefs and attitudes towards at-risk pupils. Mwarakurmes (2012) found that teachers lack the pedagogical knowledge to actively engage students to maximise learning in their own ways. Mwarakurmes reported that teachers did not accept students' beliefs and lacked tolerance towards individual learning styles. In addition, the study found weak teacher-student relationships leading to 'at-risk' situations in schools.

During the last decade, an initiative known as 'Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative by Pacific for Pacific' (RPEIPP) was formed to assist Pacific teachers to re-focus their planning by developing culturally inclusive content and pedagogies that emphasise the importance of Pacific values (Thaman, 2009). The need to embed Pacific values and knowledge in the curriculum and activities implies a decolonised system of pedagogies. Thaman points out that RPEIPP's goal is to capitalise on the cultural strengths of Pacific societies to develop learners and help Pacific communities survive. This initiative offers academic space and platforms for scholars to excel academically in national and regional institutions. Such thinking is not confined to the Pacific. Gay (2000, p. 25) points out that teachers need to deliberately create cultural continuity, which demonstrates 'culturally responsive teaching (CRT), which is instructional behaviour that responds to students' cultural needs. Shor (2012) points out that CRT facilitates academic achievement levels and encourages the development of good citizenship in schools. Empowerment through CRT enables students to cultivate personal

integrity and empowers them to be competent, ambitious and confident. An empowering education provides a platform for students to be risk-takers and critical thinkers (Shor, 2012).

Research questions

The primary research question posed in this investigation is:

What are Zone Five teachers' perceptions of socio-cultural practices on students' academic achievements in North Pentecost?

Three (3) sub-questions further guided the study:

1. What are teachers' perceptions regarding the socio-cultural practices affecting students' academic achievements?
2. What do teachers believe are common cultural practices that promote or inhibit students' formal learning in schools?
3. How might certain cultural practices be incorporated to elevate students' academic achievement?

METHODOLOGY

The Zone Five area is located in North Pentecost in Vanuatu. It is one of the seven zones within Penama province that the Vanuatu government recently established to provide educational and financial support to schools. The zone has a mixture of Francophone and Anglophone schools administered by school heads. The zone covers approximately seven square kilometres with over 5,000 residents, making it the most heavily populated zone of the province. Over the years, the zone, like other zones within the province, has been overseen by different Zone Curriculum Advisors (ZCA). The ZCAs, appointed by the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), provide advisory services to their schools. The zone is currently coordinated by a School Improvement Officer (SIO) in collaboration with the Provincial Education Officer. The zone has 23 schools altogether and comprises 74 teachers in total. Each year, Zone Five teachers convene at a selected school to discuss important issues that affect them because they are relatively close to each other. A Zone Annual Plan provided by the Ministry of Education, together with a designed Zone Five academic policy, guides the overall running of the schools.

This study used a qualitative method to capture teachers' perceptions from etic and emic perspectives within their cultural and social context, their meanings and processes (Reeves et al., 2008). This design was employed because of its flexibility at the fieldwork stage and its ability to provide rich, in-depth responses from participants. Zone Five is considered a 'culture-sharing group' Creswell (2007, p. 241). A culture-sharing group has shared sets of beliefs, behaviour and language (Creswell, 2007), which provides collective perceptions of socio-cultural elements that are anticipated to pave future directions for current teachers within Vanuatu schools. A *Talanoa* method (Nabobo-Baba, 2003; Vaiioleti, 2006) was used in the study as a research tool for data collection, with baked food and *malogu* (kava) presented to the gatekeepers as tokens of appreciation after each *talanoa* (*vevhuriana*) session. The gatekeepers for the *talanoa* sessions were treated with *binihimarahi* (respect) and *gogonaiana* (reverence). The lead researcher listened attentively and spoke with humility to participants. Obtrusive manners were avoided, and disruptions were minimal to allow participants to fully express themselves.

The lead author is from North Pentecost and has taught at Lini Memorial College, a school within Zone Five, for eight consecutive years from 2005 to 2012. Being *Ata Raga* (North Pentecost native) to the subject area and its people made the researcher mindful of his own subjectivity. As an insider, the extensive experience with the Zone Five community persuaded the lead author to focus this study on the zone and reveal the factors affecting learning. The lead researcher interacted with participants using the local language spoken by North Pentecost people, the *hano* dialect. This cultivated willingness and openness from participants, who seemed comfortable providing reliable information to the researchers. The lead author's role as an insider blended well with social functions like funerals, traditional weddings, religious functions, and fundraising during the fieldwork.

Forty-five teachers participated in the study. They were from Francophone and Anglophone schools, with 34 participants female and 11 males. More than half of the teachers in the sample have more than ten years of teaching experience, and only one had less than five years of teaching experience. From the sample of participants, six were school Principals, four Deputy Academic Principals, seven Heads of Departments (HOD), 19 secondary school teachers, eight primary class teachers and one Early Childhood and Care Education (ECCE) facilitator. All 45 practitioners had more than one role as key players in their school's academic success. Though 22% of participants were administrators, all teachers had dual roles in teaching and administration.

FINDINGS

Making sense of vernacular and symbols

Many teachers perceived that using their first language in school, at home, and within their cultural boundaries enhanced students' academic achievement. Observations concluded that the *Hano* dialect is the first language all participants use at home and in the workplace. The local Raga language is somewhat complex and varies in symbols and style. It was the primary means of conveying important information like facts and emotions between teachers and students. As teachers noted:

An excellent understanding of 'Hano' language definitely assists student's intellectual development in schools. It also helps students to construct learning in English and French as foreign subjects taught in the classroom. (TE015)

Hano dialect is a useful tool to be used in classrooms to enhance learning. I believe it to be beneficial because important facts and information in subjects such as mathematics and science can be understood better. (TE029)

I usually introduce new topics using local symbols and Hano dialect. During revisions, students are encouraged to ask questions using Hano because they feel confident with it. I am happy with that because they are learning after all. (TE007)

[C]ultural symbols and traditional activities like performing 'bua', 'singsingi', 'savogoro' and 'iboi' learnt from elders in our 'gamali' enhance students learning because students incorporate them within their assessments like prepare talks and speeches." (TE020).

Data analysis revealed that using the local vernacular and symbols in classroom pedagogy enhanced student learning and contributed to their academic acceleration. The link between the *Hano* language and learning in Zone Five schools is inseparable as students learn and interact

confidently. For teachers, utilising the students' first language enhances learning, making meaning clearer during lesson delivery.

Appreciating religion and culture

Culture and religion play a significant role in academic achievement but also can be impediments:

Involving in religious activities develops a sets of values and behaviour that directly influences what students and teachers do, say and think. The school and church are both training grounds for children here. (TE033)

I often encourage my siblings to be faithful to religious obligations to develop their spiritual understanding of things around them. Church leaders are teachers here who nurture our children through sermons. It surely helps them to be successful in class. (TE008)

Zone Five schools honor a lot of holy calendar days observed and celebrated by churches. These celebrations help students to learn and experience life-skills. However, they disturb classes which disadvantaged the slow learners". Also, syllabus are not thoroughly covered which affects examination classes. (TE025)

According to the participants, appreciating religion and culture equips learners to be leaders in all aspects of life. The religious and cultural principles of respect, unity, reciprocity and democracy provide Zone Five students with a staircase for meaningful and abundant living. Adhering to Zone Five cultural and religious environments encourages a spirit of harmony and equitable interaction among the people.

Teachers of Zone Five unanimously agreed that religious obligations have both beneficial and adverse effects on students' academic achievement. The ongoing church-related events within the school premises and the surrounding communities made it difficult for teachers to complete their annual syllabus. Similarly, students devoted more time to religious duties than schoolwork. The overall commitment to religious matters in Zone Five communities portrays churches as teaching institutions that positively affect students' behaviour toward their schoolwork.

Kava as a socio-cultural keystone

North Pentecost produces a lot of kava (*piper methysticum*) for traditional ceremonies, domestic use and commercial purposes. Kava is abundant and a significant crop for North Pentecost culture. Participants reported the crop as both beneficial and an obstacle to students' academic learning in Zone Five:

All cultural obligations in North Pentecost are associated with kava and this steals parent's time and money and not providing enough academic support for their children. (TE033)

[S]tudents are not entitled to quality care at home because their parents are always away from home during the evenings. (TE037)

I am a usual visitor at a nearby kava bar during the evening. I see many parents there whose children attend my school. They chat and drink kava every night. Some of them stay up very late. On several occasions, I observe students that are sent on errands to buy kava, tobacco and cigarette for their parents and elder siblings. (TE037)

Teachers' perceptions of sociocultural practices on students' academic achievement in North Pentecost, Vanuatu

It was observed that students were involved in kava preparation during communal gatherings such as *lagiana*, *mateana* and *bolololi*. This social responsibility often makes students sit until very late at night. However,, important cultural values, appropriate skills and attitudes are acquired during such gatherings; young people are taught during food and kava preparation at the *nakamal*. Some of the teachers commented that:

During morning work, boys in particular are sleepy and feel lazy to do exercises because they stayed up late at the *nakamal*. They often feel tired and not concentrating in class. (TE009)

The good solar lights for home use are used at the *nakamal* for kava sessions. This deprive students of good lighting for private study at home. However, several students sell kava and purchase their own. (TE045)

I must say that most parents do not help students with homework because they spend most time at the *nakamal* for drinking kava and storytelling. Children are not supported but neglected to work alone. (TE018)

Participants said excessive kava involvement and drinking used up students' quality time during the evenings. Parents involved in drinking kava are not supportive towards their children's studies. On the other hand, the return on investment on kava helps schools build new classrooms, purchase new textbooks and provide for students.

Traditional formalities

North Pentecost people associate themselves with *alengan vanua* (ways of the land). These 'ways of place' are traditional ceremonies involving both moieties, *Bule* and *Tabi*. A teacher commented:

Tradition of North Pentecost is very influential that conditions young people to conform to cultural protocols and *alengan vanua*. (TE027)

I must say that in North Pentecost, most parents respect communal obligations. They are attentive to their duties and responsibilities towards *alengan vanua*. This commitment is not healthy for their children because it is time-consuming and a waste of resources. In fact, parents should be concentrating to school activities. (TE002)

During the last five years, Zone Five schools produced a lot of underachievers because social functions such as *bolololi* have taken precedence in many homes. Most parents do not see the value of education because they do not appreciate it. This affected students learning both at primary and secondary level. (TE023)

North Pentecost people are inundated with traditional responsibilities, thus placing much importance on communal duties, especially mutual obligations and practices.

Bolololi, mateana and lagiana ceremonies

Teachers revealed that many resources are spent during *bolololi*, *mateana* and *lagiana* ceremonies. Participants stated that much money is invested in purchasing tusked pigs, *bwana* (valued red mats) and food rather than students' academic needs. One teacher commented that these traditional practices are democratic, so most parents willingly exercise their traditional rights to acquire status and wealth and establish relationships within their resource limits. When participants were asked about their views on traditional ceremonies, almost all talked about its influence, as exemplified in the following quotes:

The current condition of communities within Zone Five is not conducive for good learning. The cultural cycle of events here especially funeral periods demands a lot of resources from the people and low priority on education. Parents coming from surrounding communities are struggling to pay their children's school fees on time. It disturbs them mentally. (TE026)

Traditional obligations such as deaths, marriages and pig-killing ceremonies really disturbs students. Because students are part of the community, they are obliged to show respect by attending. If they are missing classes, they are affected! (TE008)

The Raga traditional way of life promotes togetherness because it is communally oriented. This feeling of "being home" makes students comfortable and are reluctant to attend school every day. Teachers are often blamed for student's failures which is wrong. It is our cultural way of doing things that lead to student's academic downfall. (TE010)

Because these traditional rituals typically take place over long periods, they impact students' academic work. The participants agreed that significant involvement in these cultural obligations inhibits students from achieving better academic results. However, participants agreed that these practices hindering learning could be resolved through meaningful dialogue to reach a 'negotiated space' among homes, communities and schools. The 'negotiated space' model should empower students to realign their focus towards learning.

Understanding spiritual and cultural phenomenon

Developing a cultural and spiritual understanding was a theme that surfaced during data analysis. Participants perceived a strong connection with the cultural and spiritual realm boosts Pentecost children's academic performance. During *talanoa* and interviews, almost all participants commented positively on culture and religion, as exemplified by these responses:

Zone Five students should be encouraged to execute activities like sketching family trees playing traditional games and plays such as 'gai', 'visvisi' and 'gorogorovwengo'. Our culture teaches allegiance to superior being. This traditional knowledge of relationship fosters indigenous philosophies whereby students and teachers relate their own spiritual domains with their learning environment. (TE040)

Traditional rituals of performing birth, marriage and death ceremonies should be taught in school. The traditional songs and dances are important for us because they link our social world with the supernatural. Acquiring and interacting using traditional rituals identifies who you are anywhere. (TE035)

North Pentecost is an intact society where life revolves around unwritten regulations. People's daily lives are guided by the invisible web of totems, norms, spirits and principles relating to clans, family structure and church. Participants felt that if culture and religion blend well into the formal curriculum, students will be more independent and respond well to social responsibilities.

DISCUSSION

In Zone Five, chiefs and elders at the *nakamal* can scaffold and create learning spaces that cultivate personal independence. This study suggested that students' involvement in socio-cultural activities, such as *lagiana*, *mateana* and *bolololi*, promote planning skills, which assists students in accomplishing life-long goals. The accumulation of experiences and understanding of one's surroundings develop skills that apply to their everyday tasks. These are skills that, if exploited by teachers in schools, will likely empower students and encourage them to strive for academic achievements. This is consistent with Koya's (2009) advice. He outlined ways of

devising lessons that consider students' needs and backgrounds; as students become more engaged in learning, their academic credentials increase, so they become successful later in life. Bourdieu's (2011) cultural capital explains that students coming from upper-class contexts become successful because of their cultural capital. This is consistent with teacher's perceptions in this study, where students become better managers and planners if they blend well with diverse socio-cultural practices to acquire cultural capital within their own social boundaries. The North Pentecost culture emphasises obligations toward the *gamali*, which is perceived to be the focal point of learning and teaching at the local level. This instils values of cooperation, acceptable behaviour and respect, which are crucial for learning. It is in the traditional space, which Bourdieu termed 'habitus', where knowledge, skills and spiritual powers are regulated. North Pentecost culture is male-dominant; thus, the *gamali* may influence mainly male students to take responsible actions for their learning journey. The way North Pentecost culture exerts influence on students affects the *habitus* of learners. Students' dispositions for navigating the education system reflect how they have acquired cultural capital over time. The interconnectedness of communal life and pedagogy is a system that influences learning.

The findings from the study suggest that culture and religion play a significant role in elevating students' academic attainment. They are perceived to provide a stairway for progress and change among students. In North Pentecost, religion and culture are perceived to be common strong grounds that learners in school embrace and capitalise on for success. This is consistent with findings from Loury's (2004) study, which found the same relationship in her research among a sample of youths in the United States, where active teenagers in churches obtained higher qualifications than those who were inactive. The findings in North Pentecost correspond with Regnerus et al.'s (2003) theory that 'religious service attendance constitutes a form of social integration that has the consequence of reinforcing values conducive to educational attainment and goal setting' (p. 645). These values are underpinnings of addressing different socio-cultural practices that affect learning in Zone Five schools. The study posits that culture and religion positively affect academic learning, mainly through fostering beliefs that influence individual traits, such as a work ethic. A 'negotiated space' for students provides a way to choose the 'best of both' worlds to promote balanced learning.

The findings indicate that using local vernacular and symbols within student's boundaries enhances academic achievement. Using *Hano* as a tool for instruction and cultural symbols in schools by teachers provides an insight that understanding complex concepts is achievable if the medium of instruction is familiar and straightforward. This finding is vital because teachers and students across the Pacific Islands often face setbacks relating to foreign language use. For instance, Willans et al. (2015) found that in the rural primary schools of Vanuatu, teachers are competent when using vernacular to teach, and this builds confidence among students to do the same during discussions, narratives and group activities.

Another finding from the current study suggested that kava planting, its preparation and drinking negatively impact students' academic learning. Teachers perceive that quality time and resources for students are reduced by the different kava processes, and parents do not support children's academic work. This finding suggests that traditional communities do not recognise the importance of formal learning but appreciate how society revolves around kava use. This is consistent with the findings of Nawele's (2006) work with 45 Fijian students who stated that excessive *yaqona* (kava) drinking negatively impacts student's academic work. Unsupportive parents at home mean students are not monitored, and this habit paralyses students because homework will be left undone. Children are much freer when left unattended and may roam around the village involved in stealing, smoking or drinking kava.

However, kava ceremonies in Pentecost play a significant role within village settings. This study found that the traditional plant encourages identity maintenance, community support and financial backing for families. Teachers noted that parents establish agreements with schoolteachers and negotiate school fees during kava drinking sessions at the *nakamal*. This demonstrates the complexity of balancing family commitments with kava drinking. Teachers are parents, and if they are involved in frequent kava drinking, their roles, competencies, professionalism and attendance will be undermined, eventually hampering student learning. Because learning is dynamic and participatory, teachers, learners, parents and communities must collaborate and negotiate a learning space for students at school and home to promote quality learning. The time spent by parents and teachers at night for kava drinking eventually jeopardises academic goals and economic growth. However, the cultural embeddedness of kava within North Pentecost is crucial because it helps the survival of many Zone Five schools. Data revealed that most rural schools survive on the revenue earned from kava, and school infrastructures are financed by kava production. This is positive for student learning because most parents are subsistence farmers. The dilemma of being obligated towards kava as a socio-cultural keystone reasserts the complexity of the traditional/educational tension. Kava's position in this traditional/contemporary society remains the central theme of a complex web that challenges modern education. In fact, these challenges could be addressed at the home and school levels so that learning is enhanced and teachers complete their syllabi.

This study revealed that students invest much time toward religious obligations. Church-related events attract students to socialise with others during free time, which may hamper academic learning. Students often exhaust themselves over the weekend, which harms learning. The relationship that students have with spirituality denotes that there is a strong link between the natural and the supernatural in Zone Five. In Zone Five, students' commitments toward religious obligations indicate that certain aspects of *alengan vanua* taught at the *gamali* correspond with Christian principles. This reflects the perception that both the church and *alengan vanua* echo the same teachings of moral and ethical principles.

Moreover, traditional formalities within Zone Five communities, such as *lagiana*, *bolololi* and *mateana*, hinder students' academic attainment. The *alengan vanua* demands a lot of time and resources from parents and students alike, including adhering to lengthy days of rituals. The results from the study reveal that the communal structure of North Pentecost insists on a strong sense of loyalty to the *alengan vanua* ethos. This contradicts teachers' negative and stereotypical assumptions that traditional formalities affect students' academic achievement. Within Zone Five, the total submission to the *alengan vanua* denotes loyalty and devotion to the *welen vanua* – the key concept to action and thought in Pentecost Island. Being of service to others and giving respect to cultural obligations within students' traditional villages is an indication that the same is practised in Zone Five schools.

Though teachers perceive students' submission to societal obligations as harming learning, compliance to various social commitments may serve as a platform for student's conformity to school policies and regulations. Furthermore, teachers' generalisation of cultural practices negatively impacting learning in North Pentecost schools is a 'mismatch' between students' cultural norms and teachers' expectations because it can affect how teachers deliver learning in classrooms. For students, maintaining communal solidarity is a norm that precedes school activities, which is an issue for teachers. This is a complex scenario that can affect pedagogy. Through dialogue among students, school administration and parents, consensus can be reached to accommodate traditional formalities in the zone.

Furthermore, North Pentecost's traditional practices of initiation ceremonies, dances, pig-killing rituals and sand drawing have supernatural links. These are cultural practices that foster allegiance to the spiritual world. This means that the transmission of traditional and secret knowledge to younger generations is through the spirits from the cosmic world and not via formal teaching. This implies that students obtain knowledge through cultural intuition, which contradicts modern knowledge acquisition processes. Therefore, there is a gap between Western scientific knowledge and cultural context. This scenario can create learning gaps for students unless traditional knowledge keepers and teachers fully recognise it. Bakalevu (2009) states that a contextualised curriculum should bridge the gap between curriculum and home cultures. The current curriculum is a culture that leads a scholar to attain a degree or certification. This means teachers in Pacific Island schools have to stretch themselves by embracing the complex modern-traditional form of curriculum. Teachers should also know the values embedded in traditional activities; otherwise, the traditions may harm learning. Working non-linearly to cultivate ethics among students is a teacher's role towards a community of learners. However, if Zone Five head teachers recognise the culture gap and devise workable frameworks for addressing it, it can be used effectively as a springboard to elevate learning in schools

CONCLUSION

Teachers identified practices impacting students' formal school learning, including excessive kava drinking, student involvement in religious obligations, domestic commitments towards families and the wider community and the cyclic traditional formalities within communities. These aspects of day-to-day interactions among the communities influence pedagogies. Traditional formalities such as *lagiana*, *bolololi* and *mateana* in North Pentecost demand time and resources. Most teachers felt that this *alengan vanua* ethos disturbs students' learning. However, a 'negotiated space' can be reached via dialogue between home and school to address these concerns. Establishing bonds and entering into relationships creates room for the balanced academic well-being of learners. Currently, the home environment and communities in North Pentecost are not conducive to students' academic learning, which calls for teachers to devise practical steps to help address student academic achievement. Teachers felt that vital communal values should be integrated into the current curriculum. Similarly, teachers revealed that students should be taught to understand spiritual and cultural phenomena that affect their social and academic lives. Nourishing students' understanding of their cultural and spiritual world in the curriculum develops a sense of responsibility towards academic work and life.

REFERENCES

- Asian Development Bank (2009). *Vanuatu economic report*.
<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/27516/van-economic-report-2009.pdf>
- Bakalevu, S. (2000). Ways of mathematising in Fijian society. *Module Five, Pacific Cultures in the Teacher Education Curriculum Series*. UNESCO Chair/Institute of Education.
- Bakalevu, S. (2009). Engendering culturally responsive teaching. In *Rethinking education curricula in the Pacific: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 58–70). He Parekereke (Institute of Research and Development in Maori and Pacific Education), Victoria University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2011). The forms of capital. *Cultural theory: An anthology*, 1, 81–93.

- Burnett, G. (2004). Schools, teaching and values. *Pacific Curriculum Network*, 13, 1–5.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Ferguson, R. F. (2003). Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the Black-White test score gap. *Urban education*, 38(4), 460–507.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, practice and research*. Teachers College Press.
- Hongboontri, C., & Keawkhong, N. (2014). School culture: Teachers' beliefs, behaviors, and instructional practices. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(5), 60–87.
- Koya, C. F. (2009). Sustainable living in the Pacific: Exploring the role of multiculturalism in teacher education. *Re-thinking education curricula in the Pacific: Challenges and prospects*, 102–123.
- Loury, L. D. (2004). Does church attendance really increase schooling? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43(1), 119–127.
- Mwarakurmes, A. (2012). Teachers' views of at-risk students in Vanuatu. In *Harvesting Ideas Niu Generation Perspectives* (pp. 191–205). USP Press.
- Nabobo-Baba, U. (2003). Indigenous Fijian educational ideas. In K. H. Thaman (Ed.), *Educational ideas from Oceania* (pp. 85–93). USP.
- Nabobo-Baba, U. (2006). *Knowing and learning: An indigenous Fijian approach*. Suva, Fiji: IPS Publications, PIAS-DG, USP.
- Nawele, K. (2006). *The perceptions of Fijian Secondary School Students on the Effects of Cultural, Religious and Family Obligations on their Academic Performance* (Master of Education), The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji. <http://digilib.library.usp.ac.fj/gsd/collect/usplibr1/index/assoc/HASH01fe/2b79089a.dir/doc.pdf>
- Reeves, S., Kuper, A., & Hodges, B. D. (2008). Qualitative research methodologies: Ethnography. *British Medical Journal*, 337(7668), 512-514.
- Regnerus, M., Smith, C., & Fritsch, M. (2003). Religion in the Lives of American Adolescents: A Review of the Literature. Chapel Hill, NC: *A Research Report of the National Study of Youth and Religion*. p. 46–47.
- Republic of Vanuatu (1999). *Education master plan*. <http://www.paddle.usp.ac.fj/collect/paddle/index/assoc/van012.dir/doc.pdf>
- Roundell, T. (2003). *Arts education in the Pacific region: Heritage and creativity*. United Nation Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).
- Sanz, E. C., Molt, M. C., & Puerta, J. G. (2015). Teachers' beliefs about diversity: An analysis from a personal and professional perspective. *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research (NAER Journal)*, 4(1), 18–23.

Teachers' perceptions of sociocultural practices on students' academic achievement in North Pentecost, Vanuatu

- Shipman, T. S. (2008). *Wanem we mifala I wantem [What we want]: A community perspective of vernacular education in Vanuatu* [Master of Arts thesis, University of Hawaii]. University of Hawaii Repository.
<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/e9ae00c9-5853-4b74-9d3e-981af60e57c5/content>
- Shor, I. (2012). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tarman, B. (2012). Prospective teachers' beliefs and perceptions about teaching as a profession. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, 12(3), 1964–1973.
- Taufe'ulungaki, A. (2002). Pacific in the crossroads: Are there alternatives? In F. Pene, A. Taufe'ulungaki & C. Benson (Eds.), *Tree of opportunity: Rethinking Pacific education* (5–21). Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji.
- Taufe'ulungaki, A. (2009). Tongan values in education: Some issues and question. *Re-thinking education curricula in the Pacific: Challenges and prospects*, 125–136.
- Thaman, K. H. (2008). Nurturing relationships and honouring responsibilities: A Pacific perspective. *International Review of Education*, 54(3–4), 459–473.
- Thaman, K. H. (2009). Towards cultural democracy in teaching and learning with specific references to Pacific Island Nations (PINs). *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 6.
- Thaman, K. H. (2012). *Reclaiming a place: Teachers and the education of Indigenous peoples in Oceania*. Paper presented at the Keynote address at MATSITI Conference, Adelaide, Australia.
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b821/ec372cbebb4acb38004c5035e6eefc64bd43.pdf>
- Thaman, K. H. (2014). The cultural challenge to higher education in the Pacific: Understanding Pacific students and Pacific cultures. *Discussions and Debates in Pacific Education*, 125.
- Thomson, P. (2002). *Schooling the rustbelt kids: Making the difference in changing times*. Allen & Unwin.
- UNESCO (2006). *Pacific education for sustainable development framework*. Paper presented at the Pacific Ministers of Education, Nadi, Fiji.
https://www.sprep.org/att/IRC/eCOPIES/Pacific_Region/46.pdf
- Vaioleti, T. M. (2006). *Talanoa research methodology: A developing position on Pacific research*. Paper presented at the Waikato Journal of Education, Waikato, New Zealand.
<http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/handle/10289/6199>
- Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training. (2010). *Vanuatu national curriculum statement*.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. In M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, (Eds.). Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). *The collected works of LS Vygotsky: Problems of the theory and history of psychology* (Vol. 3). New York: Springer Science & Business Media.

- Watson-Gegeo, K. A. (2005). Rethinking Vanuatu education together. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 17(2), 502-504. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/185439>
- Willans, F., Early, R., Tamtam, H., Robert, C., Thieffry, C., & Vandeputte-Tavo, L. (2015). Re-shaping language policy in Vanuatu education: Complexity, challenges and chances. The University of the South Pacific.
- Zheng, H. (2015). *Teacher beliefs as a complex system: English language teachers in China*: Springer.
-



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Authors and readers are free to copy, display and distribute this article with no changes, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives (IEJ: CP), and the same license applies. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at. The IEJ: CP is published by the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (formerly ANZCIES) and Sydney Open Access Journals at the University of Sydney. Articles are indexed in ERIC, Scimago Journal (SJR)Ranking / SCOPUS. The IEJ:CP is a member of the Free Journal Network: Join the IEJ: CP and OCIES Facebook community at Oceania Comparative and International Education Society, and Twitter: @OceaniaCIES

Post-pandemic lessons learnt from student reflections: A case study of diploma-level students at Fiji National University

Afrada Shah

Fiji National University, Fiji: afrada.shah@fnu.ac.fj

The global pandemic led to an expansion of research about education in the new normal. Students' lived experiences were mostly documented through surveys or in-depth online interviews due to movement restrictions. One issue with such approaches is that students are guided by set questions and have limited opportunities to cathartically reflect upon their experiences. With this in mind, a case study approach was used with the overarching aim of exploring the lived experiences of students in Fiji during the global pandemic using an online reflective assessment. As part of their coursework, students were required to complete a reflective assessment based on their pandemic-related experiences. Sixty submissions met the inclusion criteria of the current study and were included based on purposive sampling. Findings from this study support Sustainable Development Goal 4 as it confirmed student experiences, including financial, learning, lifestyle and mental health challenges. Students also reflected upon the notion of 'social distancing versus social disrespect' as, in the case of Fiji, the phrase 'it takes a whole village' is not just a metaphor but literal because the concept of individualism is alien to the socio-cultural context. Positive reflections were also documented, including the revival of traditional systems (veisa (barter system)), strengthening social connectedness using technology, and demonstrating values such as resilience and genuine care. This research also suggests the value of reflective assessments using online platforms to avoid classroom constraints and encourage students to mine their own lives for insight away from a traditional classroom setting.

Keywords: Teaching and learning; reflective assessments; education; pandemic; Sustainable Development Goal 4

INTRODUCTION

Fiji, a hub within the Pacific Island region, with its three major universities and approximately 800 primary and secondary schools, experienced an abrupt and immediate setback due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The only possibility for continuing to deliver education was to transition from typical face-to-face classes to other modes of teaching and learning, specifically via online platforms or other remote learning modes, such as television, radio and so forth, for primary and secondary schools. Crawford (2021) encouraged researchers to consider further work on the impact of the global pandemic and education, contextualising or challenging such research against previous literature. He emphasised that scholars who neglect doing so will 'extend the knowledge gap between research and practice' (p. 3).

With this advice in mind, the current study used a case-study approach to explore the lived experiences of diploma-level students studying at the Fiji National University during the global pandemic. In addition to contextualising students' lived experiences, the research highlighted the urgency of rebuilding and strengthening education in the new normal per Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. Revealing students' lived experiences gives educators an insight into students' lives, learning experiences and perceptions of teaching approaches. Educators

can learn from students in the context of where the barriers of traditional classrooms are gone and through open-ended online reflective assessments. Student reflection may strengthen the teaching and learning processes because educators will have insights into students' lives, priorities and concerns, enabling teachers to appreciate how to more deeply relate in future with those in their care. In particular, students' lived experiences during the global pandemic provide educators with opportunities to transform their teaching approaches and recognise technological advancements in education, which might be worth maintaining post the global pandemic. In essence, this argument encapsulates the thematic focus of 'Revisioning education in Oceania: Walking backward into the future together' of the OCIES 2022 Conference

This paper begins with a review of the literature relevant to teaching and learning and the socio-cultural implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on collectivist societies similar to Fiji. Issues pertaining to the research approach, including participants, data collection, analysis and ethical considerations, will be presented. Findings from the current study will be offered with the support of direct participant quotes. This paper will discuss the implications of the findings, the study's limitations and recommendations for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socio-cultural experiences in collectivist societies during the global pandemic

Since Fiji has a diverse collectivist society, it is important to review literature about similar socio-cultural contexts, that is, among indigenous collectivist societies. Pandemic-related movement restrictions led to challenges that contradict traditional norms and customs in some socio-cultural contexts. Within the African context, Akwa and Maingi (2020) recognised that restrictions on movements prevented families of the deceased from conducting traditional burial rites. Jaja et al. (2020) discussed the spikes in COVID cases due to social practices such as funeral rituals and attending church and prayer meetings. The practice of cultural rituals, such as male circumcision, was referred to as a 'ticking time bomb' (p. 1078) by the authors during this period. Germani and colleagues (2020) indicated that collectivist societies include people who exhibit interdependence and sociability, which leads them to be concerned about their social groups. Individuals with greater social interconnectedness were less vulnerable to psychological distress, whereas those who could not maintain the connectedness exhibited psychological distress.

McLeod et al. (2020) noted that, historically, indigenous people experience greater health disparity, as recognised by the *UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People*, which impact mental health, poverty, domestic dynamics, quality of life etc. The global pandemic exacerbated these issues for indigenous communities, including those in the Oceania region. (Keawe'aimoku Kaholokula et al., 2020). For example, Aboriginal people in Australia tend to move between towns and communities for shopping to reduce food costs, but restrictions on travel during the pandemic have made this impossible (Power et al., 2020). Power et al. (2020) also presented examples of how restrictions to travel caused socio-cultural disruptions for Aborigines, Māori and Torres Strait Islanders because they could not engage in cultural practices and traditions. In Fijian communities, Vave (2021) noted that many funeral gatherings had minimum compliance with movement restrictions protocols in Fiji. Their analyses indicated that, over time, Fijians increasingly overlooked movement restrictions. Rural funerals appeared to have had more reduced movement compliance than urban funerals. The reason could be that law enforcement heavily supervised urban funerals.

Student experiences & challenges: Teaching, learning & health

Many researchers have captured the experiences of students, especially their challenges during the COVID-19 period. For instance, in a three-phase study, Maqableh & Alia (2021) ascertained that students typically used mobile devices to complete learning tasks. Using such devices is not conducive to effective learning, such as attending online classes, perusing online resources and completing assessments. The need for students to use such devices indicates that students, educators and universities were unprepared for the ‘new normal’, a phrase that became synonymous with the pandemic. Other studies highlighting problems with online learning identified low motivation, access to and fluency with technology-based learning and connectivity-related issues, as well as perceived low support from universities. Some students across different levels perceived their study workload increased online compared to classroom-based settings (Almadhi et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2020; Maqableh & Alia, 2021).

Holistic health and well-being were also major concerns for many scholars. Physical health was determined as a significant issue because of an increase in sedentary lifestyle related to movement restrictions, unhealthy diet and increased use of gadgets (Saeed & Javed, 2021). Several studies (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Chirikov & Soria, 2020; Gestsdottir et al., 2021; Saha et al., 2021) identified that the pandemic negatively impacted the mental health and wellbeing of university students in several countries. Psychological distress due to study workload was corroborated in several studies because educators were typically not equipped with strategies to transition quickly and effectively to online teaching. This transition and other factors, such as lack of experience in online learning, technology and connectivity issues, led students to exhibit symptoms of psychological distress (Pang et al., 2021; Tahir et al., 2021; Werner, 2021). The uncertainty regarding online learning and the future was another concerning issue (Moawad, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

For two semesters from 2020 to 2021, diploma-level students enrolled in a mandatory ethics course were required to complete a reflective paper based on their pandemic experiences as part of their coursework. These formed the basis of the data for this study. A few submissions had to be excluded because of issues such as plagiarism, incomplete assessments or did not address assessment guidelines. Following ethical clearance, 60 student submissions that met the assessment criteria of the current study were included based on purposive sampling.

Table 1 summarises the demographic details of participants included in this study. Details, such as the programme the students were enrolled in, have not been included to avoid unintentional disclosure of participant identity. Most of the participants were born in Fiji. In terms of ethnic background, students were classified under their respective ethnic groups, either *iTaukei* (indigenous Fijians) or Fijians of Indian descent. The ethnicity of the participants was validated using the university’s student database, and none of the participants from Fiji had records of dual heritage. The ‘others’ category represents students from other Pacific Island countries such as Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Year Enrolled	Number of Participants	Gender	Ethnicity
----------------------	-------------------------------	---------------	------------------

2020 – Semester 2	5	Female	<i>iTaukei</i> (indigenous Fijians)
2020 – Semester 2	37	Male	<i>N</i> = 24 <i>iTaukei</i> (indigenous Fijians)
			<i>N</i> = 2 Fijians of Indian Descent
			<i>N</i> = 11 ‘Others’
2021 – Semester 1	3	Female	<i>iTaukei</i> (indigenous Fijians)
2021 – Semester 1	15	Male	<i>N</i> = 11 <i>iTaukei</i> (indigenous Fijians)
			<i>N</i> = 3 Fijians of Indian Descent
			<i>N</i> = 1 ‘Others’

N = represents the number of participants.

Research approach: Data collection & procedures

A qualitative research approach was undertaken to conduct a content analysis of student reflections and identify themes relevant to the study's overarching aim. The reflective assessment, part of coursework and used for data collection, later allowed students to reflect on their pandemic-related experiences. The prompts listed in Table 2 were open-ended questions aimed at encouraging students to have a free flow of thinking, reflecting and responding about their experiences, lessons learnt and perceptions.

Table 2: Assessment prompts

Personal experiences & challenges	<u>Prompt 1:</u> What have been your personal experiences during this situation?
	<u>Prompt 2:</u> What challenges have you faced?
Moral lessons	<u>Prompt 3:</u> What are some moral or ethical lessons you have learnt at a personal level during this time?

[The above is an excerpt from the course assessment guidelines that were provided to students]

Students enrolled in the course were required to complete this assessment but were included in the study only once they had consented. Participants were informed of the ethical considerations of the study, with particular emphasis on confidentiality, anonymity, their right to withdraw from the study and separation of participation and final grades. Identifying indicators that could have led to the identification of participants were redacted. This research study has received institutional ethical clearance from the Fiji National University, where the study was based.

Data analysis

A general inductive analysis approach was used in the study. The content of student reflections was examined to determine themes. These reflections were tabulated as raw data and were read multiple times for initial understanding and to attain familiarity. Next, codes and sub-categories were inductively identified and generated. These codes then led to the identification of salient emerging patterns and themes, ultimately leading to this paper's findings and discussion. The data analysis process was completed when no new codes and themes could be established.

FINDINGS

The study shows that 100% of participants reported some form of challenge associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent movement restrictions implemented in Fiji. General experiences were divided into three sub-themes: financial challenges, difficulties with learning and teaching and disruptions to social lifestyle and mental health challenges. Participants further reflected upon the socio-cultural challenges experienced due to pandemic-related restrictions, including religious disruptions and loss of cultural values and practices. Finally, participants reflected upon positive experiences and lessons learnt during and following the pandemic. Table 3 provides a summary of descriptive statistics.

Table 3: Summary of Findings and Descriptive Statistics

Themes & sub-themes		descriptive statistics (%)
General Experiences	<i>Financial challenges</i>	87
	<i>Challenges with teaching and learning</i>	67
	<i>Impact on social lifestyle and mental health</i>	47
Socio-cultural Challenges	<i>Religious disruptions, loss of cultural values, traditions, and practices</i>	63
Positive Experiences	<i>Self-reliance, focus on health, value of family, strengthening relationship with God, values of Fijian/Pasifika spirit and also lesser burden due to the ease in respect to socio-cultural obligation</i>	97

General experiences

Financial challenges

Financial difficulties were reported by 87% of the participants. This challenge was related to job losses, pay reductions and the economy collapsing. The following are excerpts from the reflections of students who reported financial difficulties:

Participant 8 (Male, iTaukei): Covid 19 has greatly affected myself and my family. My parents have both been laid off from work. One of the challenges that greatly affected our family was money. This had brought by more difficulties as without enough money it would be very difficult to live life normally.

Participant 13 (Male, PNG): I was faced with financial problems due to the fact that the pandemic affected the economy of most countries, so any money I received from home was well below what I expected because the value of my native Kina dropped drastically.

Participant 56 (Female, iTaukei): My father's yaqona selling business made a loss. No more sales as our customers mostly worked in the Tourism industry. People would not spend on yaqona as families' priority was food. My siblings too suffered a pay cut as their school had closed. We suffered and struggled because of income loss. I worried about my studies as my father would not be able to afford and slowly saw my dreams of studies breaking.

Participant 57 (Female, iTaukei): We [position] were given the option of either to work without pay or to hand in our resignation letter. We, of course chose to work without pay

as looking for another [workplace] of same or of a great tonnage would be difficult given the situation.

These findings indicate that students were affected financially generally due to their parents or family members being laid off from their employment during the pandemic. Working students were forced to work without pay or with reduced pay for fear of losing their jobs. Students whose finances were dependent on the tourism sector were affected either directly through job losses or indirectly due to the drop in tourism. In relation to the student from Papua New Guinea, financial challenges were significant as they were away from home and their families back home were also financially deprived. These narratives highlights that financial challenges are connected to the wellbeing of students as they were burdened with the declining economy, which distressed many of them.

Challenges with teaching and learning

The second most reported general challenge (67% of participants) were associated with online learning and teaching, especially the sudden transition to online learning and lack of technological resources to keep up with online learning. Some examples of struggles reflected by students were:

Participant 6 (Male, Indo-Fijian): [H]ad to attend online classes which made education little bit tough. At times, we have to encounter network problems and at times the concepts are not understood properly.

Participant 7 (Male, iTaukei): It brought about plenty changes and challenges where we had to adapt to in order to survive, our daily routine was totally different from our norm. Being in the highlands where the mobile reception was not good, I had to walk up through the forest and onto the mountain in order to get good mobile receptions just to study online.

Participant 53 (Female, iTaukei): As a student the main challenges that I face was the online classes and Zoom classes with lecturers during the lockdown since school were closed. For some days network is down and there is slow connection. It was confusing to adjust to online learning.

Students typically reported issues with online teaching and learning, especially with internet network disruptions as many of them were back home, away from the main campuses. Students in rural areas especially faced this difficulty and had to physically ‘walk through the forest and on to the mountain’ to attend online classes or complete assessments. Network issues seemingly also led to communication challenges, such as difficulties in understanding what was being taught. Students found it difficult to suddenly transition to online teaching and lost motivation to learn. Lived experiences and challenges associated with teaching and learning highlighted the education crisis during the global pandemic and the urgency to strengthen teaching approaches as aligned with SDG 4.

Impacts on social lifestyle and mental health

Under the category of general experiences, the third sub-theme was related to the impact of changes to social lifestyles and mental health. Forty-seven percent of participants reported being affected by not being able to socialise and be among friends and its consequent mental health implications. As examples, the following student reflections emphasise this sub-theme further:

Participant 24 (Male, iTaukei): Socialising with friends and going out to the nightclubs was my way of de-stress.

Participant 26 (Male, iTaukei): This virus didn't just collapse an immune system it caused a collapse in culture, religion, and the economy. Although there were predictions about a pandemic no one ever thought it would hit us and when it did, it hit us hard. People have lost their jobs, there was not only an economic depression, people were also victims of depression during this period. Some to the extent had tried to commit suicide.

Disruptions to social lifestyle and mental health are linked as social connectedness with friends, community, religious and cultural interactions are important for individuals in this context. The movement directives during the pandemic and subsequent restrictions on social gatherings including but were not limited to family gatherings, *grog* sessions in communities, socialising with friends and work colleagues were distressing for students, including working students. This fits with Crawford's (2021) argument supporting contextualisation of student experiences, as these findings suggest the value of social interactions for individuals in societies such as Fiji.

Social distancing versus socio-cultural disrespect

Sixty-three percent of participants reported challenges that were categorised under the theme socio-cultural disregard or disrespect due to pandemic related movement restrictions. Several factors were mentioned, one of which was related to religion and the inability to go to church and engage in prayer as normal.

The following are some reflections from participants to support this theme:

Participant 27 (Male, iTaukei): Church was like a second home to me; ever since mass gathering was prohibited, I felt my spiritual side of being was affected as a Christian.

Participant 44 (Male, iTaukei): [C]urfew has been made from 11pm to 4am has avert me from youth chain prayers.

Participant 60 (Female, iTaukei): Religious gathering was not allowed.

Religion plays a critical role in relation to social connectedness among most Fijians. Besides its significance for social functioning, religion also provides many individuals in this context with comfort. Religiosity and spirituality strengthen coping and resilience when Fijians face difficulties.

Another recurring sub-theme was the inability to attend socio-cultural gatherings, including family events and funerals, which are a critical characteristic of the Fijian and Pasifika ways of living and culture.

Participant 34 (Male, iTaukei) articulated this sub-theme quite well as he stated:

[A]s a child growing up, we're used to the normal handshake when meeting new people. However, due to the restrictions, this was prohibited. From a cultural perspective, it was seen as a sign of disrespect. Due to the social distancing restrictions, it was hard not attending a close relative's burial and with the economy in crisis, supporting our families proved to be a challenge.

Other participants corroborated this in similar ways:

Participant 9 (Male, iTaukei): Coming from the different cultures, the way we interact and greet each other is beyond the traditional way of hand shaking that is by hugging, kissing, patting and so on.

Participant 55 (Female, iTaukei): Personally, being a Pacific Islander, it is a norm for us to have huge family gatherings, if it's not every Sunday then it's every couple of weeks. So, when the pandemic started, and all these regulations and restrictions were set in place it definitely changed what we considered as normal.

Some participants also recognised that they were aware of the social repercussions of not following pandemic related restrictions. The consequences of disobeying laws typically had two-fold implications for Fijians. One being the potential risks associated at an individual level, such as paying fines and going to prison. Then at a socio-cultural level, the shame and negative impact these risks might have on individual and social reputation. The following reflections support this narrative:

Participant 51 (Male, iTaukei): [W]hen the curfew was implemented in March, I was not at all happy about it everything was kind like cut short, I cannot spend longer time in having *grog* and *talanoa* session with my friends and relatives. And on top of that, if I happen to break the curfew rules, I will be put on fine or worst spend a day at the jail, which I don't want to, and most certainly am not looking forward to.

Participant 56 (Female, iTaukei): I think this is something which we all must take into account. Obeying the curfew restrictions and laws from the government is something that I have learnt during this pandemic. Disobeying the rules and regulations will just get us into trouble with the law and that will make us have a bad report and put a *shame to our families' names*.

Overall, these findings corroborate the challenges associated with more universal experiences of students during the global pandemic. These include financial difficulties associated with unemployment and the economic crisis. In relation to teaching and learning, students typically faced difficulties with internet disruptions as many had to go back to their homes in rural settings, did not have proper electronic devices to engage with online learning and difficulties with adjusting to the abrupt online learning. Students also experienced issues relating to mental wellbeing due to restrictions on their social lifestyle. Moreover, students in this context reported socio-cultural challenges pertaining to restrictions on religious and cultural activities, and concern towards loss of cultural values, traditions and practices.

On the bright side: Positive implications of social distancing & movement restrictions

As part of the assessment guidelines, students were encouraged to reflect upon positive experiences or lessons learnt. There were quite a few themes which emerged and were associated with the 'bright side' of the global pandemic. The most prevalent theme was related to achieving a sense of self-reliance, self-awareness and self-discipline. Fifty-five percent of participants reported this in numerous ways. Some examples are outlined below:

Participant 19 (Male, iTaukei) emphasized the need to prioritize self-care through '[R]egular schedule exercise and the eating a healthy diet. Keeping a safe routine taking time to meditate or pray are all important'. This participant also mentioned that we need to be to 'be gentle with yourself in times like this you'll have good days and bad days. Your emotion in lowest or highest this time, try not to compare yourself with friends on social media feed there is more going on behind the scenes.'

Participant 26 (Male, iTaukei) discussed the value of shared responsibility as 'we don't have to depend on to the mothers to do all the household chores and re-adapting subsistence living as during the crisis, we managed to live happy as we do all those stuff at home. Farming and backyard gardening is one of the main sources of providing the food unto the table during the lockdown, as it is free and healthy too.'

Further, 48% reflected upon how they had acquired a shift in a more positive direction when it came to their health and safety. Most of the participants had discussed this theme in a comparable manner and two anecdotes have been randomly selected as examples below:

Participant 15 (Male, PNG): From this situation I have learned that basic hygiene is very important. Yes, we all know and practice cleanliness but sometimes we overlooked the little things like washing hands regularly, using sanitizers, social distancing etc.

Participant 56 (Female, iTaukei): To take better care of your health. Nowadays newer and newer diseases or viruses are starting to develop, and scientists will need time to make a cure. So, it's better if we just take good care of our body both in a mental and physical way. And to always take note that prevention is better than cure.

Further positive aspects included spending time and bonding with family (43%), strengthening personal faith and relationship with God during challenging times (27%), and demonstrating values of the Fijian and Pasifika spirit of love, genuine care and compassion towards others (25%). The value of family and relationships was something that many students had a realisation of during the pandemic as explained by the following participants:

Participant 43 (Male, iTaukei): [M]ade me realise that family is everything. It has brought me closer to my family because I was always away on work, and I had less of family time. We were all driven together as a family to work with each other during the crisis and help one another.

Participant 57 (Female, iTaukei): During the lockdown period that our nation went through was a time that one could say, was spent on the smallest form of social group, *family*. This was a divine opportunity where family members actually consider home as a place where fight, joy and laughter are the most precious and not just a place where one could just use as a resting spot before getting back up again and start working.

Another positive realisation that some students reflected upon was strengthening their personal relationship with their faith and God. In comparison to the challenges mentioned earlier, some participants recognised that there were other ways to strengthen their devotion rather than just going to church. The following participants explained their personal development in terms of their connection with their faith:

Participant 43 (Male, iTaukei): Another wonderful experience I had to endure during this pandemic was that my personal relationship with God rose to a whole new level. I learnt the importance of praying, fasting, and learning to have faith. Having to learn new things on my own and testing myself became the new normal for me.

Participant 53 (Female, iTaukei): The outbreak of the virus has taught us to trust God and have faith in him. It sure has made us spiritually grow. Indeed, most of us panic when we have the first case in the country but having faith in our God is something that can take away the panic during the pandemic. Churches were closed but that did not stop us from worshipping our God. It has really taught us to always trust God more.

Students also reflected upon the true spirit of being a Fijian and despite the challenges, many Fijians still managed to demonstrate positive characteristics and outlook. Fijians are known for their resilient nature, in addition to other values, such genuine care, kindness and concern for others in the community as described by the following participants:

Participant 6 (Male, Indo-Fijian): Try to be a help to another, not rather being a burden, adjust with the situations as fast as possible. Once a person adapts to a situation fast enough,

he or she is able to control others. Never lose hope, encourage other beings positively. It is said that positive mind brings positive vibes.

Participant 8 (Male, iTaukei): Love and care for one another. Covid-19 has taught us that the only way to live life without worrying much is to always love and look out for one another, especially family. Since we are all affected with this pandemic we must work together and help those in need.

One of the most interesting positive outcomes reported by participants (27%, 16 participants) was the reinstatement of a traditional and cultural practice, known as *Veisa* (barter system) but with a technological twist to it and maintaining social connectedness through technology.

Participant 3 (Male, iTaukei) wrote, ‘the formation of the group on a social media platform, “Barter for A Better Fiji”, which allowed Fijians to acquire basic needs in exchange for something of interest to the recipient. Despite the severity of the economic state Fiji was in, the whole country exhibited commendable shows of resilience and perseverance and moved forward into the new normal.’ **Participant 31** (Male, iTaukei), while discussing job losses mentioned that ‘there can be other means of sources of income to compensate for these issues like turn to agricultural production, as some of the people are doing through social media on Facebook exchanging of goods through barter system.’

In relation to relying to technology to maintain social connectedness, **Participant 59** (Female, iTaukei) wrote, ‘we’ve just stayed at home and been apart during this pandemic. This does not exclude us from assisting one another; I have relatives in the Northern [location], and we also keep in touch with them, updating them on what is going on in the mainland and how the situation is progressing. Even if we are required to follow the government’s rules to the letter, we might be physically apart but at heart, families are important whether in Fiji or elsewhere.’ Further, **Participant 3** (Male, iTaukei) also emphasised the following, ‘I believe that this pandemic has brought citizens closer together, not only as citizens of Fiji but also of the human race. The entire world is at war with each due to racial differences, but Fijians everywhere have come together in the midst of these trying times to help each other in any way possible.’

Another participant shared a rather interesting anecdote, which contrasted with the socio-cultural challenges outlined earlier:

Participant 36 (Male, iTaukei): [L]ockdown for some people has improved their financial status. This can be noted in various customs and traditions of Islanders life involving mostly communal perspectives. This includes a lot of gatherings which involve a lot of money. Through the lockdown and with the introduction of curfew hours, and also limitation to number of people attending a function, in a way I personally feel that it has relaxed burdens that used to exist prior to Covid 19.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to explore COVID-19 pandemic-related experiences of diploma-level students at the Fiji National University. The findings established common challenges experienced by students, which have also been documented in university-context globally (Maqableh & Alia, 2021; Almadhi et al., 2021). These universal or shared experiences across different contexts were related to financial challenges, difficulties with teaching and learning as well as adjusting to the significant change in social lifestyle resulting mental health impacts (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Chirikov & Soria, 2020; Gestsdottir et al., 2021; Saha et al., 2021). Teaching and learning challenges were linked to the inability to effectively cope with the sudden transition to online learning, poor internet connectivity and lack of access to proper

electronic devices (Almadhi et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2020; Pang et al., 2021; Tahir et al., 2021; Werner, 2021;). All these challenges were reported commonly in previous literature and were also ascertained by Fijian students. SDG 4 encourages educators to strengthen their teaching approaches to mitigate these common difficulties preparatory any future catastrophic event.

Moreover, there were socio-cultural experiences more specific to the context of the current study. These experiences included challenges and positive outcomes. Socio-cultural challenges related to Fijians' religious and cultural restrictions and loss of cultural values, traditions and practices. From a positive perspective, students reflected on experiences that strengthened their spirituality and faith, appreciating simple things about life, such as family and relationships, true Fijian spirit and values, reinstating traditional practices using technology to support fellow Fijians and an easing of the financial burdens associated with socio-cultural obligations.

Concerning challenges associated with socio-cultural disruptions, it is important to note that Pacific Islanders have unique traditions and customs that conflict with movement restrictions (Vave, 2021). From a socio-cultural perspective, it is customary for Fijians to shake hands, hug loved ones and greet with kisses on the cheek, all of which were disallowed due to the pandemic. As Participant 34 noted, refraining from such gestures is considered 'disrespectful', and it took a while for Fijians to get used to other forms of exhibiting love, care and respect. Fijians could not partake in traditional rituals and ceremonies, such as those associated with weddings and funerals, as they usually would. This was due to the initial complete lockdown whereby no gatherings were allowed, and later gatherings were allowed in small, constrained groups. For Fijians, the phrase 'it takes a whole village' is not just a metaphor but literal, as the concept of a small gathering is quite alien to this socio-cultural context. As documented by Vave (2021), the collectivist nature of Fijian communities made it difficult for Fijians to fully comply with pandemic-related restrictions.

Further, findings ascertained that people were concerned about their social reputation should they not comply with the restrictions. Vave (2021) noted that Fijians in urban areas were more likely to comply with movement regulations than Fijians in rural areas because of the presence of enforcement officers. As mentioned in student reflections, there was concern about bringing shame to the family if one was caught not complying with movement restrictions. Therefore, regarding socio-cultural implications, Fijians had multiple issues to deal with, including being unable to participate in religious activities and socio-cultural gatherings; if they disobeyed the restrictions, they feared the consequences to their social reputation.

Participants were encouraged to reflect on positive experiences and perceptions. These are related to being more attentive to health and safety, values of and characteristics of a 'true' Fijian or Pacific Islander, social connectedness despite physical distance, and growth in their relationship with spirituality and faith (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Another interesting observation was the revival of traditional systems such as *veisa* or barter system with a modern technological twist. Also, a solution for being unable to attend gatherings resulted in cultural ceremonies being streamed live using social media platforms. These examples demonstrate crucial characteristics of Fijians and Pacific Islanders in general, including resilience and genuine care towards others. Over time, these communities have demonstrated these qualities, be it environmental threats, climate change, political unrest or a global pandemic.

Under normal circumstances, Pacific Islanders must contribute towards the social functioning of their traditional customs and religious obligations. However, pandemic-related restrictions allowed them to step back from these obligations and reduced the financial burdens that they

might have under normal circumstances, as explained by Participant 36. This also corroborates Vavi's (2021) findings concerning unemployment and financial crisis due to the pandemic and how movement restrictions eased the burden of costs associated with socio-cultural events and gatherings. However, Vavi (2021) also noted that being unable to financially contribute towards socio-cultural obligations could 'intensify and prolong grief, thereby affecting closure'. Nonetheless, the positive anecdotes documented by students in the present study are important to consider because it demonstrated the resilient nature of Fijians and Pacific Islanders and that communities in this socio-cultural context will find a way to survive.

In conclusion, findings from this study presented unique perspectives on the lived experiences of Fijian university students. These findings provided valuable insights into enabling the implementation of SDG 4 as it confirmed myriad student experiences, including financial, learning, lifestyle and mental health challenges. It is important for educational institutions to recognise the needs and challenges of students who are not prepared to deal with a new and unique threatening event. However, it is imperative to note that, in true Pasifika spirit, individuals within this socio-cultural context found ways to be resilient and come up with unique ways to survive, whether it be reinstatement of traditional systems in a modern way or seek for the positive during difficult times.

A limitation of this study is that the findings lack a comparative basis for weighing the difference between challenging and positive experiences. Participants were prompted to reflect on positive experiences, but it is unclear whether they would have thought of positive experiences had they not been provided with that prompt. However, this was part of coursework assessment and, as such, provided them with an opportunity to cathartically reflect upon a major incident in their lives.

It will be useful for educators to include reflective assessments in learning and teaching so students can freely share and express their life experiences without the closedness of other assessment formats and disruptions to traditional classroom settings. By gaining insights into students' lived experiences with open online platforms, educators can strengthen teaching approaches, show concern and prioritise the needs of students. Overall, these findings can be used as anecdotal narratives for further research, especially in terms of revisioning education in Oceania, which is impacted time and time again, whether it be a pandemic, natural disaster, or socio-political uncertainty. Reinstating *veisa* with the use of technology demonstrates that lessons from the past combined with future advancements can positively direct the present. Thus, the reinstatement of *veisa* (past) with a technological twist (present and future) can be viewed as a metaphoric implication for revisioning education in Oceania.

REFERENCES

- Akwa, T. E., & Maingini, J. M. (2020). From Ebola to COVID-19: Reshaping Funerals and Burial Rites in Africa? *Journal of Healthcare Communications*, 5(3), 7. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2472-1654.100007>
- Aguilera-Hermida, P. (2020). College students' use and acceptance of emergency online learning due to COVID-19. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100011>
- Almadhi, A., Alhorishi, A., Alnamshan, A., Alkhamis, F., Alosaimi, R., Alassaf, T., & Alateeq, F. (2021). Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on career perceptions among medical students in (IMSIU). *World Family Medicine*, 19(8), 12–20. <https://doi.org/10.5742/MEWFM.2021.94091>

Post-pandemic lessons learnt from student reflections: A case study of diploma-level students at the Fiji National University

- Chirikov, I., & Soria, K. M. (2020). *International students' experiences and concerns during the pandemic*. SERU Consortium, University of California - Berkeley and University of Minnesota. <https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru-covid-survey-reports>
- Crawford, J., Butler-Henderson, K., Rudolph, J., Malkawi, B., Glowatz, M., Burton, R., Magni, P., & Lam, S. (2020). COVID-19: 20 countries' higher education intra-period digital pedagogy responses. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, 3(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.1.7>
- Crawford, J. (2021). During and beyond a pandemic: Publishing learning and teaching research through COVID-19. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 18(3). <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.18.3.2>
- Germani, A., Buratta, L., Delvecchio, E., & Mazzeschi, C. (2020). Emerging adults and covid-19: The role of individualism-collectivism on perceived risks and psychological maladjustment. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(10). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17103497>
- Gestsdottir S, Gisladdottir T., Stefansdottir, R., Johannsson E., Jakobsdottir G., & Rognvaldsdottir, V. (2021). Health and well-being of university students before and during COVID-19 pandemic: A gender comparison. *PLoS ONE* 16(12). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261346>
- Jaja, I. F., Anyanwu, M. U., & Iwu Jaja, C. J. (2020). Social distancing: How religion, culture and burial ceremony undermine the effort to curb COVID-19 in South Africa. *Emerging Microbes and Infections*, 9(1), 1077–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22221751.2020.1769501>
- Keawe'aimoku Kaholokula, J., Samoa, R. A., Miyamoto, R. E. S., Palafox, N., & Daniels, S.-A. (2020). COVID-19 Special Column: COVID-19 Hits Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Communities the Hardest. *Hawai'i Journal of Health & Social Welfare*, 79(5), 143–146.
- Maqableh, M., & Alia, M. (2021). Evaluation of online learning of undergraduate students under lockdown amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: The online learning experience and students' satisfaction. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106160>
- McLeod, M., Gurney, J., Harris, R., Cormack, D., & King, P. (2020). COVID-19: We must not forget about Indigenous health and equity. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 44(4), 253–256. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.13015>
- Moawad, R. A. (2020). Online learning during the COVID- 19 pandemic and academic stress in university students. *Revista Romaneasca Pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 12, 100–107. <https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.1sup2/252>
- Pang, Y., Li, M., Robbs, C., Wang, J., Jain, S., Ticho, B., Green, K., & Suh, D. (2021). Risk factors for mental health symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic in ophthalmic personnel and students in USA (& Canada): A cross-sectional survey study. *BMC Psychiatry*, 25. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-021-03535-1>

- Power, T., Wilson, D., Best, O., Brockie, T., Bourque Bearskin, L., Millender, E., & Lowe, J. (2020). COVID-19 and Indigenous Peoples: An imperative for action. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 29(15–16), 2737–2741. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15320>
- Saeed, N., & Javed, N. (2021). Lessons from the covid-19 pandemic: Perspectives of medical students. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*, 37(5), 1402–1407. <https://doi.org/10.12669/pjms.37.5.4177>
- Saha, A., Dutta, A., & Sifat, R. (2021). The mental impact of digital divide due to COVID-19 pandemic induced emergency online learning at undergraduate level: Evidence from undergraduate students from Dhaka City. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 294, 170–179. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.07.045>
- Tahir, M., Malik, N., Ullah., Khan, H., Perveen, S., Ramalho, R., Siddiqi, A. R., Waheed, S., Shalaby, M. M. M., DeBerardis, D., Jain, S., Vetrivendan, G L., Chatterjee, H., ..., Pakpour, A. H. (2021). Internet addiction and sleep quality among medical students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A multinational cross-sectional survey. *PLoS ONE* 16(11). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0259594>
- UNESCO. *Sustainable Development Goal 4*. <https://en.unesco.org/education2030-sdg4/targets>
- Vave, R. (2021). Urban-rural compliance variability to COVID-19 restrictions of indigenous Fijian (iTaukei) Funerals in Fiji. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health*, 33(6–7), 767–774. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10105395211005921>
- Werner, A. M., Tibubos, A. N., Mülder, L. M., Reichel, J. L., Schäfer, M., Heller, S., Pfirrmann, D., Edelmann, D., Dietz, P., Rigotti, T., & Beutel, M. E. (2021). The impact of lockdown stress and loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health among university students in Germany. *Scientific Reports*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-02024-5>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Authors and readers are free to copy, display and distribute this article with no changes, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives (IEJ: CP), and the same license applies. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at. The IEJ: CP is published by the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (formerly ANZCIES) and Sydney Open Access Journals at the University of Sydney. Articles are indexed in ERIC, Scimago Journal (SJR)Ranking / SCOPUS. The IEJ:CP is a member of the Free Journal Network: Join the IEJ: CP and OCIES Facebook community at Oceania Comparative and International Education Society, and Twitter: @OceaniaCIES

COMMUNITY VOICE

The conference as feast

Kabini Sanga, Martyn Reynolds & Adreanne Ormond

The first known use of the term ‘conference’ was in 1572. It is an English term borrowed from Middle French and Medieval Latin with derived meanings that include contribution, discussion and a sense of bringing together, to which the notion of exchanging opinions became later added (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The term ‘feast’ was first recorded in the 13th Century and includes an intriguing mix of solemnity and celebration, bringing together ideas that stem from the sacredness of the temple and the happy idea of a holiday (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), echoing a sense of holiness—a day of no routine work in which reflection on higher powers and the meanings of life have space. The conference, when imagined and executed as a feast in our Oceania region, brings together interaction, debate, celebration and the sacredness that derives from a consciousness of living under a shared sky and surrounded by a shared ocean, both of which speak of greater powers than our own, reminding us of our responsibilities to the world and each other.

The OCIES 2023 Conference held at Fiji National University’s Natabua Campus, Lautoka, was called as a feast. Fiji is part of Melanesia, and Melanesian feasts have their own characteristics and sequential structures. Who is involved and their roles are important determinants in Melanesian feasts. These factors affect what the feast will look like. Not all feasts involve the eating of food. Some mortuary feasts, for example, are not centred on food consumption. However, even mortuary feasts involve distribution and exchange (Foster, 1990). The conference as feast provides a focus on wealth, distribution and connection.

Not everyone can call a Melanesian feast, and those invited always want to know, ‘Whose feast is this?’ A feast-caller needs status so their group’s leaders, relatives and those with whom they have alliances will loyally support and attend. A feast may be a public event, but local, contextual and personal relational webs act as the foundation, providing appropriate goods and willing hands, hearts and minds to enact the call. The OCIES 2023 conference was a feast called through an alliance of Associate Professor Kabini Sanga of Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington and solo Co-president of OCIES, and Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, Dean of Education and Humanities, Fiji National University and longstanding OCIES member. The alliance brought international and Fijian teams together to provide intellectual and programme leadership, physical and spiritual nourishment, hospitality and opportunity for participants from far and wide.

In egalitarian cultures, leadership is not understood as the prerogative of a supreme leader. A feast is a loosely coupled activity where specific people exercise control over their areas of responsibility. Those charged with pig distribution do not wait for permission but rely on their knowledge of context and negotiation to deal with unforeseen problems. They know they are the fitting people to do their set activity, and they act and control events within a given framework and understanding. Once the frame is set, conversations are for information-giving, not decision-making. The public nature of the event means the credibility of the whole community is at stake—to be reduced or enhanced depending

on the contribution of those involved. In the conference as a feast, roles such as identifying and garlanding esteemed visitors, chiring parallel sessions, handing over the OCIES *vaka*, organising food and drink, and caring for strangers are to be accomplished to the best of one's ability. The staff of Fiji National University did all of these tasks well.

Because a feast is an open invitational event, one can never be sure who will arrive. Responsiveness is, therefore, a key skill that ensures that a feast is a time of affirmation and reaffirmation. Leaders of *mana* (potency, honour) must ensure that the *mana* of feast-goers is protected and enhanced. Attention to how people and things are named, how food is served, and the many ways nurture is provided—all of these contribute to a *mana* economy. Affirmation comes through the way one is treated. Exercising care for others whose value systems and, therefore, needs are outside of conference conventions makes feasting an effective lens for conferencing. The conference as feast means relationship development is paramount, and appreciation for the content of the conference is a matter of appreciating those who bring it as a gift.

Leadership in Melanesia, as elsewhere in Oceania, involves service. In OCIES, we serve our elders by honouring them and ensuring they have a platform to speak and recognition for their contributions. We embrace our young ones through means such as the 'New and Emerging Researchers of Oceania' mentoring sessions. We welcome strangers through invitation and, in some cases, financial support, enabling them to become friends. We make intergenerational conversations possible so that change and continuity remain well-balanced. And we create spaces for disparate people to come together to spark new ideas, alliances and opportunities. In the conference as a feast, intellectual attention and critique takes place in a wholesome, integrated environment where the service ethic enables the whole to be greater than the parts.

This community voice contribution has honoured the Conference Community. We conclude with some voices from that community:

Participating in the 50th Annual OCIES Conference held in Lautoka, Fiji, proved to be an invaluable experience in my capacity as a teacher-researcher. This conference afforded me the opportunity to forge collaborative connections with fellow researchers from the Pacific region, which, in turn, enriched my capacity for critical thinking and scholarly writing. Through active engagement in discussions and the presentation of my research, I not only garnered recognition for my contributions but also received constructive feedback from esteemed peers within the field of education. It fostered an environment conducive to knowledge exchange and personal growth.

This was not a conference of academics, rather a family reunion reigniting the flames of ancient oceanic intellectual traditions. These flames shed light on our contemporary and future challenges and warmed the weary hearts of educational navigators in the wake of a tumultuous global pandemic.

In these accounts, celebration and discussion go hand-in-hand under Oceania skies, OCIES is a family, and the conference as feast has done its relational work leaving participants satisfied but with a lasting taste that encourages.

REFERENCES

- Foster, R. J. (1990). Value without equivalence: Exchange and replacement in a Melanesian society. *Man*, 25(1), 54–69.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Conference. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conference>
- Merriam-Webster. (nd.). Feast. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feast>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA

Authors and readers are free to copy, display and distribute this article with no changes, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives (IEJ: CP), and the same license applies. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. The IEJ: CP is published by the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (formerly ANZCIES) and Sydney Open Access Journals at the University of Sydney. Articles are indexed in ERIC, Scimago Journal (SJR)Ranking / SCOPUS. The IEJ:CP is a member of the Free Journal Network: <https://freejournals.org/>

Join the IEJ: CP and OCIES Facebook community at Oceania Comparative and International Education Society, and Twitter: @OceaniaCIES